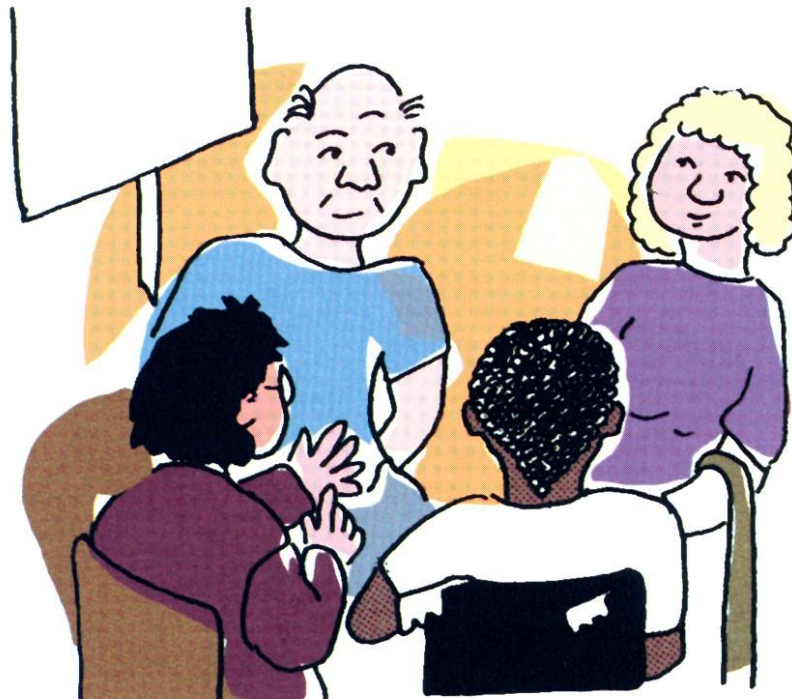


Evaluation of the impact of Diverse

Full report



Prof. Pauline Heslop

Kieran Curtis

September 2023

Evaluation of the impact of Diverse

Introduction

Diverse UK is an independent organisation run for and by people that identify as autistic in the Bristol, Bath and North-East Somerset, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire area. It is a not-for-profit registered charity (number 1170255). There are approximately 200 people who are registered with the organisation and who attend groups, of which about 60 are regular active members.

Diverse runs a wide range of groups and events for people to attend, organised by people that identify as autistic and neurodiverse. All are in public, accessible venues and offer a space where autistic people can enjoy being with others and be themselves. Current activities include arts and crafts, board games, bowling, cinema, creative writing, DJ and bands nights, football, gaming, nightclub, quiz nights, tennis and walking photography.

The aim of this evaluation was to assess the impact on wellbeing of attendance at the Diverse social activities and from being part of the Diverse community.

The evaluation took place from April to September 2023. It was undertaken by two researchers from the University of Bristol, one of whom identified as autistic. The evaluation activities comprised the following:

- Survey questionnaire for all members.
- Informal attendances at activities and events by the evaluation team – to share information about the evaluation not to evaluate the activities themselves.
- Interviews and focus groups with Diverse members.

More information can be found in Appendix 1 about how the evaluation was undertaken and the research team's reflections of this.

The findings below are based on:

- Survey responses from 61 members of Diverse (for an analysis of the demographic information about these respondents please see Appendix 3).
- Interviews with 18 members of Diverse, plus one proxy interview with a family member.
- A focus group of 8 members of Diverse.

Findings

Many people who contributed to the evaluation of the impact of Diverse spoke highly of the organisation and how it had made a positive difference to their lives. We have identified three main themes about the impact of being a part of Diverse on its members:

- Making a difference to members' thoughts and feelings.
- Making a difference to the activities and skills of members.
- Making a difference to how people thought about the future.

However, what underpinned each of these themes seemed to be the way Diverse worked and how this contributed to making a difference to people's lives. The evaluation team were not tasked with evaluating Diverse as an entity; rather we were concerned with the difference that Diverse made to people. In speaking with members, it became apparent that there were some aspects of the organisation that set out the conditions in which positive impacts could be felt. It is here that we will start before examining the more direct impacts on people's lives.

1. The way Diverse operated and how this contributed to making a difference to people's lives

In thinking about the way Diverse operates we will consider:

- Inclusivity.
- A strengths-based approach.
- The provision of safe and supportive spaces.
- The importance of an autism-only, rather than a generic space.
- Ways for the organisation to further maximise impact.

Inclusivity

There were two ways in which those participating in the evaluation spoke about how the inclusivity of Diverse had an impact on their lives.

First, people spoke about the importance of feeling welcomed, whether they had a diagnosis of autism or felt as though it was a place for them. Obtaining a diagnosis of autism can be a long and difficult process for many people, particularly those who were not diagnosed in childhood, and those living in areas where waiting lists for an assessment service are long. In addition, many people self-diagnose because they've been denied a diagnosis, because they are afraid of stigma, or because they don't feel they'll get much value out of it, and thus never have a formal diagnosis. The position taken by Diverse, of being inclusive of people who had not been formally diagnosed was therefore important, as one person explained:

'I emailed [asking] 'Is it okay if I don't have a diagnosis?', and he's like 'yeah sure! Just as long as you feel that you belong here...' I can't remember exactly what he said but it was something along the lines of 'If you feel like you belong here then you probably do'. I was very insecure about not having a diagnosis and being assessed... I've encountered some autistic people online, fortunately not many in my life, but there are some people who are like 'well you're not really autistic unless you have a diagnosis' and so I was afraid I would run into people at Diverse. But they welcomed me.' (Participant 3).

The impact of this inclusive approach, was that people who had not been diagnosed were able to feel comfortable in the environment and just be themselves, as will be discussed later.

The second way in which those participating in the evaluation spoke about how the inclusivity of Diverse had an impact on their lives was in relation to the range of group activities on offer, helping people to feel that their own special interests were able to be catered for. One interviewee commented:

'What I love about Diverse is the fact that it's their members saying, 'I love photography can we do a photography group?' and being told why don't you lead the group?' (Participant 34).

There were also some comments about Diverse being responsive to requests for specific events or activities. One person commented:

'She listened to us and listened to the feedback...[from a person who] wanted more LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] things. He wanted a vehicle within which he could actually express himself, because he really wants to do drag, and he wants to do it, but he thinks his autism is holding him back. So can you please put on some sort of event so I can actually do drag? So [they] actually put that event on and it was absolutely stunning! It was so multifaceted she catered for everything. I could not believe the amount of planning that went into it, the amount of people and energy that she must have expended to get that whole night together. It was phenomenal!' (Participant 19).

By taking an inclusive approach it seemed that people felt as though there was a place for them at Diverse, and that the organisation was responsive and flexible in meeting their interests. As one interviewee commented: *'People are often just given the 'local offer' their entire lives, so how different is this!'* (Participant 32).

A strengths-based approach

Although the phrase 'strengths-based approach' was not used by those participating in the evaluation, the overall tone and content of their comments emphasised that the focus of Diverse was very much about supporting people's strengths. Several felt that attending Diverse groups could *'let them grow as people and do things that they would not otherwise have considered.'* (Participant 36). One of the focus group members illustrated with an example from his own experience, explaining that he had tried a header in football, something he wouldn't have done in a less supportive or high-pressure environment, because he was *'not scared of messing up'* (focus group participant). *'Everyone's got different abilities and there's no judgment'* confirmed another focus group participant. Another interviewee explained:

'I think everyone provides something. It's not planned, it's lovely. I know from working and attending Diverse, it really highlights your strengths e.g in bowling you have to do your own scores and there are some people who are naturally good at that and they do it for others. And others you might just share your experiences or look out for each other – for example if there's someone new and they go to the toilet, people notice they have gone and want to know where they are and if they are OK.' (Participant 55).

Other people commented that being involved with Diverse had afforded them opportunities to use some of their existing skills to support groups or activities. One participant commented:

'I've assisted with groups before quite a bit, and then one time a person couldn't make one of the groups...so I was asked whether I could actually lead the group...the difference it's made is people having faith in me more than anything...I mean I don't always feel like I'm the most capable person at doing things, but if someone has faith in me, and they know I can do stuff even if I don't know it myself, and then I go and do something and I'm like 'oh that's another thing I can do now, great!' Tick... I can tick that off, then if I need to do that in the future it's like well I did it once, and the situation's very similar to what it was, so yeah, I can do it again.' (Participant 17).

The provision of safe and supportive spaces

Several interviewees used the words 'safe' and 'supportive' when describing Diverse, and it became apparent that for some, having a safe space to go was of vital importance. One person commented:

'There are times ... I think oh I don't really want to go out, I want to stay home and sort of hide my head under the pillow, and then it's like, well that's on, at least it's somewhere I can go and it's safe, and I won't get any difficulties there.' (Participant 25).

The issue of safety was raised a number of times by those involved in the evaluation and seemed to be important for people to be able to thrive. Some people reported hurtful experiences, including of being bullied, when using some non-Diverse social spaces, so having what they perceived to be a safe place to use provided by Diverse enabled them to then be themselves and develop their confidence.

The importance of an autism-only, rather than a generic space

The value of Diverse being an autism-only (whether diagnosed or not) space, as opposed to autistic people using generic services or opportunities was directly discussed in some interviews but touched on in passing in others. It was not an issue raised in the questionnaire survey. There were some strong opinions passed about this; all of them suggesting that the biggest impacts on people's lives were driven by being able to feel supported in an autism-specific space where people could try out skills and approaches before taking them into the wider world. As one interviewee commented:

'Autism is a social disability, so our members may have never had, or only had limited experience of, the benefits of feeling part of a 'tribe', as opposed always to be forced to fit in to someone else's norms. To expect someone with a social disability to 'fit in' in a neurotypical group is, in my opinion, as crass as asking a paraplegic to join in with an able-bodied sports club... Why should they not have a space where they could be totally themselves? In an ideal world having fully inclusive groups would be perfect, wouldn't it? Given time and confidence, members of groups might want to go out into other groups... Here it's that feeling of acceptance, of growth, of feeling they can find their own way as a starting point to go on. Because you don't want life to be separatist, but to feel like you can go out and really enjoy something and then take it forth into the neurotypical world.' (Participant 32).

Some interviewees mentioned generic, neurotypical clubs or events that they had previously attended which they felt had set them back, not let them flourish. Interviewees commented:

'I'd rather come here than go somewhere where I don't know if I'll be bullied or made fun of or whatever.' (Focus group participant)

'Joining in with another [sports team] can be really difficult, particularly with the lad culture that goes with it, so being able to join this was perfect really.' (Focus group participant).

In summary, it seemed that although Diverse was engaging in conversations and actions to remove constraints for autistic people and to explore what a more accommodating world might look like, participants who commented on this felt that there was still a place for autism-friendly spaces in order for autistic people to benefit:

'That is very much what Diverse is doing – trying to be that mediating force, raising awareness and creating a world where autistic adults are able to be themselves and free not to have to adapt and mask¹ – just be free themselves and enjoy their specificities and sensitivities and what they bring, and not have to apologise for what the rest of the world might see as the quirks that go with that.' (Participant 32).

¹ Masking occurs when an autistic person hides or disguises parts of themselves or their behaviours in order to fit in with the people around them. For many autistic people this is an unconscious strategy that is deeply ingrained.

Ways for the organisation to further maximise impact

Several comments were made about Diverse as an organisation and how that impacted on its members. Whilst most comments were positive, there were some suggestions as to how the organisation could change or adapt to further maximise its impact.

The relationship between how the organisation is managed or delivered, and how it impacts on those attending groups was clear for most of the respondents to the evaluation, for example if a group is cancelled at late notice and someone attends without being aware of the change, their anxiety levels could be heightened with resulting stress and frustration which can spill over into their lives. As one person said:

'If something goes wrong or changing the time for the group... it can make you more paranoid and overthink a lot more.' (Participant 11).

A few other participants in the evaluation commented on the work undertaken by the organisation and group leaders, with paid workers being stretched with little time for planning and creative thinking. One person explained:

'They're so inundated. They're so run off their feet...they've got too many things that are on the go... [new ideas] are too much for them to take on.' (Participant 19).

A potential impact of this could be people not raising suggestions for new groups or activities, or suggestions not being acted on very quickly. The same participant continued:

'If we did things, it could actually make our neurodiversity less. And that's things like left-right brain stuff like juggling, riding a bicycle, playing a musical instrument. All those things which we notoriously find difficult are actually things which can make [a difference] if we actually applied ourselves and did it, and had the encouragement to do it. It would make our neurodiversity less, things like going up and acting on stage...I think more things like that should happen, more of the creative arts, not just sitting there with bit of paint.' (Participant 19).

Another person reflected on some future possibilities for Diverse:

'Who knows where Diverse could be in the future? Maybe it could get political. Maybe it could get radical. That might not be the thing to say here but how about campaigning if there is a cohort interested in that, in getting their voices out at a local level. They have got that framework.' (Participant 32).

2. The impact of Diverse on members' thoughts and feelings

Almost all (97%; 56 of 58) of survey respondents reported that being part of Diverse had made a positive difference to how they thought or felt in general. This was a striking finding, echoed in the interviews, which endorsed the positive impact of Diverse by:

- Having more positive emotions, such as happiness or satisfaction.
- Reducing feelings of isolation.
- Feeling able to be oneself.
- Understanding oneself more.
- Feeling more confident.
- Having a reduction of negative feelings.

Having more positive emotions, such as joy, happiness, or satisfaction

93% (57 of 61) respondents to the survey stated that being part of Diverse made them have more positive emotions such as joy, happiness or satisfaction. One interview participant commented:

'It makes me feel happier, makes me feel included, makes me get more enjoyment out of life which is otherwise pretty vacant.' (Participant 24).

Other people commented:

'It makes me feel happy and makes you think and process things better as well.' (Participant 44).

'It's really made a difference. I'm a lot more positive, slightly more outgoing, I have a lot more to look forward to. I'm not staying in my house 24 hours a day. I'm constantly planning ahead.' (Participant 24).

It appeared that having more positive emotions was linked to the social contact people had at Diverse groups. For some this was being alongside other people, for others it was engaging in chat and discussion. What underpinned this, however, and set up the conditions in which people had more positive emotions, seemed to be the atmosphere of the groups: *'It's not just being with people but it's being in that space'* (Participant 55). Interviewees commonly commented that positive emotions were underpinned by being in a place where they felt safe and supported, respected for who they were, and treated as an *'equal human being'* (Participant 3).

Reducing feelings of isolation

83% (50 of 60) survey respondents stated that being part of Diverse had made them feel less isolated now that they were in touch with other autistic people. In support of this comment, one survey respondent commented:

'Diverse has helped me feel less awkward and alone in my feelings as an autistic person.' (Participant 42).

Similarly, one interviewee said:

'I'm not gonna say that I'm an extremely isolated person, but at times it feels like that. So just having something to do being around people just beats a little bit of that loneliness.' (Participant 8).

Another interviewee explained more fully how this felt for her:

'I think sometimes hearing other people talk at groups about how things impact on them makes you feel less alone, you think it's not just you. Sometimes as well people talk about strategies and share ideas – like peer support. I guess you are seeing part of yourself in someone else ...I would naturally be empathetic and kind to someone else but don't always do that to yourself because you have it drummed into you through society and sometimes other people that you are from a deficit position - so that can be quite therapeutic.' (Participant 55).

Not all feelings of isolation or difference seemed to be dissipated upon first contact with Diverse. Some interviewees commented that it had taken time for feelings of isolation or loneliness to reduce, and that although attending Diverse groups was helping, it was a process that they were going through. One interviewee commented:

'...maybe less alone. But really, I think I'm desperate to connect with other autistic people, and I don't have that yet.' This participant had been diagnosed as autistic as an adult, a few years prior to the

interview, and explained that he had spent his life 'masking' and was finding it difficult to stop doing this even when with other autistic people because it was so ingrained in him to do so. It was taking time for him to stop expecting those around him to respond in a neurotypical way, something that made him 'uncomfortable' (Participant 14).

Another interviewee reflected that it was only after reflecting on her feelings over time that she realised she had reduced her feelings of loneliness. She explained:

'I've been pretty isolated since ...2020 and going back to Diverse on a regular basis... for a while I wasn't comfortable with even outdoor group activities...But having regular social contacts - I'm I guess still realising how important that's been to me. Because it's not always the sort of thing that you recognise the benefits of at the time, but you definitely... I definitely saw what happened when I didn't have that.' (Participant 3).

Feeling able to be oneself

A number of participants, as with Participant 14 above, linked reduced feelings of isolation from attending Diverse with an increased sense of being able to be themselves. One survey respondent commented:

'It is amazing to finally find people who I can be myself around.' (Participant 25).

For several interviewees this was also a prominent theme:

'We can be more comfortable being ourselves, we don't have to pretend to be someone else in this environment – its good.' (Focus group participant).

Another participant explained:

'I was having such an identity crisis, so severe I felt like I couldn't trust my own memories of my own life... and I was suicidal from it at one point, but just having so many people accept me as an autistic person really helped set me right...the autistic community, and in large part Diverse, were very important in basically saving me from that... They were comfortable with me, I was comfortable with them, it was just an absolute revelation. That was one of the big turning points in me becoming more confident in asserting myself as an autistic person and I've continued to do that.' (Participant 3).

Understanding oneself more

Along with feeling able to be oneself at Diverse groups, some interviewees also found that this helped them to have a greater degree of self-understanding and self-efficacy. This was not something we explicitly asked in the survey questionnaire, but was a prominent theme identified in the interviews. For some people, this was practical in nature:

'Diverse has helped me realise what atmospheres I am most comfortable in – like loud and close spaces and bright lights – no.' (Participant 58).

For others, it was related to their feelings or emotions:

'It's kind of helped me understand who I am, and why I am the way I am, and it's... it's helped me be more, I guess forgiving of myself and just more accepting of who I am.' (Participant 17).

We did not ask about how or when people using Diverse services were diagnosed with autism. What was apparent from the interviews, however, was that Diverse had a significant positive impact on the thoughts and feelings of people irrespective of their diagnostic status. For some of those not already

diagnosed with autism, being involved with the group had led to a greater understanding about themselves. One person who had not been diagnosed with autism reflected:

'I hadn't realised I was masking, and how much effort it is to spend time around neurotypical people. So yeah, it was like 'oh yeah, I can just be myself', and everyone else is as well, and I'm not having to worry.' (Participant 25).

Feeling more confident

71% (42 of 59) of survey respondents stated that being part of Diverse had made them feel as though they had more confidence when meeting new people. However, the comments from survey respondents and interviewees suggested that increased confidence came not only in meeting new people, but also in a range of other situations. Some survey respondents commented:

'It's helped me to leave the house and overcome social anxiety.' (Participant 45).

'Diverse has made me more confident in my abilities to adapt to new situations, and to feel safer in unfamiliar situations. Also more confident talking to people I don't know.' (Participant 17).

Interviewees provided more examples of the ways in which being a member of Diverse had impacted on their confidence. A focus group member explained:

'It's definitely given like general confidence...and that you can achieve what you want. It's hard to explain but just being around similar people and seeing what they've achieved and hearing about their advice in the newsletter – its 'Oh yes, I can do that as well' so it really gives you confidence and determination, and not feeling restricted or anything. It feels like showing us we can do whatever we want.' (Focus group member).

One parent explained how their son's confidence had developed since attending Diverse:

'He liked me to go with him at first, but what had progressed is that he has found certain clubs that he can go to completely on his own. 10 years ago, I would have said that's impossible, but he gets himself there on the bus, interacts with whoever is in charge enough to be able to access these things. It's done heaps for his self-confidence...He did surprise me the other day he said, 'I'm going into [city]'. I said, 'Oh what's that for?' 'I want to do some shopping'. So that was a nice surprise. Would he have done that before joining Diverse? I don't think he would have done. I think familiarity with routes – he didn't think twice about going in to [city] but before Diverse I don't think we went into [city] much at all as a family. He never would have gone on his own.' (Family member).

More difficult thoughts and feelings

As well as Diverse engendering positive thoughts and feelings, we wanted to be sure that it was not also resulting in some more difficult thoughts and feelings. We specifically asked about two aspects of this in the survey: having negative emotions, and not feeling able to speak up for oneself.

- 79% (45 of 57) respondents stated that being part of Diverse had **not** made them have any more negative emotions, such as feeling anxious or stressed, or having shutdowns or meltdowns². A further 19% reported that there had been no change in this for them.

²Either a shutdown or meltdown can occur in situations with high sensory and processing demands, causing increased levels of anxiety and distress, and resulting in difficulty thinking and communicating clearly. A shutdown response is directed inwards, often interpreted as detachment, withdrawal or aloofness. A meltdown response is directed outwards, often interpreted as frustration, a 'tantrum' or an aggressive panic attack.

- 65% of respondents stated that being part of Diverse had **not** made them feel less able to speak up for themselves. A further 23% reported that there had been no change in this for them.

Interviewees who explained their experiences of more difficult thoughts and feelings mainly attributed these to stresses caused by an event location, unexpected changes to arrangements for a group meeting, or to frustrations due to particular individuals. As one interviewee commented:

'For me it's not helpful having something changed from what I was expecting it to be.' (Participant 5).

Overall, however, being a part of Diverse had brought significant positive benefits to the thoughts and feelings most respondents to the survey and to most interviewees.

3. The impact of Diverse on the activities and skills of members

Almost all (88%, 52 of 59) survey respondents reported that being part of Diverse had made a positive difference to what they do now. As one interviewee summed it up:

'I guess primarily it was kind of Diverse being the catalyst for me to then feel able to do other things.' (Participant 5).

There were a number of aspects of this:

- The provision of social space and opportunities to make friends.
- Developing new interests and engaging in new activities.
- Developing skills for life.

The provision of social space and opportunities to make friends

The provision of space in which to engage in social activities was mentioned as being particularly helpful for some people. One interviewee confirmed that:

'...even if one group was cancelled one month and you needed that social contact you can just go to a different group so there's that continuity and that does a lot of good for me and other people as well.' (Participant 55).

Another person explained:

'There was a day earlier this summer when I had things to do but was just in a thunk [sic], and I realised 'I think I need to be around people'. So, the [Diverse] group was on that night... I just went there, and ...I just sat in the room with people and chatted ...I left feeling very refreshed, and I was able to go home and finish a job application that I'd been meaning to submit.' (Participant 3).

For other people, the provision of social space also afforded the opportunity for friendships to develop. 52% (29 of 56) of survey respondents stated that being part of Diverse had helped them to meet new friends who they would see socially outside of Diverse groups. One family member explained how her son had not just expanded his social circle but had done so with people of different ages and at different stages in their life, which he had found particularly helpful. This had led on to him developing a friendship with two other people, something his parent described as *'huge'* and *'momentous'*:

'I think he's definitely gained from it...I think that interacting at the Diverse groups has to have helped that friendship grow ... he's made a friend which for him is really difficult – and that's directly from Diverse.' (Participant 32).

For a small number of interviewees, the social contacts they had at Diverse had become like family. One person commented:

'They call it a diverse family, and it is, to me it's my family now...That's a massive thing to say...now I consider Diverse to be my family. I want every single individual in Diverse to be okay, because to me that it's like, you can't choose between the children... I don't ever choose between them, which one I like the most 'cause I love them all. So, to me, if you've got a family, everybody's important in that family, and you've got to learn as a family to integrate all of those people within it, and that is a beautiful thing to actually do.' (Participant 19).

Developing new interests and engaging in new activities

62% (36 of 58) of survey respondents stated that being part of Diverse had helped them to do activities that they wouldn't have done before. One wrote: *'It's reignited [my] passion for my hobbies such as photography'* (Participant 1) and another stated *'It's extended [my] opportunities with the Footy Moving Forwards group.'* (Participant 49).

60% (38 of 56) of survey respondents stated that being part of Diverse had helped them to develop new interests, with respondents stating that they were *'trying new things more often'* or being more physically active. One interviewee commented:

'I've also been getting into tennis lately to get more active and get more exercise – that's something new. I've also been going on daily walks so I can get out and about [for my health]. Yes, I definitely [feel better for that].' (Participant 58).

Interviewees provided a range of examples of engaging in activities that they would not have done without the support and encouragement of Diverse. The football team had recently played in a tournament with other mental health and disability teams and took great pride and confidence from coming third against teams that had been together for years longer than them. Another interviewee explained that they had taken great pleasure from sharing their creative writing:

'We did a thing last year where we wrote a short piece and had it put up in the Create Centre in Bristol. I'm pretty pleased with that. I like to share my stories.... I have been writing since I was a teenager but have only recently started to think I might be good enough.' (Participant 38).

The person had also taken part in the Bristol literature festival with Diverse. *'We all read out a poem. I don't write poems very often...I enjoyed it. It made me feel quite proud.'* (Participant 38).

Developing skills for life

What was striking from the interviews was how much 'added value' members gained from Diverse and the wide range of skills they developed from their involvement. One interviewee commented:

'It's almost like practice for life.' (Participant 55).

Such skills included:

- Assertiveness and *'honing leadership skills'* (Participant 17).
- Communication: *'It seems like nothing [to buy a drink], but for him with speech and language issues and confidence issues – that's great.'* (Family member).
- Facilitating or co-facilitating a group: *'They rotate co-facilitating and it works really well and its allowed them to have another layer to their creativity. It's amazing how people have come out of themselves and had a go at it.'* (Participant 32).

- Help with housing: *'She gave me suggestions on how to maximise my ability to find a place.'* (Participant 3).
- Planning one's time: *'It's allowed me to fill in my schedule a bit more and it has made me adapt my schedule to important things like interviews or meetings and if I have a Diverse event on at the same time I have to adapt or change. It's helping me plan things.'* (Participant 58).
- Self-reflection: *'I think it's just been helpful to meet other autistic people and hang out with them to kind of see how they behave, and to feel that I can maybe behave differently to what I'm used to.'* (Participant 14).
- Social skills: *'It's got me better at talking to other people who I wouldn't necessarily have been comfortable talking to before, whether it's something as simple as asking for a coffee or asking for a ticket to get on the bus or... something more challenging such as having to give a stranger directions on the street.'* (Participant 1).
- Soft skills: *'such as navigating to the loos or choosing from a menu.'* (Family member).
- Supporting a person in a new situation: *'Now I try to approach people who are maybe sitting alone, or I haven't seen before, and introduce myself... if they did want to be introduced to somebody and were just shy, I offer to do that. Whereas I probably wouldn't do that in a predominantly neurotypical space, I would probably be a bit of a wallflower myself.'* (Participant 3).
- Taking responsibility: e.g. *'running something that's like a small project and finishing it through to conclusion'* (Participant 5), such as organising a photography competition and an exhibition at the Create Centre in Bristol.
- Travelling independently into Bristol: *'It's helped me plan out my bus routes and become more familiar with areas of Bristol that I might need to go to if I ever get a job. Like now I know the quickest bus or the quickest route to take.'* (Participant 58).
- Understanding other people more: *'It's made me stop and think about other conditions that I'm not really familiar with. I think there are so many things that are hidden, sometimes I just stop and think and question myself.'* (Participant 55).
- Work opportunities: *'I wouldn't be involved in autism research if it wasn't for Diverse'* (Focus group member).

Not engaging in activities outside of Diverse

We wanted to be sure that being a member of Diverse was not stopping people from engaging in other activities that they wanted to do. We specifically asked survey respondents if being part of Diverse had stopped them doing some things they enjoyed or made them go out less than they used to. 77% (43 of 56) of respondents to the survey stated that being part of Diverse had **not** made them stop from engaging in other activities that they wanted to do. Most other participants (21%) said that there had been no change in this for them. 73% (41 of 56) of survey respondents stated that being part of Diverse had **not** made them go out less than they used to. Most other participants (23%) said that there had been no change in this for them.

Overall, being a part of Diverse seemed to have made a positive difference to what people did in their day-to-day lives, in terms of the provision of social space and opportunities to make friends, people developing new interests and engaging in new activities, and developing skills for life.

4. The impact of Diverse on members' thoughts about the future

Almost all (86%, 50 of 58) of the survey respondents reported that being part of Diverse had made a positive difference to how they thought about the future. Being optimistic for the future can contribute to good mental health and a sense of positivity about the present. That most respondents to the survey felt that Diverse had impacted them in this way is an important finding. Within this there were three main themes:

- Looking forward to the future more positively than before.
- Diverse providing opportunities for people to engage with work or additional responsibilities that will serve them well in the future.
- Remaining friends into the future with people they had met at Diverse.

Looking forward to the future more positively than before

72% (41 of 57) of survey respondents stated that being part of Diverse had made them look forward to their future more positively than before. A quarter of respondents (26%) felt that there had been no difference in this. One survey respondent wrote:

'I now have some ideas as to what I'd like to do in my life going forward.' (Participant 17).

More specifically, a family member explained:

'Seeing people building on their strengths and finding the confidence to be themselves has also helped me to be more optimistic for my own child...and less anxious about what the future holds.' (Participant 34).

Another interviewee commented:

'I have a lot more to look forward to. I'm not staying in my house 24 hours a day. I'm constantly planning ahead.' (Participant 58).

Opportunities for people to engage with work or additional responsibilities that will serve them well in the future

Some of those participating in the evaluation of the impact of Diverse commented that the opportunities within Diverse, such as doing voluntary or paid work, had made them feel more optimistic about the future. We did not specifically ask about this in the survey, it arose in the interviews when discussing the difference Diverse might have made to their thoughts of the future. However, this did seem to be a significant impact for some people, albeit a limited number. One person commented:

'I'm going to be doing admin for Diverse and the festivals. It's started to open up things a bit more for me. I do want to work in an autism context - possibly 2 years ago I didn't know what that looked like, but now I'm starting to see it more and more, not just with Diverse, but in a wider way, so it's helping me to see options.' (Participant 55).

Another person explained:

'I'm glad I'm developing leadership skills, because I've got a feeling I'll need it in the future. I don't know where my future is going to be...I've got to find something new to do, and I think that this is getting me there, if not actually there, but the skills I'm building feels like it's leading to something.' (Participant 17).

Remaining friends into the future with people they had met at Diverse

73% (41 of 56) of survey respondents stated that they thought they would remain friends into the future with people they had met at Diverse. One survey respondent wrote:

'I find comfort in knowing ...that my son has people he can socialise with in the future and be part of a community.' (Participant 33).

Although this wasn't a particularly strong theme in the interviews with Diverse members, there were few comments made about future friendships. One person commented:

'There are so many people I have met at Diverse, I don't want to lose that, I don't want to lose that friendship. I don't want to lose that sense of community. I don't want to lose that sense of togetherness.' (Participant 58).

Not being more anxious about the future as a result of engagement with Diverse

We also wanted to be sure that being a member of Diverse was not making people more worried about their future. When we specifically asked about this in the survey questionnaire 61% (34 of 56) respondents stated that being part of Diverse had not made them feel more worried about their future. Most other participants (32%) said that there had been no change in this for them.

Conclusions

The aim of the evaluation was to assess the impact on wellbeing of attendance at the Diverse social activities and from being part of the Diverse community. The findings are based on survey responses from 61 members of Diverse, interviews with 18 members plus one proxy interview with a family member, and a focus group of 8 members of Diverse.

We summarised the findings into 4 main themes:

- The way Diverse operated and how this contributed to making a difference to people's lives.
- Making a difference to members' thoughts and feelings.
- Making a difference to the activities and skills of members.
- Making a difference to how people thought about the future.

Many people who contributed to the evaluation spoke highly of the organisation and how it had made a positive difference to their lives in one way or another. The majority of members felt that it provided an inclusive social space where they could be themselves, feel safe and supported, and gain confidence. Attending Diverse groups and events had contributed to reduced feelings of isolation and being able to understand oneself more, such that it became a 'catalyst' for them to manage better in generic social spaces.

Few people suggested ways in which the impact of Diverse could be enhanced. Where they did, they identified the need for core staffing to be increased to allow time for reflection and forward planning and supporting members to explore a wider range of groups and activities.

Appendix 1: How the evaluation was undertaken and the research team's reflections of this.

There are many types of evaluation, and the approach taken depends on several factors, including the research question, whether comparative data (either before-and-after measures or from a comparative population) is accessible, and the resources available.

Many evaluations of services focus on the experiences of participants in using a particular service; there are many publications describing different approaches for measuring patient experience, and a range of different tools that can be used. However, the specific research question being posed to evaluate Diverse was: '*What is the perceived impact of being a member of Diverse?*' Thus, the focus was very much on the impact, either intended or unintended, of being a member of Diverse, not about other aspects of the organisation.

Ideally, an evaluation of the impact of a service would draw on data gathered from the start of a service, to provide 'baseline' information. In our case, data related to impact was not available, so we had to collect and use data at one time point only. Many of the participants used their own comparisons when thinking about the impact of Diverse: for most it was thinking about a time before they started attending Diverse. These recollections are important and of value in themselves, although cannot be corroborated and are subject to the vagaries of memory.

We adopted an approach that was primarily of summative evaluation. This 'sums up' the overall effect of what is being evaluated and is useful for judging the overall worth and significance of something, such that decisions can be made as to whether it should be continued or could continue to be funded. However, elements of formative evaluation were also relevant, in that the findings from the evaluation may be used to help 'form' or develop the work of Diverse. Diverse, as an organisation, is constantly evolving and developing; it is not a static, formulaic service requiring fidelity to a particular model. Thus, what is being evaluated – the impact of being a member of the organisation – will have different resonance to each person.

We used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, starting with the collection of quantitative survey data and following this up with qualitative data from in-depth interviews. The purpose of the first quantitative stage was to get an overall impression about the impact of being a member of Diverse; the second qualitative stage was to help explain and contextualise the results from the first quantitative stage. We afforded equal priority to each of the data sources. 'Mixing' of the data occurred in the intermediate stage when the results of the quantitative data analysis were used to guide the qualitative data collection, and at the end of the qualitative stage when all data was interpreted and analysed as a whole.

The first quantitative stage – a questionnaire survey

The survey was based on aspects of impact that we sought to understand. Although we searched for some standardised impact evaluation tools that might be relevant, none fitted the circumstances of this evaluation, so survey questions were developed specifically for this evaluation. The survey was created using JISC Online Survey software in English; no non-English-speaking people were members of Diverse so translation into community languages was not required.

Survey responses were categorised or in free text. Members who required support to complete the survey were supported by their peers or group volunteers who were all experienced in supporting autistic people. A short guide was available for the volunteers about supporting a person to complete the survey if it was required.

The survey was piloted with a small number of Diverse members to assess its ease of understanding and appropriateness of content; subsequent to this, several changes were made to the survey. A copy of the final version of the survey is available at Appendix 2.

Information about the survey was shared with Diverse members via email, Facebook or the Diverse UK website. The evaluation team visited several of the groups to help them understand the work of the organisation, to develop trust and rapport with members, and to ensure that members had heard about the survey and knew how to access it.

All members were encouraged to complete the survey questionnaire using paper or web-based copies. Support was provided if required by group leaders, the evaluation team or others of the person's choosing. Survey responses were returned directly to the evaluation team via an online link or posted to the researchers at the University of Bristol.

A total of 61 members of Diverse completed the survey questionnaire and returned it to the evaluation team. An analysis of the demographic information about these respondents is included at Appendix 3.

The survey asked participants if they would be interested in participating in the second stage of the evaluation to expand on their comments. They could opt for an individual interview in person or on-line, or to join a small focus group in person or on-line. We wanted to cater for the different ways autistic people feel comfortable in sharing their views and to ensure that we were adjusting our approaches to make the evaluation activities accessible to all.

The second qualitative stage – interviews and focus groups

32 survey respondents indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed individually online or in person; 27 people indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed as part of a focus group; many of these had also indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed individually. All of those who indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed, and who had given their contact details, were invited to an interview or focus group. Of these several were unavailable, and one person preferred to send additional comments by email.

A total of 18 members of Diverse were interviewed individually, plus one family member who was interviewed on behalf of their youngster. In addition, one focus group was held of 8 participants.

The topic guide for the interview was developed from previous evaluation activities that had been conducted within Diverse, the responses from the quantitative survey, and questions designed to fit the aim of the evaluation. All interviewees were sent a copy of the guide prior to their interview, to give them time to process the questions and consider their responses. A copy of the topic guide is included at Appendix 4.

Most interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes. 11 were held online; 8 were held in person. The focus group of 8 participants was held in person and lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Consent process

The evaluation team made themselves available to answer any potential questions about evaluation as a whole, by visiting Diverse groups and events, and sharing their contact details should potential participants have any queries. Assumed consent was obtained from those completing the survey.

Those interested in participating in an interview or focus group were sent an information sheet and formal consent form. Interviews or focus groups only took place after receipt of consent forms from those involved, and these were checked at the start of each interview or focus group.

Consent was checked regularly throughout the interviews and focus group. During the focus group one member drifted away and this was accepted as being withdrawal from the group.

We followed the Mental Capacity Act Code of Practice which states that *'Researchers should assume that a person has capacity, unless there is proof that they lack capacity to make a specific decision (see chapter 3). The person must also receive support to try to help them make their own decision (see chapter 2).'* (MCA Code of Practice p.204). However, none of the participants interested in contributing to the evaluation lacked the capacity to do so. One family member provided a proxy interview, but the Diverse member was nearby and joined the interview after some time to provide their own comments.

Ethical review of the evaluation process was undertaken by the University of Bristol School for Policy Studies Ethical Committee (reference: SSPREC/2223/336).

Reflections on the evaluation process

As an externally commissioned team with the skills and expertise to undertake the evaluation, we faced advantages and disadvantages. We took an independent stance and previously were not involved with the organisation. One of the evaluation team was autistic and provided valuable insights to the evaluation. We worked hard to ensure that our process and findings were credible, by checking the language used in the questionnaire, piloting evaluation materials, and visiting groups to meet those completing evaluation activities and answer any questions. On the other hand, a potential disadvantage was that we were not totally familiar with the history and context of Diverse and did not have a clear idea about the individual 'reasonable adjustments' that some people required to take part in the evaluation. We gained considerable tacit knowledge by attending, observing and where appropriate joining in with group activities, and hopefully allayed any fears and concerns about us. Overall, we were met with warmth and friendliness and a clear desire to engage with the evaluation if it was for the good of the organisation.

Appendix 2: The survey questionnaire

School for Policy Studies



Thinking about attending Diverse groups

This questionnaire is to find out about what difference it makes to you to be a member of Diverse.

We really appreciate you taking the time to fill it in.

The findings will be used to help improve Diverse and to apply for more funding from the National Lottery and other funders.

When filling out the questionnaire, you may find it helpful to read the whole question thoroughly before answering, to ensure that you understand the question.

Question 1 is about your involvement with Diverse

Can you start by telling us about your involvement with Diverse?

1a. For how long have you been a part of Diverse?

This could be as a group member or facilitator/worker (paid or a volunteer) (please tick one answer).

Less than 1 year	
1-3 years	
More than 3 years	

1b. Have you attended one or more Diverse groups over the past year?

This could be as a group member or facilitator/worker (paid or a volunteer) (please tick one answer).

Yes	
No	

If the response to Q1b is 'yes' go to Q1c.

If the response to Q1b is 'no' go to Q2.

1c. Which of the following groups have you attended in the past year?	Please tick those you have attended	Please tick those you have been a facilitator at
Arts and crafts		
Band/music group		
Board games (e.g. Mana House)		
Cinema (Bath or Bristol)		
Creative writing		
Dungeons and Dragons		
Football		
Gaming at Belong		
Hidden Gems Hollywood Bowl group		
Basement 45 - live music and nightclub		
Walking group outdoor photography		
Pub social and pub quiz (Toto's)		
Roxy indoor games/bowling/ice-free curling		
Tennis		
South Glos. Aspies		
Any other group(s) (please name)		

Question 2 is about how you think or feel as a result of being part of Diverse

<p>2. Has being part of Diverse made a positive difference to how you think or feel in general? (please tick one answer).</p>	
Yes	
No	

2a. Does being part of Diverse....	Yes	No change	No
Make you have more positive emotions (e.g. joy, pride, happiness, satisfaction)?			
Make you have more negative emotions (e.g. feeling anxious or stressed, having shutdowns or meltdowns)?			
Help you have more confidence when meeting new people?			
Make you feel less isolated now that you are in touch with more autistic people?			
Make you feel less able to speak up for yourself?			

<p>2b. Please write any other ways that being part of Diverse has made a difference to how you think or feel.</p>

Question 3 is about what you do now as a result of being part of Diverse.

<p>3. Has being a part of Diverse made a positive difference to what you do now? (please tick).</p>				
<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>No</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Yes		No	
Yes				
No				

3a. Does being part of Diverse....	Yes	No change	No
Help you develop new interests?			
Help you do activities which you wouldn't have done before? (e.g. going out or online)			
Make you stop doing some things that you used to enjoy?			
Make you go out less than you used to?			
Help you meet new friends who you see socially outside of Diverse groups?			

<p>3b. Please write any other ways that being a part of Diverse has made a difference to what you do now.</p>

Question 4 is about whether being part of Diverse has made you think about the future.

<p>4. Has being a member of Diverse, or attending a Diverse group made a positive difference to how you think about the future? (please tick).</p>	
Yes	
No	

4a. Does being part of Diverse....	Yes	No change	No
Make you feel more worried about your future?			
Make you look forward to your future more positively than before?			
Make you think you will remain friends with people you have met at Diverse?			

4b. Please write any other ways that being a part of Diverse has made a difference to how you think about the future.

Question 5 asks you if you want to say anything else

5. Would you like to make any other comments about the impact on you of being a part of Diverse?
(please tick).

Yes (please write below)

No (please go to Q6)

5a. Please write any other comments about the impact on you of being a part of Diverse.

This section is about you. We will keep this separate from your answers so that no one will know what you have said.

6. Your name.....

7. In which area do you live? (please tick one answer)	
Bath and North East Somerset	
Bristol	
North Somerset	
South Gloucestershire	
Other (please write where)	
Prefer not to say	

8. Who do you live with? (please tick one answer)	
I live alone	
I live with my family/relatives	
I live with friends	
I live with other people who are not family or friends	
Other (please write here)	
Prefer not to say	

School for Policy Studies

9. What is your age? (please tick one answer)	
Under 18	
18-24	
25-34	
35-44	
45-54	
55-64	
65 or over	
Prefer not to say	

10. What is your gender identity? (You can leave this blank if you would prefer not to say)

11a. Would you be happy to be interviewed one-to-one to tell us some more about your views? (please tick)	
Yes, in person	
Yes, online	
No	
I am unsure at the moment	

School for Policy Studies

11b. Would you be happy to be interviewed as part of a small group to tell us some more about your views? (please tick)	
Yes, in person	
Yes, online	
No	
I am unsure at the moment	

If the response to Q11a or 11b is 'yes' or 'unsure' go to Q11c.

If the response to Q11a or 11b is 'no' go to the final comment.

11c. If you are happy to be interviewed, what is the best way to contact you for this? Please fill in whichever option(s) you are comfortable with.	
Phone	My phone number is.....
Email	My email address is.....
In person	In person at the following Diverse group(s)

Thank you and what happens next

Thank you for filling in the questionnaire. Please now submit it if you are online.

If you have filled the questionnaire in on paper, please return it in one of the following ways:

1. By handing it to a facilitator/worker at Diverse, to pass on to Pauline or Kieran.
2. By posting it to:
Pauline Heslop, University of Bristol School for Policy Studies, 8 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TZ.
3. By taking some photos of it and emailing them to: Pauline.Heslop@bristol.ac.uk

School for Policy Studies



Once we have looked at the answers, we will talk to people in more detail about their views. We want to find out how being a member of Diverse and/or attending one or more Diverse groups has made a difference to you.

We will write up the findings and share them with you in September. The findings will be used to help improve Diverse and to apply for more funding from the National Lottery and other funders.

Best wishes from

Pauline and Kieran

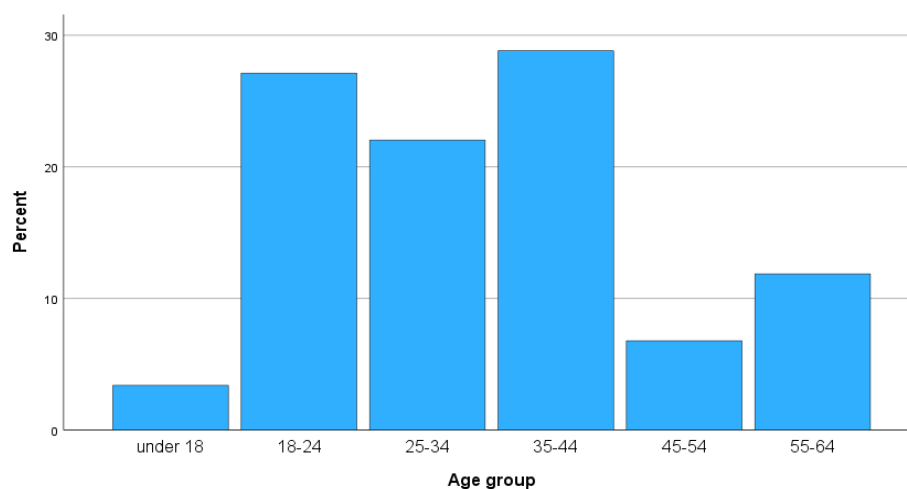
Appendix 3: Demographic analysis of those completing the survey questionnaire

A total of 61 people completed one or more of the survey questions. Demographic data for the whole of the Diverse membership was not available to us, so we were unable to assess the representativeness of those who had responded to the survey compared to the overall membership.

Age

59 respondents provided information about their age. The overall age range was from under 18 to 64 years of age, with the majority (78%, n=46) being young people between 18 and 44 years of age. Figure X shows the age distribution of people who completed the survey questionnaire.

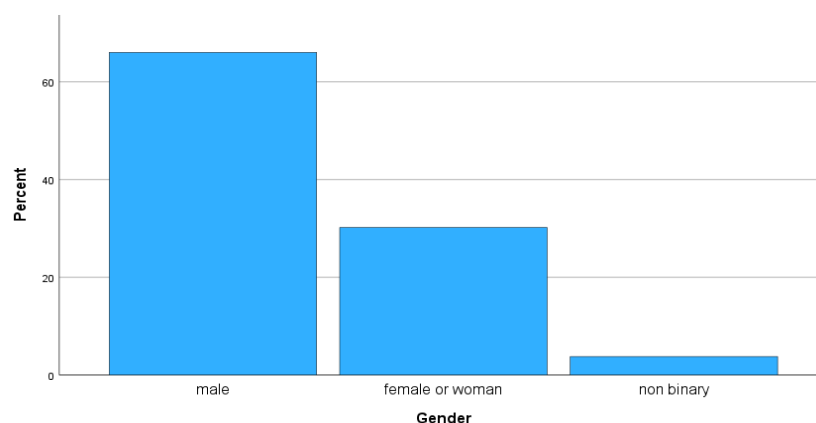
Figure 1: The age distribution of people who completed the survey questionnaire.



Gender

53 respondents provided information about their gender. Two thirds described themselves as male (66%) and almost a third as female or woman (30%). Fewer than 5 described themselves as non-binary.

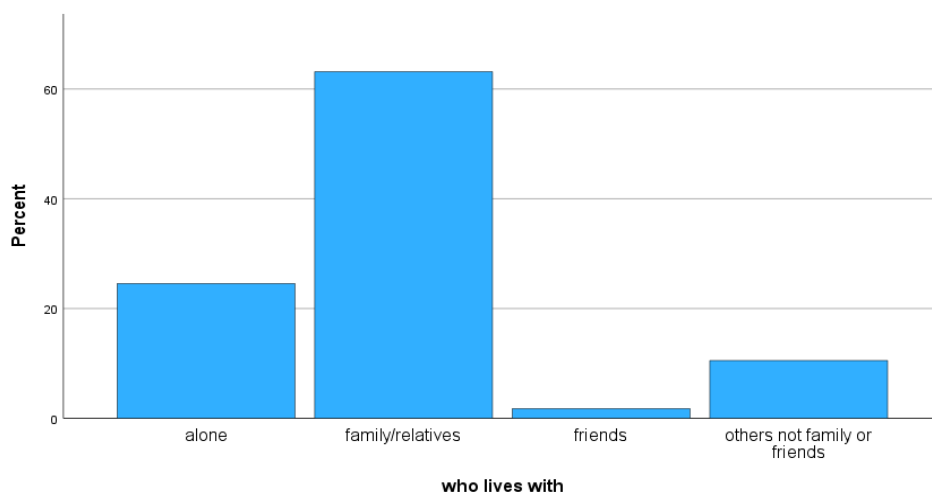
Figure 2: The gender distribution of people who completed the survey questionnaire.



Living circumstances

57 respondents provided information about their living circumstances. The majority (63%) lived with family members or relatives. A quarter (25%) lived alone; most being aged 35 and over. A small proportion (12%) lived with friends, or with people who were not family members or friends.

Figure 3: The living circumstances of people who completed the survey questionnaire.



Diverse groups attended

57 respondents provided information about the Diverse groups that they had attended over the last year. Survey respondents had, between them, attended a wide range of Diverse groups; the mean (average) number of groups attended by each respondent was 2.4 (range 0-10). Thus, respondents were presenting their views based on a breadth of Diverse activities.

Table X shows the groups attended, and the number of respondents who had attended each group.

Table 1: The groups attended and the number of respondents who had attended each group.

Group	Number of respondents
Pub social /quiz	25
Arts and crafts	12
Tennis	12
Football	11
Live music and nightclub	11
Cinema	10
Board games	9
Dungeons & dragons and tabletop games	8
Gaming	8
American indoor sports and games	8
Walking photography	5
Hidden Gems bowling	<5
South Gloucestershire Aspies	<5
Creative writing	<5
Music/band	<5

Appendix 4: The topic guide used in the interviews and focus group

1. Can you start by saying in your own words what has been helpful to you from being a part of Diverse?
2. Is there anything that has been unhelpful to you?
3. What changes do you think that being a part of Diverse has made to what you think or what you do in your life? This could be a positive change or a negative change. (Ask follow-up questions to check that all the changes to the person or their life have been covered).
4. Are these changes only due to Diverse, or are there other reasons for the changes in what you think or what you do in your life?
5. What is it about Diverse that has led to these differences in your life? e.g., it could be that it helps you to structure your week, or there are people there who can help you with any problems you may have etc. You might have other examples of your own.
6. We would like to ask you some questions about some potential differences that Diverse could make. (If any of these have already been discussed, skip them).
 - a. Has being a part of Diverse made you feel part of a community of like-minded people? Can you explain more about how this might or might not be the case for you? Can you give me some examples of that?
 - b. Has being a part of Diverse had any impact on your friendships or relationships with other people? Can you explain more about how this might or might not be the case for you? Can you give me some examples of that?
 - c. Has being a part of Diverse had any impact on your mental health and how happy or sad or anxious you might feel? Can you explain more about how this might or might not be the case for you? Can you give me some examples of that?
 - d. Has being a part of Diverse had any impact on your confidence, for example in talking to people or going out? Can you explain more about how this might or might not be the case for you? Can you give me some examples of that?
 - e. Has being a part of Diverse helped you to develop new skills that you can use in other aspects of your life e.g. in running a group, in being organised, in communicating with different people etc. Can you explain more about how this might or might not be the case for you? Can you give me some examples of that?
 - f. Has being a part of Diverse had any impact on you getting or holding down a job? Can you explain more about how this might or might not be the case for you? Can you give me some examples of that?

- g. Has being a part of Diverse had any impact on other aspects of your life (e.g., your housing, what you do in the day, how much money you have, how healthy you feel etc) Can you explain more about how this might or might not be the case for you? Can you give me some examples of that?
- 7. If the person filled in the questionnaire: Can we just check some of your questionnaire responses with you?
 - a. We are interested in your answers to XXXXX. Can you tell us a bit more about the answers that you gave to questions XXXX?
 - b. Do you want to explain any of your other answers more fully?
- 8. Ask everyone: Is there anything else you want to tell us about the impact on you of being a part of Diverse?

Evaluation of the impact of Diverse

A report for Diverse UK, undertaken by University of Bristol, 2023

For further information contact:

Prof. Pauline Heslop

School for Policy Studies, 8 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TZ

Email: Pauline.Heslop@bristol.ac.uk

For a copy of the full report, or a summary of the report, contact:

Andrew Powell. Email: Andrew.powell@diverseuk.org

A copy of the full and summary reports will also be hosted on the Diverse UK website:

<https://www.diverseuk.org/>