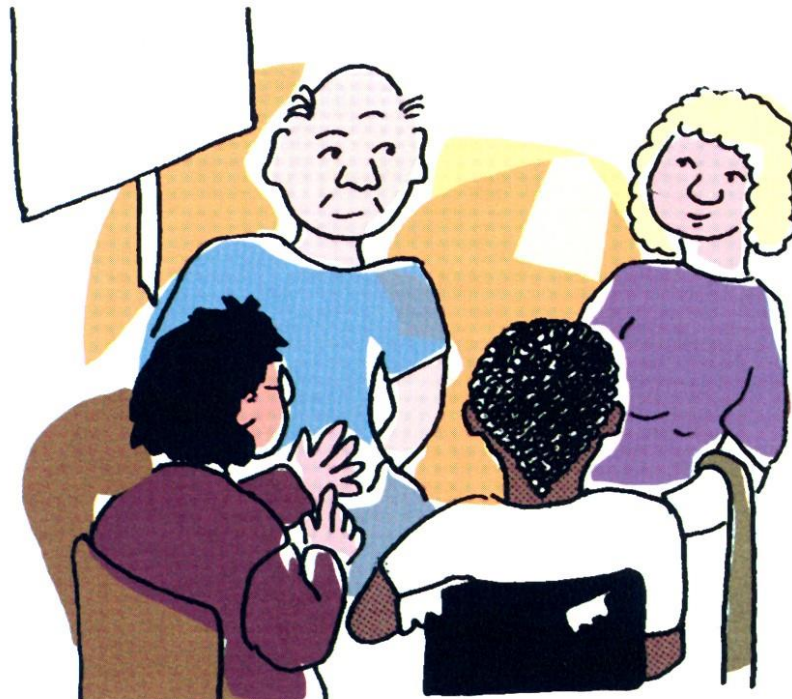


Evaluation of the impact of Diverse

Short summary



Prof. Pauline Heslop

Kieran Curtis

September 2023

Introduction

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 findings of the evaluation are based on:

- Survey responses from 61 members of Diverse.
- Interviews with 18 members of Diverse, plus one interview with a family member.
- A focus group of 8 members of Diverse.

Findings

The findings are presented in 4 sections:

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

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

There were some aspects of the organisation that helped people to feel positive about their lives.

- Feeling included.
People spoke about the importance of feeling welcomed and included, as though there was a place for them at Diverse, and that the organisation was responsive and flexible in meeting their interests. One person said: *'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 was very insecure about not having a diagnosis and being assessed... But they welcomed me.'* (Participant 3).
- A strengths-based approach.
The overall tone and content of people's comments emphasised that the focus of Diverse was about supporting people's strengths. One person commented that attending Diverse groups lets people *'grow as people and do things that they would not otherwise have considered.'* (Participant 36).
- The provision of safe and supportive spaces.
For some people, particularly those who had had difficult experiences using generic services, 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 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. All suggested that the biggest impacts on people's lives were driven by being able to feel supported in an autism-specific space where they could try out skills and approaches before taking them into the wider world. One interviewee 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)
- Additional ways for the organisation to further maximise impact.
There were some suggestions as to how the organisation could change or adapt to further maximise its impact. Some people commented on the workload of staff, with 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).

2. The impact of Diverse on making a difference to members' thoughts and feelings

Almost all (97%; 56 of 58) of survey respondents, and most people interviewed, reported that being part of Diverse had made a positive difference to how they thought or felt in general.

- Having more positive emotions, such as happiness or satisfaction.
What underpinned having more positive emotions seemed to be the social contact people had, the atmosphere of the groups, and 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. One survey respondent commented: *'Diverse has helped me feel less awkward and alone in my feelings as an autistic person.'* (Participant 42). Not all feelings of isolation or difference were reduced upon first contact with Diverse – for some people this took some time.
- Feeling able to be oneself.
With reduced feelings of isolation from attending Diverse groups, came an increased sense of people being able to be themselves. One person said: *'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).
- 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. One person said: *'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).

- Feeling more confident.
71% (42 of 59) of survey respondents and most people interviewed stated that being part of Diverse had made them feel as though they had more confidence in a range of situations. One person said: *'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).
- More difficult thoughts and feelings.
We wanted to be sure that being a member of Diverse was not also resulting in some more difficult thoughts and feelings. 79% (45 of 57) of survey respondents stated that being part of Diverse had **not** made them have any more negative emotions, such as feeling anxious or stressed. A further 19% reported that there had been no change in this for them. 65% of survey 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.

3. The impact of Diverse on making a difference to 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.

- 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 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... 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).
- 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, such as *'trying new things more often'* (focus group member). Interviewees provided a range of examples of engaging in activities that they would not have done without the support and encouragement of Diverse, such as playing in a football tournament, exhibiting their creative writing or reading their poems in public.
- Developing skills for life.
What was striking 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, communication, group facilitation, planning one's time, self-reflection, social skills, taking responsibility, understanding others, travelling independently, help with housing or work.
- 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. 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.

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

Almost all (86%, 50 of 58) of the survey respondents and most interviewees reported that being part of Diverse had made a positive difference to how they thought about the future.

- 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).
- Opportunities for people to engage with work or additional responsibilities that will serve them well in the future.
Some people commented that the opportunities within Diverse, such as doing voluntary or paid work, had made them feel more optimistic about the future. One person commented: *'I'm glad I'm developing leadership skills, because I've got a feeling I'll need it in the future...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).
- Not being more anxious about the future as a result of engagement with Diverse.
We wanted to be sure that being a member of Diverse was not making people more worried about their future. 61% (34 of 56) of survey 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.

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 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.

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 this summary, 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/>