

SPAN: a hands-on history project

Evaluation Report

June 2021

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Acknowledgements

This report (and the SPAN History Project) would not have been possible without the commitment and involvement of History Group researchers who worked with academics and community workers to develop a history of SPAN. Researchers took part in evaluation interviews and agreed to evaluators observing the activities and interactions in History Group meetings. They also critically engaged with draft versions of this report. Thank you, History Group researchers for your time and invaluable insights throughout this extended project.

Thanks also to two individuals who, as former staff and volunteers at SPAN, took part in early evaluation interviews to aid our understanding of what it is like to be the focus of a historical study like this one.

The SPAN History Project was guided by a Steering Group comprising contributors from the the Wellspring Settlement, The University of Bristol, former staff at Single Parent Action Network as well as History Group researchers. The Steering Group, chaired by independent consultant Catherine Lecointe, was instrumental to the progress of the evaluation, offering guidance and input on the methods and helping to shape this report. Thanks to the Steering Group, for your solid engagement with the evaluation and willingness to contend with detailed exploration of the process of doing this work.

In addition to the core group of collaborators on the project, staff at the Wellspring Settlement provided essential assistance by delivering the crèche and providing administrative support and space for the evaluation interviews. We are also grateful to Nicole Andrieu at the University of Bristol for crucial administrative backup. Thanks also to Caroline's Crèches for additional cover when this was needed.

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Reading this report

This report is intended for anyone who would like to know more about how co-produced research works from the point of view of a team of research collaborators. We worked together for many months to create and evaluate a History of Single Parents Action Network. As has been noted before (Thomas-Hughes 2016) co-produced research can be a 'messy' business as research collaborators define and work towards the goals of a study together. The project described here has been successful, with a number of research outputs completed or in process, eight out of a possible twelve voluntary researchers still engaged in the project after fifteen months and members of the project team working together to establish two follow on projects. However, like most collaborative projects, there was disagreement and discord along the way and, as evaluators we have tried to include these aspects of the work so that the report can be supportive and helpful to others who are engaging in similar research studies.

Report outline

Summary report

For those who may struggle to find the time to read the full report, the report summary begins on the next page with the findings, suggestions for consideration by future research co-production teams and the Steering Group's review of the final report including tips for future research co-production teams.

Full report

The main part of the report then introduces the project and the evaluation in Section 1. Section 2 considers the activity in history group meetings to give readers a feel for what happened at the core of the project. This is followed by presentation of the experiences and accounts of History Group members in Section 3 and of university and community staff in Section 4. Lastly, Section 5 explores how project stakeholders thought about the value of history and of the history of SPAN. The report draws extensively on the words of all those involved in the project. Each section begins with a summary which is followed by the detail and analysis for that topic.

Terms used in this report

- Co-production – collaboration involving individuals/organisations/communities, alongside academic or professional researchers. This could mean collaboration which focuses on:
 - the overall management and control of research
 - setting research priorities
 - doing the research and/or
 - communicating the research findings (adapted, Holmes, 2017)
- Researchers / History Group members – people from the community engaged as voluntary collaborators on the project.
- Contributors/ paid contributors – community staff, consultants and academic researchers.
- Collaborators – contributors and researchers.
- SPANers – people who had an association with Single Parent Action Network as members of staff, volunteers, students or users of the project.
- Wellspring Settlement – Barton Hill Settlement merged with another local charity and changed its name to Wellspring Settlement in February 2020; reflecting the time of communication, the settlement is occasionally referred to as Barton Hill Settlement in this report.

It is important to note that there was significant overlap in these categories with several individuals belonging to more than one category; for example SPANers on the project were also contributors. (See section 1.2 Project Structure).

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Summary 1 – Findings

This section of the report looks back at the project evaluation to highlight findings in five main areas: making together to leave a lasting legacy, the learning and development of collaborators on the project, decision making, the roles of collaborators and the benefits and demands of co-production.

Making together to leave a lasting legacy

At the start of 2020 the project seemed on track with several clearly defined outputs to complete and a History Group that was working well together and increasingly effective, but the project was significantly impacted by Covid-19. History Group meetings at the settlement had to stop and project activity was cancelled, postponed or transferred online. The pandemic affected the process of the group's ending and extended it by two months. Despite the interruption to the work brought about by the pandemic, history group researchers showed considerable pride in what had been achieved; this included: a mural, an online project event, a set of commemorative mugs, a series of oral history interviews and the cataloguing of the SPAN archive, project presentations and several planned collaborative research articles which are now in process. The perceived permanence of some of the History Group outputs was particularly valued by History Group members. Importantly, the group had developed supportive ways of working throughout the project which came to the forefront when Covid-19 and government restrictions severely impacted on the lives of group members.

Over time, project facilitators and researchers created a routine for meetings that became context for activity in the group. The regular check-ins, coffees, seating arrangements and food seemed essential to the work. For some researchers, engagement in the group was mainly focused on the social aspects of the groups including building friendships and having interesting discussions in the group. Others focused their participation on the potential to explore the historical topic. Researchers expressed gratitude and praised the methods for engagement. Some researchers appreciated the deliberately inclusive measures used to gain agreement and input from researchers. However, occasionally, researchers expressed a desire for more negotiation of the structures used by the group, whilst acknowledging the difficulties of doing this within the limited time available.

The History Group developed an inclusive way of operating which meant that researchers could keep in touch with the project even if they were not able to attend a meeting. Researchers appreciated this flexibility but irregular attendance was occasionally problematic for the progress of the work, particularly when important decisions were made.

For ex-SPAN staff, the backgrounds of History Group members and their ability to relate to the issues within SPAN's work were important. University staff were concerned that the work of the project should be well-received in academic settings such as journals and also generate engagement and interest from wider public audiences. There was concern from contributors who were also ex-SPAN staff, that the history project was more focused on the processes and methods used in the study, rather than the content of SPAN's history. A few contributors reflected on the university ethics requirements and questioned its timing and length within the History Project. The project Steering Group included all project contributors with an invitation to History Group members to attend the meetings. At the time of writing, the group had met five times as a forum for stakeholders to oversee and support the project to achieve its aims.

Learning and development

Researchers' motivations to join the group covered different aspects of personal development. Whereas some were focused on developing their skills or intellect, others had more precise aims of wanting to develop or change their careers. The status of the University of Bristol as a prestigious and well-known

institution was also a feature that had led to participation in the project. The subject matter of SPAN and single parenting was also an important factor attracting potential researchers to the project; a few researchers, who were single parents, said that the topic area had attracted them to the project. The politics of SPAN was also mentioned as a factor which drew people in and sparked their interest in knowing more about the organisation and researchers valued the chance to learn more about their community. However, the research topic was also a potential barrier to some people's engagement, either because researchers believed they needed to be single parents to be in the group or because the identity of 'single parent' did not feel applicable to their situation.

Researchers' learning on the project covered a range of areas including interviewing, archiving and organisation skills as well as understanding the process of a research project. Facilitators encouraged researchers to build on existing capabilities in their time on the project and offered extensive support to researchers to enhance the development of their skills. The experience of planning and attending project events provided points of focus for involvement that were meaningful and motivating to researchers. Researchers spoke positively about the way that the initial stage of the project had included enjoyable but demanding goals - in particular delivering a group presentation at a conference which seemed to build confidence within the team of researchers.

The History Group offered opportunities for supported group and individual learning. There seemed to be a strong connection between researchers' independent development and the support of the whole History Group. History Group researchers kept up with the changing requirements of their role as the project progressed through each stage. Part of the responsibility of project facilitators was to support History Group researchers in understanding this developing role. Researchers developed their skills as the project progressed, and during the evaluation interviews many reflected that they had become more self-assured as a result.

Researchers were often able to point out ways that the group had helped them to develop communication skills. For those who were learning English, the group was a supportive learning space. The group was also a place to practice and observe group communication issues as they arose. Researchers often reflected on conversations exposing differences of opinion and background as a positive aspect of their engagement in the group. However, in the second term, there was conflict and tension in the History Group which was stressful for researchers and contributors. In managing decision-making in the group, facilitators were also required to address the feelings of disappointment, anger and anxiety (See Facer and Enright 2016).

Researchers appreciated the chance to find out more about SPAN, especially the opportunities to engage with people who were involved in the organisation. There were however criticisms from some about a lack of historical content in the project and a suggestion that the content was focused mainly on the leadership of the organisation. University staff spoke about historical methods as an important aspect of why the history of SPAN mattered. The use of co-production in the work was a central area of exploration. For community-based contributors the history of SPAN mattered in more direct and experiential ways. The majority of collaborators demonstrated a belief that history mattered and that the history of SPAN was also important. The history of SPAN was considered important because it had the ability to inspire or support change in the present and future. Former members of staff at SPAN welcomed the history project as an opportunity for that history to be told to a wide audience. A strong motivator for involvement of community collaborators was the concern that this history was being lost or marginalised.

Making decisions

The activities of the History Group were partly structured by decisions made before the group had started. The application for funding had involved decisions about who would be involved in the project, the main

project milestones and timings. The History Group was the key part of a network of stakeholders including evaluators, the Steering Group and SPANers, the university and the settlement. The History Group was resourced, enabled and yet also limited by the presence and interests of these stakeholders, that included the requirements of the project funders.

Power was distributed through negotiated processes and a variety of decisions made about how the research would progress. A range of methods were used to make decisions in the History Group: gathering ideas, combining ideas, presenting options and proposals, portioning decisions, questioning, facilitating space for thinking and dreaming, gathering feedback, voting and working towards consensus. University researchers and community workers left space for History Group researchers to make specific decisions such as which research outputs to develop. Activities where researchers could see that they were making a difference on the project seemed most valued by researchers. After proposing a structure and then facilitating agreement as to how a decision would be made, facilitators left final choices to researchers. History Group researchers were concerned that participation in the group should be on an equal basis with others and where voices were felt to be left out this was noted as an important issue.

The roles of collaborators

The project involved overlapping groups of stakeholders from different backgrounds who had a high level of personal and professional investment in the work. Contributors were willing to engage with the complexities and potential difficulties of co-production. With differences exposed at the start of the project, contributors began to negotiate how the research would be done and who would be involved. SPANers were valued as important contributors to the project by members of the project team but the role of SPANers was a source of disagreement, especially in the early stages of the project with contributors having different understandings of their place within the project structure. Some contributors expressed concern that SPANers might be side-lined, or become merely 'objects' of study in the research process.

The roles of project team members were defined and noted in a project meeting at the start of the project. However, project contributors also revised ways of working as the project evolved and changed its focus. Open discussion about the expectations of stakeholders was considered an important aspect of communication, but there were sometimes differences in expectations of roles which impacted on the work. Contributors also highlighted the need for early discussion of the practical aspects of communication between stakeholders including expectations about, for example, the regularity of meetings and preferred methods of communication.

Several contributors held multiple roles on the project. In the earlier stages, some contributors found it difficult to define their own role on the project. Project members had worked closely together on previous research projects so that some of the university and community staff knew each other well. The project involved collaboration between individuals who had knowledge of each other's motivations and ways of working.

The involvement of the settlement was appreciated by all contributors who saw that it offered the space for the History Group meetings as well as the time of centre staff including caretakers, receptionists and managers. The organisation was also valued because of its experience and reputation in community development work. The availability of the crèche and of several centre-based community projects including parenting classes and a debt advice service was an advantaged of holding meetings there.

Contributors highlighted the many resources and skills that were brought to the work by representatives from the university. Preconceptions about the university were considered to be a barrier to engagement with members of the public and community organisations. A potential disappointment or fear for

contributors engaging with universities was that they might 'hold back' from using their experience to guide the research project.

At the start of the project, collaborators held detailed discussions about who might be invited to join the History Group. These discussions were an important phase of the project where contributors discovered each other's expectations and hopes for the work. Although essential, these discussions may have delayed the practical work of gaining interest and commitment from potential History Group members. The success of recruiting History Group members and their continued commitment to the project were considered major project successes. The role of the community worker responsible for recruitment and support of researchers was considered crucial here. An important feature of recruitment to the group was the opportunity that researchers had space to discuss the group and ask questions about what it would entail. These conversations were often initiated by staff who had already built a relationship with the potential researchers; they took place at the settlement and other community settings. The provision of individualised and tailored advice that addressed issues like timing and childcare, seemed a crucial part of the project's initial success in recruiting researchers to commit to a year-long group.

The History Group needed enough structure so that researchers knew what they were being asked to do, but also to be open to researchers' input into the process. This seemed to be an ongoing challenge of the facilitator role. The diverse range of motivations for joining the group and the broad range of prior experience of researchers required a balance of different types of activity and focus during group meetings.

Benefits and demands in co-production

Researchers often praised the welcoming tone of the facilitators, showed their appreciation of the group and valued the opportunity to take the risk of doing something different in a mutually supportive space. Membership of the History Group involved researchers in unusual conversations which allowed for the possibility of gaining insight into the lives of people from different backgrounds. Several researchers noted that they had made valued friendships in the group and others spoke about the group as 'family'.

For some of the researchers, the History Group was a gateway to wider networks of support and interest in the local area. As the project progressed, History Group members became connected through other activities in their lives. Engagement in the History Group was a source of pleasure, inspiration and empowerment for some researchers. Most of the researchers interviewed seemed deeply affected by their time in the group and two researchers reflected on immediate impacts on employment – one on practical support for employment options and the second spoke of the History Group leading to a change in her view of the university as an employer.

Ten out of 12 researchers who attended the group had children who used the settlement crèche and this provision was undoubtedly important for the project's progress. Further, careful consideration of childcare issues in the timing of the sessions (for example, allowing time to drop children off at school before the group started) seemed important. It should be noted that although, the offer of childcare was appreciated by members of the group, using that childcare was not always uncomplicated for mothers juggling other responsibilities and specific needs of children.

Offering food and drink were essential to building trust and relationships in the History Group. As History Group researchers were not paid for their time, these aspects were essential ways of showing appreciation and valuing the volunteers. The less structured meal and breacktimes were opportunities for people to get to know each other. Despite the considerable effort that went towards organising inclusive participation in the work, barriers to participation were still evident. Taking part in research interviews was identified as something that was difficult for researchers to balance alongside their parenting and other responsibilities.

Time was precious for researchers who could have a few hours without childcare in the History Group. Where time was felt to be wasted or not used efficiently, this was frustrating for attenders. Several researchers spoke about the timing of meetings as something that led to them joining the group. The timing of meetings within the school day was crucial to participation for almost all of the researchers. The level of involvement in the group may have been a dilemma for some group participants. One researcher expressed her desire to do much more work on the project whilst at the same time, knowing her available time was limited.

In the early stages of the SPAN History Project, researchers were introduced to the concept of co-production, to SPAN and to other members of the History Group. Some were attending the settlement for the first time. With both the university and the settlement having extensive administrative and ethical requirements, there was a lot to achieve in the first few weeks. In addition, the History Group were introduced to the project evaluation. Positive views of the initial meetings outweighed negative ones but some researchers were concerned about the group being dominated by more confident voices and about the initial pace of the group being too slow and lacking in historical content.

Contributors from the university and the settlement also noted the pressure of time in the later stages of the project. Several contributors expressed a view that they would have preferred more time for archival analysis and historical investigation on the project. Researchers were appreciative of the time they spent on the project but for some, getting to meetings was sometimes difficult because they were fitting it in with school runs, childcare and sometimes work. For some of the researchers, the History Group meetings did not easily fit into their week.

When the group was in conflict, researchers sometimes questioned their participation in the group. Researchers described how distressing and difficult conflict in a group can be and the need for space to discuss and resolve conflict as well as support at difficult times in a group's development. Contributors recommended an approach to conflict that explores differences and allows time for facilitators to observe the emotions and dynamics in the group. Most collaborators reflected on their emotions during the project and noted some anxiety during the work. There were moments of intense emotion on the project which impacted on the team.

Researchers appreciated the unusual and uncertain nature of the history project. For some researchers, potential for enjoyment on the project appeared to be enhanced by the openness and unpredictability of the work. However, when research volunteers take part in a research project where activities and outcomes are not known from the outset, they are taking a risk with their time and emotional energy. Trust in the project hosts and facilitators as well as the use of interactive and engaging discovery methods seemed to aid the navigation of these uncertainties.

Summary 2 - Suggestions for co-produced research

Using the evaluation framework as a guide, this section offers suggestions for future research co-production. We acknowledge that each project will be unique, and we ask readers to consider the relevance of suggestions to their own circumstances and context.

Working together to co-produce research

- Facilitate discussion about understandings of research co-production amongst project stakeholders. Seek to gain understanding and (hopefully) agreement about who is involved in the project and who will be co-producing the research. If there are several arenas for co-production, ensure that interested collaborators are aware of these arenas and how they fit into the broader project structure.
- Consider the motivations for involvement of different collaborators and whether these can be communicated so that all collaborators have an understanding of the needs, preferences and priorities of their colleagues. Consider the balance of activity on the project and how time might be organised in a way that reflects the priorities and motivations of all collaborators. Communicate about expectations of engagement and involvement in the project including what level of engagement is required and if there are any boundaries to involvement.
- Consider the requirements of different contributors. Academic researchers, community partners, community researchers and potential research participants are likely to have different requirements for how they wish to be engaged with and included in the research.
- Consider what support and structures will be needed for contributors to participate in the project over time. Where project activities and roles are likely to change, take time out to review how things are going and give contributors the opportunity to suggest improvements to ways of working. Use a variety of methods for engaging with the research including in person contact with research participants if this is relevant to the work.
- If appropriate, engage all contributors in discussions about research ethics on the project. Try to develop a common understanding of the way that ethical issues such as respect for participants, doing no harm and consent relate to the ambitions for the project.

Learning and development

- Aim to provide a supportive environment with opportunities for individual learning and development as well as group experiences that build trust, skills and knowledge. Consider opportunities to gain confidence on the research project and how different activities on the project might allow participants to consolidate and practice skills that they bring to the work.
- Consider possibilities for accreditation of the learning that takes place within the co-production process. This accreditation could highlight transferrable as well as specialist research skills. Consider other ways to support participants who wish to develop their learning once the project has ended.
- Consider planning an event or activity in the early part of the project; this will be an opportunity for team-building. If possible include activities designed to enhance researchers' understanding of the proposed work as well as develop communication skills and experience of working together on the project.

- Consider how to ensure that the administrative and evaluative aspects of the project do not dominate the research activity and, where there are opportunities for learning within these processes, ensure that these are highlighted.
 - I. Facilitators of similar work could consider starting a project with a 2-4 week taster course where requirements for administration, ethics and consent might be more manageable. This could be followed by a process of gaining full consent to take part in further work.
 - II. Facilitators might also consider introducing more subject content into the group from day one. Shifting the balance only slightly might be more enjoyable and provide inspiration to community researchers.

Making decisions

- Consider a range of options for collaborators to make decisions during the co-produced research and, where relevant, engage participants in deciding which methods might be used in different situations. Check-in with collaborators to see how comfortable they are with decisions that have been made on the project.
- Clarify the boundaries of decision-making to contributors including which decisions are made in which forums and what decisions have previously been made during early project planning. Where necessary, prioritise the decisions that are made in collaborative settings so that there is an acceptable balance between planning and doing the work. Recognise the time required for effective joint decision-making and prioritise decisions to be made in within co-production forums. Consider where and when different collaborators might be most needed to guide the progress of the project.

The roles of collaborators

- Communicate the purpose and expectations of roles on the project. Support collaborators to understand that the focus of the work is likely to change over time and try to ensure that any changes are communicated to relevant people.
- Aim to develop ways of working that are communicated, understood and agreed. There may be times when ways forward may seem unclear to collaborators. Well communicated structures and ways of working may help to guide participants through uncertainties within the project.
- Set aside time in the project for discussing approaches to, and roles in, facilitation. Allow time to debrief after meetings and opportunities for planning forthcoming sessions. Facilitating groups alongside colleagues is a skilled task requiring sensitivity and trust between facilitators and the group. Ensure that there is space to discuss and monitor roles in the group so that facilitation can be responsive to collaborators.
- Consider allowing space for flexibility so that where appropriate, community researchers can be supported to input into the *process* as well as the *outputs* of co-produced research.
- Consider how the project can encourage people from different backgrounds to be involved. This could include people who have had difficulty accessing training and education opportunities and people who have English as an additional language. The SPAN History Project had success in recruitment because it discussed the possible barriers to participation at length. Project staff held several conversations with potential attenders to allow them to find out about the group and to ask questions.

- Allow time in planning sessions for discussions about how to tackle inequalities in the group. The issue of who takes up airtime in groups is a sensitive one, but it is also a difficulty which occurs in most group settings. It is also relevant to consider wider structural inequalities including 'race', gender & sexuality, class and disabled/non-disabled status etc. and also to the power and influence awarded to those who hold a professional status.
- Consider opportunities for community participants to have different roles and responsibilities on the research project. These could connect to researchers' interests, skills and motivations. Consider what strategies might be used to ensure that all group members are able to learn and contribute at an appropriate pace. Consider the balance of activity for people with a substantial experience of research compared to those who have very little experience. These suggestions will need to be balanced against offers of group activities which can build a team and support group development.
- Consider including clear goals for the early stages of the work so that contributors have a sense of purpose and the feeling of making a contribution. These might also be helpful for building trust and developing working relationships.

Benefits and demands in co-production

- Consider highlighting potential career opportunities for contributors in the publicity for community research or co-production opportunities. Present a comprehensive 'offer' of the variety of potential benefits for individuals. The SPAN History Project seemed to offer a lot of opportunity for self-development and empowerment.
- If possible, provide the option of on-site childcare for research volunteers. Consider the time that will be needed to settle children into crèche provision and to collect them afterwards when planning session times. Where appropriate, consider alternative arrangements for people who are not able to use the childcare provided. (For example, where a child attends specialist childcare provision.) Consider the timing of meetings and, if possible, discuss this with potential participants.
- If diversity within the group is to be prioritised, develop early strategies for how this will be achieved. This could include targeted recruitment with local community organisations. Support opportunities for researchers to develop communication skills and cultural sensitivity within the project.
- Consider setting aside time for the less structured conversations that may help to build trust amongst collaborators. The development of friendships and mutual support within co-produced work can be an important benefit for contributors. Where a group is going through a period of conflict, consider any needs for additional support for collaborators.
- Involve collaborators in decisions about how non-attenders to group meetings might be able to contribute to the work. Consider the different ways that contributors might be involved in the research – for example using remote methods such as email and WhatsApp if they are unable to attend group meetings.
- Ensure that contributors are given feedback and shown the value of their contributions to the work. For contributors who are not paid, this might include gifts, lunches and work references which describe their contribution to the study.

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Summary 3 - Feedback from the Steering Group on the Evaluation Report (January 2021)

At the last Steering Group meeting (attended by consultants, University and Wellspring representatives but not History Group researchers), we asked those who had been deeply involved in the 'SPAN A Hands On History' project to offer their reflections on the draft evaluation report and what struck them as they read it and if it chimed with their own experience of being involved in the project. We were interested in identifying what rang true, whether anything didn't ring true, and whether there were any glaring gaps in the report.

1. Is there anything in the report that seems very true for you about how the project went?

The diversity of the researchers involved in the project meant that there was no single experience. The value of meeting and learning from a diverse group of people was seen as one of the strengths of the project. However, such diversity also presented challenges. One implication of this diversity in motivation/experience etc. was the importance of thinking hard about how to keep people involved, e.g. the importance of having a relaxed chat over food for those looking primarily for the social c.f. those looking to get a certain job. Steering Group members noted the critical role played by facilitators in supporting all individuals and activity, as well as the importance of deciding that this would be a closed group with concern throughout to support inclusion.

The importance of being clear with everyone about the knowns and unknowns at the start of the project: what is set in stone and what is negotiable? Steering Group members stressed the importance of making clear what was known and already fixed – e.g. things like timeframe and total budget, as well as leadership structure and organisations involved that had been fixed by the funder - but then, also making clear what was unknown and very much open for negotiation. Here the critical issue was transparency with the group over what areas they were able to make decisions about. There was also a sense of the importance of being mindful throughout on the timeline to ensure outputs are produced in time, while seeking to balance planning with flexibility. The building of trust in and with the facilitators was seen as crucial, but questions remained over what the right amount of facilitation was in a coproduced project like this.

The importance of experimenting with new forms of decision making, especially given the constraints of time. Steering Group members noted the openness on the part of the group to experiment with finding effective and inclusive methods for decision making and communications.

The need to acknowledge and normalise that co-production (and group working) will involve conflict. Steering Group members recommended the importance of giving people tools to deal with conflict. In this particular project, these could helpfully be used to manage tensions between different stakeholders and the also the multiple roles of former SPANers.

The role of the evaluator across the whole course of the project was seen as extremely important. They ensured that everyone's voices were heard and could feedback and act as a critical friend throughout the project and not simply at the end of the project.

The individual connections made with the history of SPAN were seen as particularly important. These ranged from seeing SPAN's history as offering up a toolkit for activism to resulting in a greater feeling of connection with the city.

2. Is there anything in the report that doesn't seem true to you?

Statement about co-production challenging power needs more interrogation. In particular Steering Group members noted that this was not a central aim when starting the group although the aim of generating new knowledge. It was clear that individuals in the group were empowered through the process, but the question remained of whether there are important differences between community and academic perspectives on challenging power through coproduced research.

Conflicts and tensions tended to be underreported in the final report. While conflict does emerge as one challenge in the report, there was a sense from Steering Group members that this could be foregrounded more and in particular by thinking about what we learned from these conflicts. Also missing were the complex emotions that were particularly important at the beginning of the project when there was anxiety about who would be involved in the context of SPAN as an organisation not ending well.

3. Is there anything about the SPAN History Project that you think is missing from the report?

Reimagining co-production as a sliding scale. Steering Group members saw the value of creating a timeline of the project that included how key decisions were made and by who as a way of thinking where the co-production was, and with who, at different moments of the project.

Interrogating the role of ex-SPAN-ners involved in the project. Who are they? Do they represent the 'community'? Where did they fit into the project? What is the impact of the project on them?

Naming the emotional process of doing the research. There were a number of key issues here, ranging from the felt anxiety of being evaluated (the experience of being simultaneously researchers but also researched upon) to the traumatic context of the ending of the project in the context of Covid-19. More was needed on the impact of Covid-19 on the group as well as the mitigation and support offered.

The need to evaluate the outputs and not simply the process. Steering Group members were conscious that the evaluation focused on the research process but did not deal with the end of the project and the ongoing work, nor on the specific research outputs created by the project team.

Advice for future projects: Tips for successful co-production

In closing the final meeting, we asked our Steering Group to come up with a list of top tips for others embarking on similar coproduced projects. This is what they suggested:

Be clear what the offer is at the start – a written offer was really helpful here.

Recruit and include a diverse team.

Include those involved in the history as researchers – in this specific case there may have been value in broadening the research team to intentionally include SPANers and their lived knowledge.

Build trust.

Be clear with everyone that there will be tensions.

Be clear and transparent about what is fixed and what is up for negotiation – what are the possibilities and limits of co-production?

Keep focus on the core aims of the project – minimise process decisions to maximise time for the central research work.

Set clear priorities and boundaries for evaluation.

Schedule regular catch-up sessions for everyone involved in the project.



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1 Introduction: co-producing a history of Single Parent Action Network

Single Parent Action Network: a hands-on history, is a collaborative history project involving academics and other community members in a collaborative process of generating knowledge. As evaluators and researchers, we are aware of different uses of the term co-production, and of debate about the usefulness of a term that is so broadly defined (See for example: Bell and Pahl (2018) and Brandsen and Horningh (2015). In this report, co-production has been defined simply as the collaboration between academics and non-academics in the research process (see page 3 and Holmes 2017).

Within the SPAN History Project, the aim of the collaboration was that academics would work alongside community members: defining research questions and aims and creating the process for undertaking the research together to develop new knowledge. Ideally co-production involves an exchange of ideas with the demonstration of respect for different kinds of knowing. (The knowing which comes from experience as well as the knowing which comes from academic training (Pente et al 2015).) Ideally research co-producers deliberately try to disrupt power imbalances between researchers and community members by acknowledging and exploring the standpoints of different participants in the research process. Co-production methods cannot avoid the reality of traditional power imbalances such as racism, sexism and class as well as other constructions that produce discrimination and harm; ideally, co-production seeks to both acknowledge and work against these. Ideas about what counts as knowledge are disrupted when researchers (from universities and communities) come together with the aim of collaborating as equals.

The method of co-production was seen as fitting for exploring the history of Single Parent Action Network (SPAN), a Bristol-based voluntary sector organisation with national and international reach. The organisation avowedly held a grassroots and activist led agenda and supported the political and social engagement of single parents in the UK from the early 1990s to 2016. SPAN challenged discrimination against single parent families with an awareness of intersectionality: the complex and varied workings of structural discrimination which ensure that families' experiences are diverse and uneven (Crenshaw 2018).

The idea for the SPAN History Project came out of previous collaborations between SPAN and the University of Bristol. It was developed in conversations between Sue Cohen (Former Chief Executive Officer, Single Parent Action Network) and Professor Josie McLellan (Department of History, University of Bristol). Led by Josie McLellan, the team envisioned a substantial project which would protect the SPAN archive, use co-production methods to research the history of SPAN and also explore the co-production process in detail. The range of research was reflected in the research questions posed:

1. What are the consequences of decentring the history of the Voluntary and Community Sector?
2. How did small grassroots organisations adapt to changes in the Voluntary and Community Sector in the 1990s and 2000s?
3. What are the implications of the 'participatory turn' for the practice of historical research? Can the methodology of co-production produce new insights and a more socially-engaged history?
4. What processes and research methods are required for co-production with groups that are under-represented in knowledge production?

After notification of funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Board, the project began in late 2018. By April 2019, the project had recruited 12 community researchers, a senior research associate and a community worker to explore and protect the archive and ‘make’ a history of SPAN together. (For a full list of paid staff working on the project, see [Table 2](#).) Alongside these members, the project also recruited an evaluator to critically examine the project and contribute to exploration of questions 3 and 4 by:

- Mapping the range of activities undertaken by the History Group;
- Examining research partners’ and researchers’ experiences at different stages of the project;
- Investigating and exploring individual, group and other impacts of the project (both intended and unexpected);
- Clarifying and documenting processes and practices for successful co-production.

1.1 Project timeline

Work towards SPAN: a hands-on history started in 2016 when JM and SC started conversations about a history of SPAN. This work built on previous collaborations between JM and SPAN. A rough timeline of the work that led up to the History Group being formed is shown below as ([Table 1.1](#) - provided by JM¹).

<i>Table 1.1: SPAN: a hands-on history – project timeline 2011- April 2019</i>	
From 2011	JM working on various history projects with SPAN
2016	SPAN closes - SC and AO retrieve SPAN’s archive
	SC and JM starts conversation with Josie about funding for a history project about SPAN
2017	SC, Joanna Holmes (Chief Executive - Barton Hill Settlement), AO and TC input into funding application. JM is lead applicant.
October 2018	Funding is awarded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council
December 2018	LH is appointed as Independent Evaluator and Critical Friend
January 2019	JH appointed as Community Support Worker
February 2019	February 2019: JB appointed as Senior Research Associate
February- March 2019	February-March 2019: Planning and recruiting the History Group
March 2019	Project ‘Kick Off’ Workshop
April 2019	Evaluation workshop for paid staff on the project. First History Group Meeting
March 2020	Meetings moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic
July 2020	Last History Group Meeting

¹ JM – Josie McLellan, NA – Nicole Andrieu, JB – Jenny Barke, SC – Sue Cohen, JH – Jude Hutchen, AO – Annie Oliver, TC – Tim Cole, LH- Lorna Henry.

1.2 Project structure

The core of SPAN: a hands-on history project is the History Group (a group of people – researchers and facilitators) who have met weekly² since the end of April to plan and conduct the historical research. The project also has other individuals and organisations helping to deliver its goals. A description of the different roles undertaken on the study was prepared by JB and has been reproduced as [Table 2](#) below.

<i>Table 1.2: SPAN: a hands-on history project: Who's who?</i>		
Group/Team	Role	Identified in this report as:
History Group	To research the history of SPAN and create public-facing output/s.	Researchers or History Group members
Steering Group	To support the project's aims and to oversee the work.	Steering Group Members
Facilitation team Jude Hutchen, Jenny Barke & Josie McLellan	To co-facilitate History Group sessions and work with the group to research the history of SPAN and produce output/s.	Facilitators or University collaborator / Community collaborator
Evaluation team Lorna Henry & Tim Cole	To explore the process of collaboration in the project.	Evaluators/Consultant
Community partner lead Annie Oliver	Advisory role to facilitation team and evaluation team Embeds project in work of the settlement	Community Collaborator
Project Administrator Nicole Andrieu	Responsible for project support, day to day financial management, sharing of data, website & social media.	Not applicable
Consultancy and support Sue Cohen	To offer expertise and consultancy to the project.	Consultant
Freelance archivist Ellie Pridgeon	To work with project team, History Group and University of Bristol Special Collections to prepare and catalogue SPAN archive.	Not applicable
Archival Fellow Vivian Latinwo-Olajide	To work alongside the Freelance Archivist.	Not applicable
Project Lead Josie McLellan	Project management and to provide expertise of historical analysis and skills to History Group.	University researcher

[Table 1.2](#) does not show a more complex underlying structure that exists on the project with overlapping interests amongst contributors. In the evaluation workshop for paid staff on the project, SPANers (a group of people who had kept in touch after working or volunteering at SPAN) were identified as key stakeholders on the History Project. This is something that the report returns to in Section 5. Looking at the relationship between Wellspring Settlement, the University of Bristol and SPANers, a number of overlapping interests are apparent. For example:

- The Project Lead had collaborated on several projects based at SPAN from 2011 onwards;
- The History Project community worker is line managed by a senior staff member at SPAN who had been transferred to the settlement when SPAN was closed in 2016;
- The project team relied on support from SC and AO for contacting people who had experience of SPAN;

² Within the school terms.

- The evaluator was engaged as both a Critical Friend and Independent Evaluator of the project; the evaluator was also employed by SPAN for over a year in the 1990s;
- The project was envisaged by a group that included at least 2 leading members of staff at SPAN (SC and AO);

[Appendix 1](#) is a visualisation of the connections and relationships within the project.

These kinds of previous relationships are not unusual within co-produced research where collaborators build on existing relationships.

1.3 Preparing for the History Group

Preparation for the group involved detailed discussions about many different issues in project meetings which took place between February and April 2019. Group facilitators (JM, JB and JH) met regularly to plan the group and support its participants. There was also significant support and input into this process by AO, SC and other team members. Membership of the group, the 'offer' to group members, recruitment, practicalities and roles of facilitators in group were key subjects on the agenda.

Membership of the History Group

There were several discussions about who the History Group recruitment should be aimed towards. The kinds of questions and issues which were discussed in meetings included the following:

- Should all History Group members be single parents?
- Will a mixed group discourage some women from attending?
- Is a women-only group justified?
- Will women feel a sense of safety in a women-only group?
- If a man is the only man in the group, will he feel comfortable?
- Would excluding men from the group attract unwanted attention to the project?
- How should the community worker respond to questions about whether the group is open to all or women only?

These questions were resolved with the decision that the group would be marketed to parents' groups (including single parents) and that the focus for recruitment would be women.

What was the 'offer' to History Group Members

In project meetings, the community worker in particular, was eager to outline a clear list of benefits that members of the History Group would receive in return for their participation. The 'offer' was solidified as a list of incentives for potential group members ([Appendix 2](#)).

Practicalities

Setting up the History Group required consideration of practical issues such as provision of a crèche, procedures for group and crèche registration, arranging lunches and room bookings.

Recruitment

Recruitment of History Group members was mainly achieved by the community worker with support of AO and the other facilitators. Potential History Group researchers were introduced to the project in the following ways.

- Distribution of posters about the research project (see appendix 1);
- An open information session at the Centre held a few weeks before the group began;
- Information highlighted on the settlement Facebook Page;
- Visits to community groups including meetings held at the settlement;
- Telephone contact and one-to-one meetings with people who showed an interest in the group;
- Meetings and telephone contact with community workers in other settings.

Facilitation

Careful consideration was given to the role of facilitators in History Group meeting. At the outset, it was decided that JH and JB would be the main group facilitators with JM providing expert input into historical research methods. The facilitators planned a regular cycle of meetings, debriefs and planning for the weekly groups.

1.4 The History Group

The history Group's first meeting took place on Tuesday 30 April 2019. [Table 1.3](#) shows information about the researchers who volunteered their time to the History Group. [Table 1.4](#) gives an overview of work undertaken over the weeks.

<i>Table 1.3: SPAN: a hands-on history – History Group Contacts</i>	
Number of researchers	13*
Average ³ age of youngest child	2.3
Average number of children	1.4
Total number of children using the crèche	11
Number of families using the crèche	10

Note: Although 13 people signed up to be members of the History Group, only 12 attended the group.

<i>Table 1.4: History Group Activity</i>						
<i>Week</i>	<i>1-11</i>	<i>12-19</i>	<i>20-26</i>	<i>27-32</i>	<i>33-38</i>	<i>39-48</i>
<i>Focus</i>	Introduction and research methods	Archive, oral history interviews and research outputs	Archive, oral history interviews, desk based research, research outputs	Research outputs	Research outputs and next steps	Event planning, evaluation, event debrief, research outputs
<i>Including</i>	Modern British Studies Conference	Project event		Online meetings from week 36		Project event

[Appendix 3](#) shows more detail about the weekly meetings

The next section describes the approach and methods used in the evaluation.

³ Mean

1.5 Approach to the evaluation

In its approach, the evaluation aimed to :

- Be flexible, imaginative and responsive to the communication needs and preferences of research team and History Group members;
- Demonstrate understanding of the issues relating research work with socially-marginalised groups, and academic partnerships with the voluntary sector;
- Include analysis of issues around ethnicity, gender and class raised by this research;
- Work ethically and sensitively with contributors and research participants;
- Use and encourage reflective practice amongst partners and researchers.

Evaluation methods were agreed by the University of Bristol, Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee in May and September 2019. [For more detail about the research approach and ethics, please request a copy of the evaluation plan.]

1.6 The evaluator role

In designing the project, the initial project team envisaged an evaluator who would be independent of the project team, offering opportunities for the team to reflect on the work and giving feedback on the progress of co-production as the project unfolded. As evaluator, my aim was to be a 'critical friend' who would help the project to evolve and achieve its goals. Although not a full member of the project team, I was engaged in discussions about the way forward on particular issues and, where History Group members' feedback was relevant to ongoing project planning, I sought permission from researchers to pass on information to the facilitators of the group. This input was given in meetings with facilitators and the Principle Investigator, in project planning meetings and occasionally in History Group debrief sessions. Evaluator feedback during the project was noted in fieldnotes. See extracts from the list of issues discussed below.

Table 1.5: Extracts from evaluators log			
Date	Issue	Context	Notes
6.5.19	<i>Timekeeping</i>	<i>Issues re time</i>	<i>Researchers coming in late seems to be an issue for other researchers. There may also be an issue about the length of the morning being too short to get into the work. Feedback from researchers has nearly always included issues around people being late.</i>
18.06.19	<i>Vocal members of the group</i>	<i>Concern that particularly vocal members of the group may be affecting other people ability to participate.</i>	<i>Discussed with the HG facilitators in their debrief and in a telephone conversation with Project Lead.</i>

11/12/19	Culture	<i>Do different organisational cultures affect collaboration?</i>	<i>Discussed with Project Lead that I thought that academics are careful and slow at the beginning and then don't stop to discuss things – connected to ethics. Voluntary Sector is steadier - doing and thinking, doing and thinking....HOW MIGHT THIS AFFECT CO-PRODUCTION?</i>
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This evaluation report was written with Professor Tim Cole and was the main project of the 'Evaluation Team' (see section 1). This evaluation has been, in part, co-produced with the collaborators of this project who have been involved in setting the goals of the evaluation, reflecting on the work and making suggestions for future co-production research. Steering Group and History Group members have also contributed to this report in their reflections on the project in interviews, meetings and in their feedback and contributions to previous versions of this document.

1.7 Evaluation Framework

A framework for the evaluation was developed using information provided by History Group members in a meeting on 14.05.19 and by project team members in a meeting held on 22.04.19 ([Figure 1.1](#)). The framework outlines the major areas to be explored in the evaluation with questions that will be addressed in the study. The framework is based on the structure outlined by Nate Eisenstadt as part of the *Know Your Bristol* project (2019). It focuses us on five main areas:

- What would project contributors like to create?
- What do the project contributors want to learn or develop in themselves and others?
- How are decisions made on the project?
- What are the roles of the different contributors on the project?
- What are the benefits and risks for project contributors?

The framework was presented to the Steering Group on 1 October 2019 and the History Group on 22 October 2019.

1.8 Evaluation methods

The main evaluation methods for this study were:

- Interviews with researchers and University of Bristol and Wellspring Settlement staff at the beginning and end of the study;
- Interviews with former volunteers or members of staff at Single Parent Action Network at the beginning of the study;
- Observing the History Group in Action – structured, transcribed observation of ways of working in the group;
- Participant observation at some project meetings;
- Participant observation at Steering Group meetings.

1.9 Evaluation data

Participant observation notes – project meetings

Notes were taken at project meetings written up as soon as possible afterwards. Notes and documents from the meetings have been used to understand and describe the activities and issues that were encountered by the History Group.

Observation notes – History Group meetings

The evaluator closely observed three History Group meetings, taking notes and recordings at the time and writing these up as detailed descriptions of the process of co-production. The purpose of this part of the work was to explore everyday interactions and processes for progressing the research study.

Interviews

The study includes findings from 31 interviews with seventeen research collaborators and two interviews with SPANers (former staff and volunteers at Single Parent Action Network). There were 19 interviews at the start of the project and 14 second interviews which began over a year later. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using computer software (NVIVO) for coding. The aim of the analysis was to capture collaborator views about their work on the project, their roles and relationships. In exploring the data, we have developed a thematic analysis of interviews where the issues identified as important to researchers are explored alongside overall questions about the qualities and challenges of co-production. A full analysis was completed for the researcher interviews but, due to time pressure on the project, the analysis of paid contributor interviews was more targeted and focused on what interviewees had learned in the process of the work. The analysis seeks to identify significant events in the process of co-production and to explore interviewees' reflections on the process.

SPAN: a hands-on history project - Evaluation Report

Figure 1.1: Evaluation framework

SPAN: a hands-on history: evaluation framework

From evaluation workshops on 23.04.19 and 14.05.19.

Area for exploration	What does the project want to achieve?	What will success in this area look like?	Key evaluation questions?	How and when will this be captured?	Who will be involved in this part of the evaluation?
1a What project contributors would like to create.	A history of SPAN including a 'final piece'...that engages diverse audiences.... and leaves a lasting legacy	The 'final piece(s)' is not yet agreed. Ideas discussed included a theatre show, a film, an exhibition, something creative. University contributors included academic papers, teaching materials, coproduction resources amongst their aims.	Do contributors achieve what they want to achieve? Is there a final piece(s)? How is it achieved? Different contributors are focused on different kinds of products. How will this be negotiated? How are the different requirements of those involved in the project balanced?	Interviews, observations of History Group meetings, final evaluation workshop.	All contributors to the project. Ex-SPAN staff and evaluation team.
1b What project contributors would like to create.	A history of SPAN including a 'final piece'...that engages diverse audiences.... and leaves a lasting legacy.	Creating work that is engaging is key. It is important to create work that can be delivered with a sense of pride and that will reach beyond academic audiences to members of the public, commissioners, policy makers and others. For some, this included people who are in a position to support change for single parent families.	What is the extent and quality of people's engagement with the project and its products. Who engages with the work? What is the response to the products of the research?	Interviews, observations of History Group meetings, final evaluation workshop.	All contributors to the project. Ex-SPAN staff and evaluation team.
1c What project contributors would like to create.	A history of SPAN including a 'final piece'...that engages diverse audiences.... and leaves a lasting legacy	Contributors discussed a variety of desired legacies for the project including: the project bringing about various social and political changes for single parents, development of the partnership between Barton Hill Settlement and the University of Bristol and funding for future work in Barton Hill. There were also hope for change in the academic arenas of history and coproduced research.	From the point of view of contributors, What is the legacy of the SPAN History Project? Does the project lead to additional funding, influence or political change? What are the next actions of the contributors at the end of the History Group or project?	Interviews, final evaluation workshop.	All contributors to the project. Ex-SPAN staff and evaluation team.
2 What do the project contributors want to learn or develop in themselves and others?	Learn more about the process of research in general, coproduction and the context and history (including its contribution) of SPAN . Develop skills in conducting research.	Learn about the history of SPAN and the context. Researchers discussed building confidence; SPAN/BHS contributors highlighted the development of creativity amongst contributors as important.	What skills did contributors bring to the project? What are the skills that participants have taken away from the experience? How. What and when have participants learned through the process? What are participants orientations towards history in general and this history of SPAN?	Interviews, questionnaires, final evaluation workshop.	All contributors to the project. Ex-SPAN staff and evaluation team.

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SPAN: a hands-on history: evaluation framework: Page 2

Area for exploration	What does the project want to achieve?	What will success in this area look like?	Key evaluation questions?	How and when will this be captured?	Who will be involved in this part of the evaluation?
3 Making decisions	Shared decision-making where researchers are involved alongside BHS/ University of Bristol staff	An atmosphere of being 'In it together', where decisions are negotiated and disagreements are discussed and managed. All parties share knowledge, and come with different perspectives.	Who makes what decisions on the project? How are decisions made? How are disagreements managed? What are the structures for decision making?	Interviews, final evaluation workshop, participant observation.	All contributors to the project. Ex-SPAN staff and evaluation team.
4 Roles of contributors	Researchers working alongside academics - each bringing own knowledge...	All contributors and participants are valued equally. Emerging roles as researchers requires support and training. All parties are working towards joint ownership of the project. Traditional role boundaries roles are to some extent 'blurred'.	What roles are taken on by the different members of the team? How clearly defined are the project team roles? Do roles change during the course of the project? How is the 'blurred roles' managed?	Interviews, final evaluation workshop, participant observation.	All contributors to the project. Ex-SPAN staff and evaluation team.
5a The potential benefits of participation?	Benefits for all contributors	Benefits include Short and longer term benefits of: Practical benefits (lunches, trips etc.) Relationships (building new relationships) Positive feelings of pride and achievement. Potential to change or develop careers Potential to set up a new service which will benefit contributors. (Also see legacy...)	What kinds of relationships facilitate coproduction? What are the benefits of coproduction for individuals an organisations involved? How important are lunches, trips etc. to supporting coproduction? Are contributors empowered/ disempowered in the process?	Interviews, final evaluation workshop, participant observation, questionnaires.	All contributors to the project. Ex-SPAN staff and evaluation team.
5b The potential risks/demands of the participation	Minimising risks through dialogue and meaningful involvement of contributors.	Minimising risks and demands on researchers such as: Pressure to achieve, tight deadlines, disagreements.	Exploration of comfort zones/ cultures/ ways of being and how these may be disrupted in the process of learning and coproduction. What kinds of demands does the process of coproduction place on contributors? How is time experienced on the project? Who leaves the project, at what point and why?	Interviews, final evaluation workshop, participant observation, questionnaires,	All contributors to the project. Ex-SPAN staff and evaluation team.

Evaluation template adapted from the resources developed Nate Eisenstadt and the New Economics Foundation.
Eisenstadt, N. (2019). *Evaluating Co-production - Know your Bristol*. [online] Available at: <https://knowyourbristol.org/2015/07/24/evaluating-co-production/> [Accessed 10 December. 2018].

The following section explores the work of the History Group which was the main forum for collaboration on the project.

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2 The History Group in action

Summary: The History Group in action

Attendance

- Thirteen researchers were recruited. Twelve attended the group and an average of seven researchers attended the sessions held at the settlement.

Structures and Routines

- The History Group was partly structured by decisions made before the group had started involving the wider project team. The History Group was the key part of a network of stakeholders including evaluators, the Steering Group and SPANers, the university and the settlement. The History Group was resourced, enabled and also constricted by the presence of these stakeholders.
- Over the months of the project facilitators and History Group researchers created a routine of activities in meetings that was the backdrop for the creative activity of the group. The regular check-ins, coffees, seating arrangements and presence of facilitators all seemed crucial to building working relationships.
- Recapping on previous events in the group was a way of reinforcing what researchers had already learned, involving people who may have missed sessions and reinforcing previous decisions made. This may have frustrated some researchers.
- The work of the History Group involved several goals that required work over several weeks including the decision about outputs and the decision about the research question. Where this was the case, returning to a topic of study could appear to be repetition for some History Group researchers and therefore a waste of time.
- The History Group seemed to have rhythms of activity that changed over time but there were constant aspects of this such as the check-in.

Time

- Having time for themselves was an important motivation for being in the group and continued attendance. Time seemed precious to researchers who could have a few hours without childcare. Where time was felt to be wasted or not used efficiently, this could be frustrating for some attenders.
- Researcher feedback noted an opinion that valuable time had been lost due to late starts to some of the meetings, long explanations and repetition of themes from previous weeks. It appears that facilitator efforts to be inclusive to researchers who were late or not able to attend regularly was frustrating for at least one of the more regular attenders in the group.

Power and engagement

- As is well documented, co-production involves the exercise and the challenge of power, especially where some people are paid to be in the room and others are not.
- As in all co-production settings, the issue of power was important in the History Group. Power was shared through negotiated processes and a variety of decisions made about how the work would progress.

- The History Group had to balance attention to the research and its outputs with considerations of the processes of the group. There were differences amongst researchers as to how these issues should be balanced.
- It has been interesting to notice how university researchers and community workers left space for History Group researchers to make particular decisions such as the decision on outputs. After proposing a structure and then facilitating agreement as to how it would work, facilitators seemed to step back from decisions, leaving the final choices to researchers.
- History Group researchers enjoyed the feeling that they had an effect on the progress of the research when they gave their views about the interview schedule.
- Where people were thought to be quiet or left out of discussions, this was a problem for the whole group which effected the enjoyment and engagement of other History Group researchers.
- Co-production involves joint effort towards goals from people with different levels of influence on choosing those goals. It requires trust for negotiations which take place within the context of a developing project where the end goal is not clearly defined.

History Group Activities

- There was a wide variety of activity undertaken by the History Group. As is to be expected, particular kinds of activities were favoured by some and not by others.
- Activities which allowed researchers the feeling of making a difference to the work seemed to be incredibly important and valued by researchers.

Making decisions

- There were multiple ways that facilitators and History Group researchers worked together to co-produce the History of SPAN; these included: Gathering ideas, aggregating ideas, presenting options and proposals, portioning decisions, questioning, facilitating space for thinking and dreaming, gathering feedback, voting, working towards consensus, making decisions as researchers and making decisions as project staff.

Roles in the History Group

- Overall History Group facilitators managed sessions in a way that was both structured and flexible. Achieving the balance between having enough structure so that researchers knew what they were being asked to do but also being open to researchers' critiques and ideas about the process seemed to be an ongoing challenge of the facilitator role.
- Even in the context of a well-established University setting, the role of a researcher in the arts can be broadly defined. In their position as History Group researchers in a community setting, members of the group were learning the requirements of their role as the project progressed and changed at each stage of the project. Part of the responsibility of project facilitators was to support History Group researchers in understanding their role.
- The research involved developing relationships between individual History Group researchers and between researchers and facilitators. The expectations that each party had of the other were

important, and sometimes there was a difference between what an individual imagined was required of them and the expectation held by the other person.

Practicalities

- Providing childcare, offering food, tea and biscuits were essential to building trust and relationships in the History Group. As History Group researchers were not paid for their time, these aspects were essential ways of showing appreciation and valuing the volunteers.
- The provision of childcare is an essential aspect of creating spaces that are inclusive to single parents.

2.1 Introduction: the History Group in action

This section aims to answer the question: What is co-production in practice? It does this by exploring the History Group's practices and routines, using data from observations of three History Group meetings and from the regular feedback given by the History Group researchers. The majority of History Group meetings were held at the settlement building but as the COVID-19 crisis hit the UK in early 2020, sessions were quickly moved online. The schedule of meetings was extended beyond the planned project end date as the group adjusted to the significant challenges brought about by the global crisis.

The issues raised in this section are explored in a generalised way with the aim of describing the overall process of co-produced history making rather than the activities or views of individuals. Participants in the meetings included History Group researchers, a Community Worker and Inclusion Manager from Wellspring Settlement (community workers), a Senior Research Associate and the Project Lead from the University of Bristol (University researchers). As evaluator, I took notes during and after History Group meetings. These notes have been supported by audio recordings for the observation write ups and by transcripts for the thematic analysis. As an evaluator, I saw my role as a participant-observer (see methods section) and I have included some brief descriptions of moments where I interacted in meeting activity.

This section is written in five parts, starting with a brief description of the setting of the History Group meetings and some contextual information about the meetings which were observed on week 7, week 18 and week 35 of the 48 sessions of the History Group. Part two expands on the detail of the History Group by describing activities and interactions in the three meetings. Part three, examines theme of decision-making in the History Group. Part four explores the regular feedback offered by History Group researchers and part five outlines the key findings of this section.

2.2 Context of History Group meetings

The centre is a well-established community project that houses offices, several training rooms, a café, crèche and garden. The SPAN archive was held in a portacabin next to the main building. At the time of the History Group meetings, senior staff at the settlement were negotiating and preparing for a merger with two other local organisations. The café, reception and main entrance to the building were just outside the room used by the History Group in its first term. The crèche was situated on the floor below. From my many visits to the project, the settlement appeared to be well-used with a number of groups and organisations using the space. Tuesday mornings, when the History Group had its regular meetings, were often busy with a group attending the café and several other organisations using the building for training or other activities.

History Group researchers using the childcare at the centre were asked to leave their children at the crèche at 9.15 am so that they could arrive for the start of the History Group meeting at 9.30 am. Meetings lasted for two hours and twenty five minutes with lunch provided afterwards for the children and group members once the meeting had ended. In general, two researchers from the University of Bristol and a community worker from the settlement attended the sessions. Occasionally a senior community worker also came. History Group researchers and facilitators (University of Bristol and Settlement staff) are not identified as individuals or by their individual role in this section; contributors are usually referred to as either researchers, community workers and university researchers; sometimes university researchers and community workers are collectively named as facilitators. Direct extracts from fieldnotes are included in *italics* with occasional interpretation in brackets.

Appendix 3 gives a summary of the 48 History Group meetings that were held. Thirty-five meetings took place in person and a further 13 meetings were held online. The average attendance for all meetings was 7 women with the online meetings which were an extension of the original project, attracting fewer attendees than the in person sessions.

Table 2.1: Summary History Group Meetings

Number of History Group researchers	12		
Meeting type	In person	Online	All meetings
Number of meetings	35	11	48
Attendance range	3-11	2-6	2-11
Average attendance	7*	4	6*

*mean rounded up

History Group researchers gave consent to the evaluator's attendance at the meeting. In my role as evaluator, I attended several meetings over the course of the project, but only three were observed in a structured way. All observed History Group meetings took place at the settlement. Table 2 shows some detail of the 3 observed meetings. Compared to the meetings overall, observed meetings had higher attendance.

Table 2.2: Observed history group meetings

Observed meeting number	Meeting One	Meeting Two	Meeting three
Date	June 2019	October 2019	March 2020
Week	7/48	18/48	35/48
Main meeting focus	The research question	Choosing research outputs – part 3	Event planning/ evaluation of outputs
Number of facilitators	3	3	2
Number of History Group researchers	9	6	8

2.3 Three History Group meetings⁴

2.3.1 History Group meeting one : week seven

The week seven meeting took place during the first term of the History Group. At this stage History Group researchers had already been introduced to the project and its aims as well as the SPAN organisation itself. The main aim at this stage, was to agree a focus for the research and to start planning for the project. The meeting included nine History Group researchers and three facilitators.

The set up

Tables and chairs are arranged together in a rectangle in the centre of the room. Two facilitators sit on one of the long sides of the tables. In the middle of the tables there is a lot of stationery including: pens (different varieties are in their boxes), post-it notes, paper and History Group researcher files containing paperwork given out in previous weeks. I sit next to two of the facilitators at the corner of the table.

There are large sheets of flipchart paper on the walls. They show:

- *A timeline of Single Parent Action Network – highly populated in several colours with notes on events that took place both within the SPAN organisation and more broadly in UK history (Figure 2.2)*
- *A sheet titled: Working Together – Group Agreement. (Notes of an earlier discussion about how the group planned to work together (Figure 2.3)*
- *A sheet entitled ‘jargon buster ‘(Figure 2. 4)*
- *A sheet highlighting Tuckman’s stages of group development (Tuckman and Jensen 1977)*

Starting off and checking in

Figure 2.1: History Group – Week Seven



Researchers start to arrive and by 9.30 am there are six History Group researchers in the room alongside the community worker, two university researchers and myself as evaluator. The meeting begins with the ‘check in’. A facilitator asks everyone in the room to say how they are and how they have arrived at the meeting. Everyone takes turns. There is talk about the weather, one researcher says she’s ok, another says she has had a difficult week. I talk about the rain. I introduce myself (for the second time) saying that I am interested in how the project works and how research is co-produced.

Ways of working

One of the facilitators reminds the group of the ways of working that were agreed in the first week (Figure 2.2). A History Group researcher asks whether the process of decision-making has been discussed in the

⁴ In this chapter fieldnotes are written in italics with other commentary in normal text.

group. The facilitator says that this was covered in the first week, but there might need to be more work on this.... This leads to a discussion between one History Group researcher and the Facilitators. The researcher refers to lots of discussion amongst the group on WhatsApp.

The 'assets' of History Group researchers

One of the university facilitators presents a summary of the issues and activities that have been explored in the previous weeks and then suggests that researchers talk in twos...about their skills and interests... There are lots of conversation between History Group researchers The conversation moves to the whole group where individual researchers are asked about the exercise. As one researcher talks about her interests...there is silence in the room. There is a feeling of mutual exchange where researchers listen intently to each other, ask questions and respond to and explore each other's offerings.

Figure 2.2: SPAN Timeline

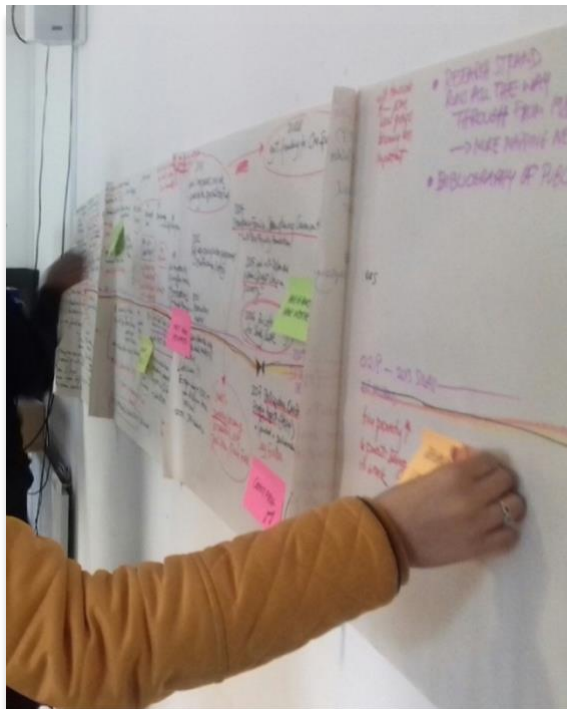


Figure 2.3: Working Together – Group Agreement

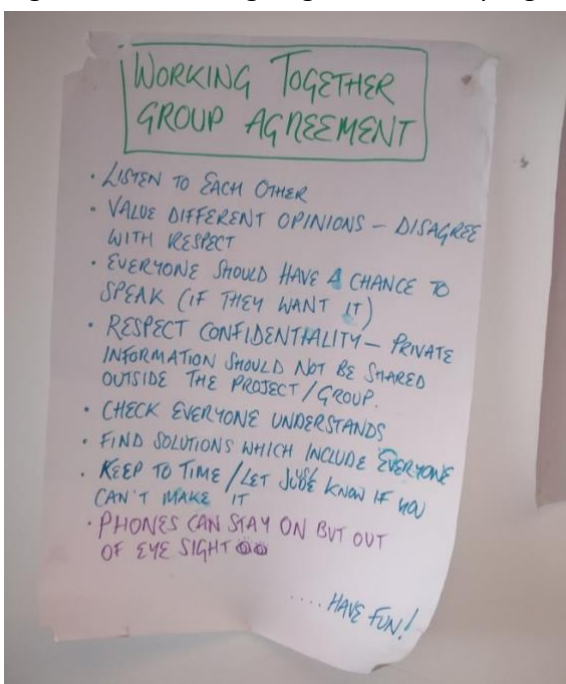
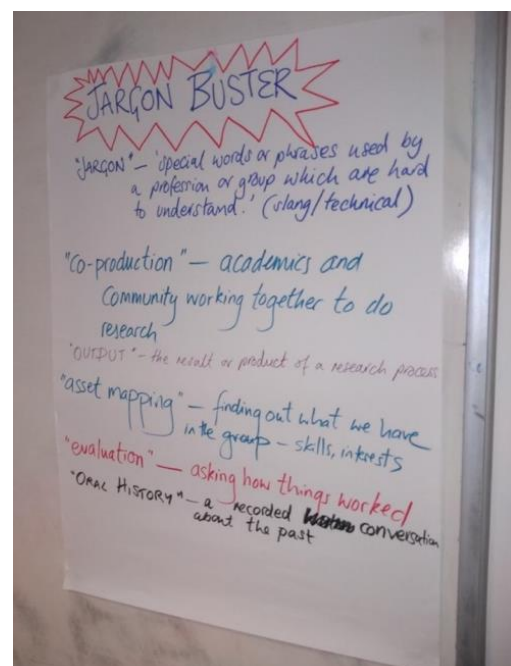


Figure 2.4: Jargon Buster



Developing a research question

There is a short presentation from one of the university researchers who introduces the idea of developing a clear research question as a focus for the work. She points out that the research question can be flexible and the focus of the work might change as work proceeds. The community worker asks if everyone understands what we mean by data which prompts more explanation. Revisiting the exercise [from a previous week] has focused the work and seems to encourage discussion about preferences in relation to the work. There is a buzz in the room, lots of voices in the room, lots of listening too. After these discussions, the facilitator asks for feedback from everyone in turn, she starts on her left...[I am not sure how well some of the women's views are being represented at this stage. Everyone speaks but some History Group researchers say much more than others.]

The facilitator presents three flipcharts with the following headings: What do we want to know about SPAN's history? How can we find that out? Who do we need to tell (and how)? She refers to an example project that was looked at in a previous week. The room is quiet and focused while the facilitator introduces the 3 questions and gives the flipchart paper to the 3 groups. She invites any and all ideas and explains that this is the stage for getting all the ideas down on paper. She invites researchers to write down just one word if they want and says that they do not have to explain ...anything to the whole group. There's a moment of quiet focus again where everyone seems to be eyes down, filling in post-it notes – lots of them. The facilitator invites the other facilitators to write their own ideas on the post it notes and then starts to add her own contributions.

After a few minutes the discussion starts to bubble up again, and researchers and facilitators move around the room to put their Post-its on the appropriate flipchart paper. Two facilitators are handing Post-its to each other, leaning on each other and stretching towards each other. I can hear lots of laughter in the room with the separate conversations in the three groups.

Three researchers arrive at different stages once the meeting has got going. With very brief hellos, and introductions to the tasks, the group continues its work quite quickly. [It looks like the group has developed a routine so that latecomers are able to join in with activities quite quickly].

Gathering ideas

The facilitator splits everyone into three groups for the discussion. Each group has a facilitator and two History Group researchers and focuses on one of the questions identified.

I decide to observe the 'how can we find out?' group. A short discussion in the group produces lots of questions that History Group researchers are interested in finding out about [I notice the depth of the interview questions suggested... researchers seem to want to challenge and investigate the information that they have so far received about SPAN].

After a while, two of the facilitators begin to signal that it is time for the group to come back together. They wait for people to finish their conversations. There is a discussion across the table between two researchers and a facilitator. The facilitator makes good use of the flipcharts, carefully placing the Post-its that group members have written on the appropriate sheet. [This clearly shows that all of the ideas are being included]. A side discussion between two researchers recedes as a facilitator gradually raises her voice. During the feedback session, one researcher holds up the flipchart while the other talks, she has a cup of coffee in her hand. There is confidence in the delivery of the short presentations.

There is some discussion about whether or not to include a comparison between single parents in the past and single parents today in the question. Facilitators suggest that this will be useful and stress that History Group researchers do not have to take part in this all aspects of the work.

Ending

The meeting concludes with one of the facilitators saying that she will return the following week with all the ideas collated. The chairs are placed back in their original position to prepare for the children from the crèche who will be joining for lunch. The end of the meeting seems quite sudden as some of the researchers leave to collect children from the crèche.

2.3.2 History Group meeting two: week 18

Figure 2.5: History Group – Week 18



The set up

Fruit, pastries, tea, coffee, hot chocolate, herbal tea, milk, vegan milk and biscuits are laid out on a table next to the window. The room is set up differently, chairs are in a circle in the middle of the room with the tables at the edges. This is the first session after an event which introduced SPANers to the research project

The check-in

Four History Group researchers are in the room at the start of the meeting and another two people arrive later. There are lots of hellos and then the group checks-in. We hear about a few mini disasters including house leaks, a broken fence, a muddy child and busy traffic.

The project's opening event

The meeting gets going as one of the History Group researchers talks about her experience of the recent event. There are lots of detail as she talks about who arrived first, who was there and the initial atmosphere. After a while, everyone starts to add to the story of the weekend event. There is a celebratory feel in the room. The community worker praises two History Group researchers who had roles at the event. There is a sense of enthusiasm as well as the acknowledgement of some difficulties in the meeting where guests tended to stay in their own groups with people they already knew. A latecomer to the History Group is greeted with a laid back with a 'hi' or 'hello'. There is lots of laughter, the mood is upbeat. One of the History Group researchers remarks that the History Group has recruited 30 people for the interviews compared to their target of 15. The Project Lead thanks everyone for being at the event. She says it was made successful through the input of the whole team. She points out individual contributions from the History Group researchers including doing the washing up, dealing with IT and talking to the guests.

Tips for the next event

As this debrief seems to draw to a close, the Project Lead asks everyone if there are things that can be noted for planning the next event that the group has. Another event is likely to be held in spring when the History Group will show the work that has been done on the project. History Group researchers contribute a few suggestions including more cups for attenders and a more formal introduction at the beginning. This leads to further discussion about the event. History Group researchers noted that guests at the event were curious about the role of the History Group researchers. Some SPANers thought that History Group researchers were from the university. History Group researchers were then in the position of having to explain who they were. The University researcher notes that name badges or lanyards will be useful at a future event.

Recap on the work of the History Group and looking forward

A facilitator recaps on the progress of the project to date. For the remainder of this term, she says, the group is going to be interviewing and analysing all the study data. She explains that the coming term will be more flexible depending on the History Group researchers' interests and whether or not they have an interview planned on the day. It won't necessarily be the whole group meeting on Tuesday mornings. She ends with the question; How does that feel? There is lots of laughter as one researcher says that the workload is daunting, asking questions about how the research will be completed in time. University researchers reply to this question with descriptions of their experience of research. One talks about research data as an 'iceberg' where researchers will use only a small proportion of the data that is available; the other speaks about the analysis as a simple and enjoyable process of reading and selecting the most interesting things. She reminds researchers that they can do as much or as little as they want towards the work. A History Group researcher adds to this saying that the research question can be really important to look at to stop the work from going off track.

Deciding on the research outputs

The main part of the session was taken up with deciding what the research outputs would be. University and History Group researchers reviewed activities from previous weeks which had produced lots of different options for things to make or develop to tell people about the research. The facilitator starts by proposing a process for deciding on which outputs to work on in the research study.

The process is outlined as follows:

- *stage 1, where the group examines all of the options discussed to date,*
- *stage 2, where the group votes on all options,*
- *stage 3, when the most popular 6 options will be judged against the criteria for outputs (devised in a previous week) and*
- *stage 4 - the final decision is made.*

The University researcher says that she hopes that decisions can be made by consensus but, if that isn't possible, the group will vote. She also points out that the History Group may decide to create more than one research output. A History Group researcher asks if the voting can be anonymous and another asks about how History Group researchers, who are not in the room today might be involved in the decision. After discussion, the History Group agrees to having secret voting. The facilitators agree that people who are not present at the meeting can vote via the History Group WhatsApp. Dilemmas are raised by History Group researchers, including how to make the individual decision about which output to vote for and how the work is going to be achieved within the time available. The project lead states that it is the facilitators' role to keep to the deadlines and that the History Group researchers are only asked to 'carry on coming on Tuesdays and [keep giving] all this fantastic input'.

Reducing the options for outputs

Previous ideas and suggestions for the outputs with brief descriptions are placed around the room. There is lots of conversations about the options. The facilitator says that anyone can add to the detail on any of the sheets of paper. History Group members who are not present are texted with the options. If they want to vote, they have 10 minutes to state their preferences. While the discussions continue in the group, two facilitators discuss a History Group researcher who is not in the room; they are talking about which option she might prefer.

The first vote on outputs

A text message comes in as another History Group researcher arrives in the room. One History Group researcher talks about how hard it is to make a decision. The History Group researchers submit their votes and another is added from WhatsApp. A facilitator tells the group what someone on the phone has chosen (lots more messages are coming via the group WhatsApp). The vote seems to happen quite quickly.

Judging options against the criteria

After a little discussion about the vote, one of the facilitators moves the session on by explaining the next part of the process. She arranges for three small groups to each judge two of the options against the criteria. She suggests scoring each project with up to five stars for each category and also noting which of the two options is preferred. A History Group researcher arrives and is updated by one of the facilitators. There are several conversations in the room as the groups work on their separate tasks. [I notice that the room seems most relaxed during these smaller conversations.] After a while, the facilitator encourages the group to come back to one conversation by asking each group what their priority would be and why...Facilitators and History Group researchers take a bit of time to display the options against their scores for each of the criteria... A History Group researcher moves a flipchart to the same wall as another one but she is asked to move it back to where it was. The facilitator explains that she would like to encourage people to move around the room when they are choosing their options. Things are quite quiet as everyone looks at the work on display but there is the occasional conversation or observation, one researcher says that all of the options could work together.

Making the final decision

About 15 minutes before the end of the meeting, a facilitator urges the group towards making the final decision. She briefly talks about each of the options and asks History Group researchers to stand next to the output that they feel most strongly about [Their first choice of all the outputs]...No-one chooses the history walk flipchart so, after checking with the group, the Project Lead removes this option. History Group researchers are asked to stand next to their second option. There is a bit of shuffling around. Now the situation seems a lot clearer: strong support for two of the options is really visible because of where people are standing.... A discussion about 'setting up a new group' ends with support for the option but the university researcher seeks permission from the group to defer further development of this output. She suggests that, setting up of a new group would require further exploration including, working out what the purpose and focus of the group would be. The History Group agrees to defer this issue and is then encouraged to consider different approaches to making a film. University researchers make a distinction between a documentary about SPAN and a documentary about the History Group and its process. One facilitator discusses the practicality of each of the two choices and another talks about learning opportunities that might be available to History Group researchers in the process of making the film. A University researcher reminds the group that the SPAN archive will still be available, whether or not the group decides to hold an exhibition and there are conversations about how the archive might be promoted through the SPAN History Project website and the Public Art.

The final vote

The Project Lead divides the options into two combinations of output which are set up to work in addition to academic papers and setting up a new group. Option one is a full documentary about the history of SPAN and an exhibition event. Option two is a piece of Public Art, a short documentary film and an exhibition.

Closing the meeting

As we come up to the end of the session, a facilitator needs to leave a little early because she has training. Another facilitator starts to round things off by celebrating the good news of the clear outcome. Public Art was the clear first choice with the addition of a film and exhibition. There is a celebratory round of applause and a facilitator asks how it feels to have made the decision. There have been lots of different stages and she hopes that everyone is ok. Two of the History Group researchers start to imagine what the Public Art might be like, hoping for 'good Public Art that will be in our community for a long time'. A facilitator says that it has been a good process 'clear and gentle' and that she is excited. A History Group researcher asks the remaining facilitators what options they would choose. One says that she is happy with the decision made by the History Group members and the other says that she is not at all disappointed by the outcome.

A facilitator asks researchers to give some feedback about the session. There are a few discussions about the interviews and childcare which carry on into lunchtime. The materials in the room are tidied away and group members start preparing the space for lunch or collecting their children.

2.3.3 History Group Meeting three: week 35

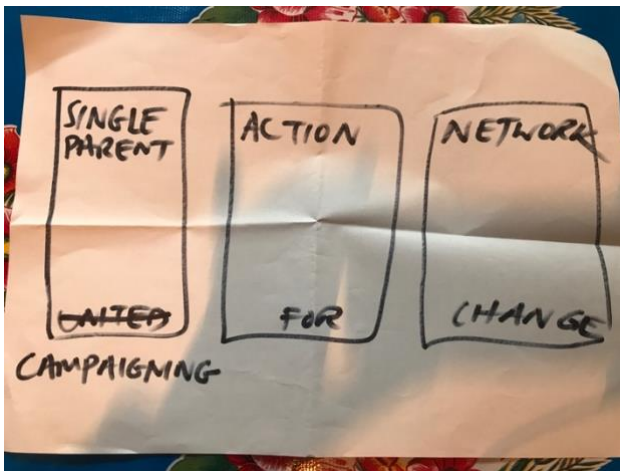
This meeting happened in the third term of History Group meetings It was the last session where the History Group met in person before moving to the online sessions because of COVID-19. We met on the first floor of the settlement building. At the time, University staff were taking strike action but both University researchers chose to attend the meeting rather than cancel it. The community worker was not present because she was unwell.

Before the session

The location for the meeting has changed since the last time I visited the group. We are in a smaller, neater room on the floor above reception. There is also less noise and distraction from the café and the many visitors to the centre. When I arrive in the room, I am struck by how welcoming the fruit and drinks on the table look. The table is next to a wall of windows in the light filled room.

A History Group researcher comes up to the group room a little early so that her child can get some breakfast before going down to the crèche. The child seems happy to be in the room, much chattier than when I last saw them. After eating, they stand on a chair by the second floor window, I am nervous that the child is so close to the open window. I close it. After a few minutes, their mum brings them down to the crèche and then returns to the meeting.

Figure 2.6: History Group – Week 35



The check-in

The meeting starts with five History Group researchers and two facilitators in the room. Three more History Group researchers arrive in the first part of the session. Facilitators tell the first few attendees that the community worker is unwell and will not be able to come to the meeting. The question 'where's Amanda?' is repeated as latecomers arrive in the room. There is a bit of giggling as the question is repeated by several people. There is some discussion about COVID-19 and concerns about the effect that it may have on people's lives as well as the History Group meetings. A university researcher starts off

the session with an invitation for everyone to check in. Everyone around the table briefly mentions aspects of their lives – some researchers chose not to say much whereas others say a bit more, talking about how things are for them personally. Two family birthdays are mentioned.

Update on project mural

A University researcher updates the group about plans for the public artwork. Gaining permission to display the artwork has been a live issue for many weeks. There have been lots of emails and conversations, including contact with the housing association's community worker who seems keen to support the History Group's mural project. Things are looking very positive but permission has not been officially granted.

The project leaflet

The university researcher introduces the topic of the creation of the study leaflet. She has prepared for this part of the session by offering a draft leaflet based on a previous discussion. The information is printed on white A3 paper with very large text. She explains that the group is being asked to suggest additions and improvements to the draft. History Group researchers read the text and then discuss it in twos.

Feedback on the draft project leaflet

One History Group researcher suggests that an alphabetical list of project team members should be changed so that it is divided into sections and easier to read. There is a discussion about the pros and cons of separating things out. One History Group researcher says, in a joking way, that the History Group

researchers are the most important part of the project, so they should be the first group to be listed. [This seems to be a significant point, even if it is a joke. It seems that the researcher has an understanding of the History Group's place within the wider project.] In the group, there is further discussion about whether it is best to list the group as a whole so that there isn't a hierarchy or to separate the group into different roles. A University researcher asks me what I think and I suggested that the teams – i.e. History Group, Steering Group, Evaluation Team etc. could be listed in groups. There is further discussion before the group reaches agreement.

Photographs

A University researcher reminds History Group researchers to send in updated photos for the website and artwork. This prompts a discussion about a photograph of the History Group that has been published in a local community magazine. A researcher says that she had not been asked for permission to publish the image and is not happy about it. There is more conversation amongst researchers about the article and the image. A University researcher explains that the project did not release the image and that she is not sure how it came to be published. She is sorry that this happened. This moves to a broader discussion about whether group or individual photos will be appropriate for the artist to use as a part of the mural.

'When you publish your articles...'

There is a friendly exchange between one of the university researchers and History Group researchers; the History Group researcher addresses a University researcher saying: 'when you publish your articles...' In response, the university researcher's replies, 'and you'. [This seems quite playful as the facilitator seems to be gently challenging the History Group researcher to get involved in writing up the research.]

Reading and writing about single parents

One of the History Group researchers reads through a presentation giving mainly statistical comparisons between single parents living in the 1990s and single parents now. There is lots of interaction between this History Group researcher and one of the university researchers while the rest of the group listens quietly. After a while, there are additional conversations happening at the same time. One of the facilitators clarifies some of the text to a History Group researcher whose first language is not English and two History Group researchers start a conversation between themselves.

Social Media

The group facilitators ask the group to consider how to use social media to publicise the event. They talk about hashtags, QR codes and other ways that they might draw attention to the work on Social Media. Two researchers who have not contributed until now are quite involved, they explain what some of the different terms mean and give their opinions.

Words for the artwork

[In previous meetings, the group had some debate about what words would be shown on the public artwork.] There had been lots of different ideas, but no agreement. Four different ideas for the wording are displayed. The decision on the wording is achieved quite quickly and the History Group seems relieved to finally close these discussions.

The final project event

University Facilitators open a discussion about the event, explaining that people will be able to sign up for it online. A History Group researcher suggests Facebook will also be a good way to let people know about the event. Prompted by the request of a History Group researcher, a University researcher gives a brief description of the purpose of the event, where it will be held and how many people will be attending. A couple of History Group researchers add in details including their knowledge of the event and the chosen venue. The group spontaneously splits into two discussions. After a short time, the Project Lead raises her voice as she responds to one of the researchers. This focuses the attention back to the main discussion. There are more suggestions and questions about the venue, food and crèche.

The University researcher reads out loud from a draft of the Eventbrite invitation. There is discussion about the wording for the digital invitation. There is a collaboration between a History Group researcher and a University researcher when the everyday wording of 'exhibition mugs' is translated into the more impressive sounding 'commemorative ceramics'. History Group members move on to talk about the crèche at the event and whether or not there will be activities as well as childcare for children. A University researcher clearly states that the crèche and children's activities will only be available to the History Group researchers and not the event attenders. History Group members raise concern about the inaccessibility of the event for single parents who may wish to attend. The children of attenders will be supervised by their parents. A History Group researcher asks if there will be a 'real' photographer at the event. Someone mentions badges for people who don't want to have their picture taken. All ideas are noted by the facilitator.

Event evaluation

A University researcher gives a short presentation about the evaluation of the outputs and then starts off a discussion about what methods of evaluation the History Group researchers have used in the past. The group then agrees on several different methods to evaluate the forthcoming public event. These methods include a web survey after the event and paper questionnaire to be completed with one of the History Group researchers on the day. They also discuss a physical method such as putting counters in a container. There is a question about how reliable this might be. A History Group researcher says that children often like to play with the counters and fill up the boxes. The University researcher says that she will go away and draw up draft questions for the different methods.

Ending

The meeting ends with one of the university researchers saying that it is time for children to be collected from the crèche. Talk in the room turns to lunch as some History Group researchers leave to collect their children.

2.4 Making decisions in the History Group

2.4.1 The context of decision-making

The SPAN History Project has several groups of active stakeholders of which the History Group was one (See section 2). Within this wider picture, the official role of the History Group was to, 'research the history of SPAN and create public-facing output/s'. The History Group was assigned the task of devising the research question and methods, gathering and analysing sources and communicating the research findings. The overall project was guided and overseen by the Steering Group. The subjects for decisions in the group were varied and ranged from the overarching decisions about the research questions and outputs to smaller choices about practicalities or leaflet design. The project employed many different ways

of approaching decisions at different stages of the project. Overall in the History Group, university researchers and community workers seemed to have a lot of control over how and when decisions were made.

2.4.2 How did History Group attenders make decisions?

This part of this section uses the fieldnotes from each of the three meetings to identify the techniques and methods that were used to make the various decisions that were made in the History Group.

Gathering ideas

Many of the decisions observed in the History Group started with a phase where facilitators proposed open discussion, sometimes starting in twos or small groups, where History Group researchers were asked to generate ideas and options for consideration. After this first stage, ideas could be further explored. (Example: decision on which research outputs to produce).

Aggregating ideas

Individual ideas (written on Post-its) were sometimes brought together on flipchart paper or as written text. Facilitators looked for similarity in ideas, checking with the group on interpretations. In this way, the views of the whole group were reduced to a manageable statement decision. (Example: Deciding on the research question).

Options and proposals

The session facilitators' work involved preparation prior to the meeting to show and describe examples of projects, outputs and methods so that History Group researchers were informed to make decisions. These proposals often grew out of an initial gathering of ideas exercise that was led by facilitators but History Group researchers also made more spontaneous proposals to the group to move decision making forward. (Examples: options for research outputs, options for wording on the project and proposal to have secret voting on the outputs).

Portioning

Some of the more central decisions to the project such as deciding on the research question and research outputs were covered in more than one History Group session. This gave researcher's time to go away and consider issues over a period of weeks rather than having to decide on the same day. (Example: Research outputs.)

Questioning

Questioning was one way that History Group researchers challenged or developed proposals for action brought to the group by facilitators. (For example, when University researchers outlined the voting method for deciding on the outputs, History Group researchers asked facilitators to consider how to include members of the group who were not present.)

Facilitating space for thinking, discussing and dreaming

An important part of decision making was the space offered by the History Group meetings for discussion, for dreaming and for expressing thoughts. With this kind of space, History Group members were able to express their ideas, either in the whole group or to one or two others. These ideas then became subject to a process of discussion and exploration that may (or as importantly may not) transform them into something practical and achievable for the group. (Example: brief discussion of research outputs in week 7.)

Gathering feedback

Facilitators asked History Group researchers to give feedback on work in progress as a way of gaining involvement in decisions about particular aspects of the work. (For example, researchers gave their views on the content and layout of a project leaflet in week 35.)

Voting

Voting was used in Week 18 when History Group researchers considered what the group would focus on creating. The use of voting was unusual for the group and the rules for voting were reiterated several times in the meeting. A History Group researcher proposed secret voting as a way to encourage and another prompted the use of WhatsApp to include History Group researchers who were not in the room on the day. (Example: Research outputs.)

Working towards consensus

Occasionally, decision-making took the form of consensus building by first gathering individual opinions and then actively and openly seeking to incorporate all opinions into a proposed course of action. This required investigating dissenting voices in depth in order to work towards consensus. (Example: the decision to allow WhatsApp voting in meeting two)

History Group researcher decisions

Often Facilitators would hold back from expressing their opinions on a topic with the aim of allowing History Group researchers to express their views and to guide particular aspects of the work. This *standing back* from the group was seen in all three meetings. (Example: decisions on outputs) (See Cohen et al 2020 and Barke et al 2020 for further examination of this issue.)

Facilitator decisions

Decisions made in the history group were structured by the group facilitators who came to meetings with the plan for discussions that morning. Session plans were created with input from History Group researchers in previous weeks but the university researchers seemed to have control over what was brought to the group when, and how long the History Group had to discuss different ideas. However, plans were not inflexible and they could be adjusted in response to what was happening in the room. (Example: decision not to have a crèche at the final event was brought to the group as a ready-made choice due to funding and project planning sessions held after History Group meetings)

2.5 Feedback on meetings: What did History Group researchers value?

History Group researchers were asked to give regular written feedback about their experience of History Group meetings. Feedback was recorded on post-it notes and placed on one of three sheets of flipchart paper that was displayed in the room. These were headed: 'Positives', 'Negatives' and 'Next time...' or something similar. The Next Time category was used to record things that History Group researchers wanted to take forward into future sessions.

Below History Group researcher's comments have been used to interpret what was valued in the History Group over the life of the project. Examples of how the comments about the first session were interpreted are shown in the methods section.

2.5.1 History Group meetings: overall feedback

Figure 2.7: What did History Group researchers Value?



Image showing a word cloud of the most frequently interpreted values. Larger words indicate values that were more frequent. Data was the feedback comments of researchers

2.5.2 Weekly feedback from researchers: the first term

This section looks at feedback comments from History Group researchers in 10 meetings in the first term of meetings. Feedback comments have been summarised to show aspects of History Group researchers' engagement under the following themes: Activities in the group, learning, structure, time, power and engagement and practicalities. By looking at the feedback comments made in the first term, we gain a picture of what it was like to attend the group and how the planning for similar groups might be navigated in the future.

Activities in the group

In the first term, many different activities were mentioned positively. These included: icebreakers, a visualisation exercise, developing the research question, practicing a presentation, looking at their own skills and assess, the review of a video, and looking at SPAN's Timeline. There were, however, some activities that rated negatively, for example, some researchers thought that a video was too long and could have been watched in between sessions. One researcher disliked an exercise looking at researcher's skills and assets and another did not enjoy the visualisation exercise.

Engagement and Power

Some researchers were concerned that not everyone was able to have their opinions. One researcher called for tolerance and patience and another suggested that the group or facilitators was not taking opportunities to 'ensure that everyone has input'. Researchers also commented that some attenders were 'feeling left out of the group' and some were quiet in the group. The level of power available to History Group members was viewed negatively by some researchers, for example, one researcher expressed disappointment over not having more choice over the evaluation questions and methods.

Social aspects of the History Group: 'Meeting new people and listening to their stories'

Many researchers spoke about their enjoyment of meeting new people, getting to know them or being with the group as an important positive experience in the SPAN History Project. It was a sentiment that was repeated several times, especially in the first term (See above – figure 2.1).

Learning

Learning in the first term was focused on understanding the History Group project itself, who was involved and how it would work as well as finding out more about SPAN's history. In the first week, one researcher's feedback said that she found the introduction to the project, 'exciting'. Towards the end of the term, another researcher described a challenging journey in the first phase of the group by saying: 'today is a good day because I have more chance to join the conversation. I have more knowledge about the group.'

For at least one researcher, the level of learning in the first term was disappointing. She commented that in her experience would be better if, 'we got more done and learned something new'. Another researcher expressed some concern about not being ready to take up the interviewing role, seeking more clarification about what constituted a well-executed interview. (At this stage, History Group facilitators had two more sessions planned for researchers to get to grips with the interviewing role.) One researcher expressed her wish to have greater input about co-production itself as well as more explicit discussion about sharing power in the group. This comment was balanced by another researcher who hoped for more historical and 'educational' content rather than explorations of the processes of project. With a group of researchers

who had a range of skills and motivations to bring to the group, it is unsurprising that there were different views about what was positive or negative in these discussions.

Being in the group

Group discussions were frequently highlighted as an important and enjoyable aspect of being in the group. The exchange of ideas and simply, 'being with' the group were also mentioned in researchers' positive comments. At this stage in the project, researchers sometimes commented that the group 'got on well' and were 'working as a group'. Whilst some prioritised harmony in the group, others also appreciated listening to diverse opinions and views as an important benefit of being part of the History Group.

Structure:

The structure of the session was commented upon by a few researchers who called for facilitators to share the outline for the session in advance. One researcher also asked for changes to the routine of the group (in particular, changing the feedback activity). researcher feedback also highlighted the importance of structured sessions in its positive comments. The importance of structure is described well in a comment on the last session of the first term:

Today is the last session before our holiday. We talked about the overall project outline. I know what I shall do in the next stage. Great!

For another researcher, a good clear structure was a key aspect of sessions feeling relaxed; she valued a session that had 'good time flow' and 'didn't feel pressured'.

Time

Having time for oneself was highlighted as an important benefit of being in the History Group from the beginning and was a recurring sentiment throughout the project. (Also researcher interviews in section 4). Issues related to time were often mentioned in researchers' feedback and concerns. This included the feeling of not having enough time on particular topics in their discussions and the feeling that too much time was spent on particular activities or topics. There were also concerns about people being late for the session with the suggestion that the start time of the group be changed. This suggestion that was taken on by the History Group facilitators.

Practical issues

Childcare was a concern in two comments at the beginning of term. Where childcare arrangements did not go smoothly (for example, children not settling in to the crèche) this had a negative impact on the History Group researchers' experience in the group.

2.5.3 Weekly feedback from History Group researchers: the second term

In the second term of the History Group, the focus of researcher feedback was similar to the first term with time, learning, engagement and power and structure again featuring in their comments. Difficult dynamics and emotions relating to the group were also starting to emerge in the comments made.

Engagement and power

Achievements and group processes were more likely to be mentioned in comments in the second term. Here researchers focused on the success of decision making, planning and the effectiveness of processes as well as the content of the sessions. Participants were attentive to what was happening in the group in their comments. Positive feedback included mention of the group processes with comments about 'working with everyone' and the 'whole group contributing'. On the negative side, several researchers mentioned aspects of the group that were not working well. For example, one researcher reflected, 'I feel like we don't always hear from everyone.'

The way that the History Group made decisions was also on researchers minds when they talked about the success of planning and decision-making. In response to a session for the recruitment of an artist, a researcher remarked 'we reached a consensus quite quickly in the end.' researchers offered praise for sessions with higher levels of participation. For example, in her feedback, one researcher, asked if there could be 'more involvement like today' at the following week's session. The difficulties of decision making were also described in the second term where one researcher appeared to prepare themselves for disagreements in the group: 'selection is difficult, [I] hope next week we can make a decision'.

In the second term, researchers enjoyed a sense of power in the group when they made comments on the interview schedule to be used by the group. Several researchers expressed satisfaction in knowing that their work had improved the interview schedule. One researcher importantly noted: 'Being able to adapt the form. It felt like our opinions mattered.'

Feelings, fears and difficulty

In the feedback, positive emotions were expressed by many researchers. The familiarity of the project was enjoyed by one researcher who mentioned that she had been 'excited' about coming back to the group after the break. researchers also wrote about wanting to improve themselves and their contributions, with comments about needing to practice (interviewing), and their wish to improve themselves. A few researchers mentioned anxiety or fear relating to the practicality of the goals of the History Group. It is also noticeable that one researcher noted gaining confidence through the work and another described the work in the group as 'stressful but exciting'.

Learning

In their feedback in term two, researchers shared their enthusiasm for the content of the work describing many aspects of the work as interesting. The topics appreciated at this stage included the reading proposals and applications for the art commission and finding out about other research projects. Again, 'great conversations' were praised with particular mention of a discussion about inequalities. Researchers were pleased to hear about the progress of this evaluation. Researchers were grateful for the opportunity to develop their research skills with one researcher commenting: 'it's good practise about [the] interview, its hard ...but it is useful.' This comment captures what might be seen as one of the main changes from the first term. The second term appeared to be more demanding of researchers, requiring a deeper level of engagement and commitment.

In the second term, the researchers spent time looking at the resources in the SPAN archive. In their positive comments, they included this experience and one included the comment 'more of this please'. For this researcher, engagement with the archive may have been something that was lacking earlier on in the study.

Practicalities of co-production

In the second term, researchers also mentioned some of the practical issues related to the project. A change in the room layout, from tables around desks in a rectangle to chairs in circle without tables was praised in the feedback from two researchers. This more open layout seemed to suit the group and was adopted for several weeks. Issues like the quality of a video and technology not working were also mentioned as these could affect the flow of the group and its ability to work efficiently.

Structure

At least one researcher did not enjoy the ritual of talking about their week at the beginning of each session and proposed more variety in how the group would engage with each other at the start of each session.

Time

In the second term, some group members commented on a lack of time, or used the feedback chart as a way of asking for a prompt start or promising to be on time in the next session. Researchers wrote positively about sessions that felt 'focused' or when they had 'covered everything'. Researchers valued a learning space that was both educational and relaxed. For example, one researcher identified 'time to chat more freely' as an important part of her enjoyment that day. Negative comments about the structure and facilitation were often focused on the perceived waste of time. One researcher noted late starts to the meeting, prolonged explanations and repetition of themes from previous weeks.

2.5.4 Weekly feedback from researchers: the third term

Feedback from researchers in the third term covered just two sessions. In week 25 (the first meeting in 2020) researchers were encouraged to look back on the progress of the project. Several feedback comments expressed enjoyment of the session but one researcher felt that there was too little involvement. The feedback from the week 35 meeting was very positive with participants valuing the session as full and productive. One History Group researcher noted gaining agreement from the group on a specific task and the only negative comment was made about the weather.

This section has explored the History Group's practices and routines by looking at the detail of History Group meetings. Relationships built up within the group seemed key to sustaining involvement of collaborators on the project who contended with requirement for both structure and flexibility to progress the work.

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3 Researchers' views

Summary: Researchers' views part one

Motivations for taking part in the SPAN History Project

- Researchers offered a variety of reasons for taking part in the History Group. Some women were focused on developing their skills or intellect while others wanted to develop or change career.
- The subject matter of SPAN and single parenting was also an important factor attracting potential researchers to the project; a few researchers, who were single parents, said that the topic area had brought them to the project. This may have been simply because they were interested to know more or possibly because they felt that they had something specific to offer from their own *experience*.
- The research topic was also a potential barrier to some people's engagement, either because they believed they needed to be single parents to be in the group or because the identity of 'single parent' did feel applicable to their situation.
- A few researchers clearly identified an opportunity to learn more about the context of their communities from being in the group. The politics of SPAN was also mentioned as a factor which drew people in and sparked their interest in knowing more about the organisation.
- The status of the University of Bristol as a prestigious and well-known institution was also a factor that had led at least one of the researchers to participate.
- The diverse range of motivations for joining the group and the broad range of prior experience of researchers presented a challenge for group facilitators. In this scenario, satisfying the different motivations of researchers was likely to be a difficult balance.
- Researchers appreciated the unusual and uncertain nature of the history project. For some researchers, potential for enjoyment on the project appeared to be enhanced by the openness of the task.

Practical aspects of participation

- Perhaps the most crucial aspect of recruitment was the opportunity that researchers had to discuss the group and ask questions about what it would entail. These conversations were often initiated by staff who had already built a relationship with the potential researchers; they took place at Wellspring and other community settings. The provision of individualised and tailored advice that addressed issues like timing and childcare, seemed a crucial part of the project's initial success in recruiting researchers to commit to a year-long group.
- While preparing for the History Group, the project team thought carefully about the timing of the meetings and several researchers spoke about timing in their consideration of what had motivated them to attend.
- Ten out of 12 researchers who attended the group had children who used the settlement crèche and this provision has undoubtedly been important for the project's progress so far. Further, careful consideration of childcare issues in the timing of the sessions (for example, allowing time to drop children off at school before the group started) seemed important.

Researchers, politics and history

- Interviews showed the range of levels of political engagement from one person who was 'not political' to people who defined themselves as activists.
- In terms of their ideas about the value of history, the majority demonstrated a belief that history mattered and that the history of SPAN was also important. The history of SPAN was considered important because it had the ability to inspire or support change in the present and future.

The first few weeks in the History Group

- There are challenges in how to introduce a co-produced research project to new researchers who have a range of levels of experience of undertaking research. The idea of co-production was not easily understood and although the term is not new, it seems to be understood and defined in many different ways.
- In the first few weeks of the SPAN History Project, researchers were introduced to the concept of co-production, introduced to SPAN and introduced other members of the History Group. Some were attending Wellspring Settlement for the first time. Facilitators tried to establish ways of working and ground rules as well as delivering content covering research procedures, consent forms and induction to the Wellspring Settlement as volunteers.
- With both the University of Bristol and Wellspring Settlement having extensive administrative and ethical requirements, there was a lot to achieve in the first few weeks. In addition, the History Group were introduced to the project evaluation.
- In the interviews, researchers often praised the welcoming tone of the facilitators, showed their appreciation of the group and valued the opportunity to take the risk of doing something different in a mutually supportive space.
- Membership of the History Group involved researchers in unusual conversations which allowed for the possibility of gaining insight into the lives of people from different backgrounds.
- Positive views of the initial meetings outweighed negative ones but some researchers were concerned about the group being dominated by more confident voices and about the initial pace of the group being too slow and lacking in historical content.
- In their interviews, researchers also talked positively about the way that the initial stage of the project had included enjoyable but demanding goals - in particular delivering a group presentation at a conference which seemed to build confidence within the team of researchers.
- In the first stages of the project there was considerable variation in researchers' experience but also, overall, a sense of ownership of and belonging to the group which was apparent in all of the interviews.

Summary: Researchers' views part two

Achievements

- Despite the considerable interruption to the work brought about by the pandemic, history group researchers showed considerable pride in what had been achieved towards the end of the project.

- The project was significantly affected by Covid-19. The pandemic effected the process of the group's ending and extended the ending by 2 months. Several meetings were held online and project activity was cancelled or postponed.
- The perceived permanence of some of the History Group outputs was particularly valued by group members. The experience of planning and attending project events also provided points of focus for involvement that were meaningful and motivating to researchers.
- The History Group offered opportunities for supported group and individual learning. There seemed to be a strong connection between researchers' independent development and the support of the History Group. Where researchers made strides in their confidence and abilities, this was at least partly due to the support gained from the group.

Learning

- Researchers appreciated the chance to find out more about SPAN, especially the opportunities to engage with people who were involved in the organisation. There were however criticisms from some about a lack of historical content in the project and a suggestion that the content was focused mainly on the leadership of the organisation.
- The role of the History Group in individuals developing confidence is emphasised in these accounts. Researchers described a clear connection between their confidence in their abilities and their time in the group. Although researchers identified specific areas in which they felt more aware of their skills, the interviews also give the impression that some of the researchers had undergone a more widespread transition towards seeing themselves as more self-assured.
- Researchers reflected on the relationships and conversations exposing differences of opinion and background as a positive aspect of their engagement with the group.
- In their reflections, researchers were able to point out ways that the group had helped them to develop communication skills. For people who were learning English, the group was a supportive learning space. The group was also a place to practice and observe group communication issues as they arose.
- Researchers were able to gain knowledge and practice skills in a range of relevant topics whilst volunteering on the project. The areas of learning included interviewing, archiving and organisation skills as well as understanding the process of a research project. Researchers were often able to build on existing skills for their further development.

Ways of working

- The above accounts show that there is risk involved in taking part in a research project where activities and outcomes are not known from the outset. Trust in the project hosts and facilitators as well as the use of interactive and engaging discovery methods seemed to aid the navigation of these uncertainties
- Researchers seemed appreciative of the time they spent on the project but for some, getting to meetings was sometimes difficult because they were fitting it in with school runs, childcare and sometimes work. For some of the researchers, the History Group meetings did not easily fit into their week.
- Two interviewees questioned the boundaries of roles in the group and one suggested other ways

that the project may have been organised. Both researchers recognised the challenges of this more fundamental negotiation within the narrow confines of one two-hourly meeting each week.

- Even though engaged on the same co-production project, researchers defined their experience in different ways by emphasising different activities and experience within the group. For some researchers, engagement in the group was a very personal activity that was mainly focused on the relationships and discussions within the group. For others, there was a definite focus on the history making role of the group.
- In considering their experiences of the decision-making on the project, researchers expressed gratitude and praised the methods for engagement. Some researchers appreciated the deliberately inclusive measures used to gain agreement and input from researchers. However, one researcher did desire a broader discussion of the structures used by the group, while acknowledging the difficulties of doing this within the limited time available.
- The History Group developed an inclusive way of operating which meant that researchers could keep in touch with the project and remain members of the group whether or not they were able to attend the regular meetings. researchers appreciated this flexibility but irregular attendance was occasionally problematic for the relationships and for the progress of the work.
- The lack of consistency of attendance at the group presented challenges in shared decision making.

Benefits and demands

- Many researchers talked about the History Group being a setting where they had made valued friendships.
- For at least some of the researcher, the History Group was a gateway to wider networks of support and interest in the local area. As the project went on, History Group members became connected in different ways, some unrelated to their first meeting in the group.
- Engagement in the History Group was a source of pleasure, inspiration and empowerment for some researchers. Most of the researchers interviewed seemed deeply affected by their time in the group.
- Two researchers reflected on immediate impacts on employment – one on practical support for employment options and the second spoke of the History Group leading to a change in her view of the university as an employer.
- The offer of childcare was appreciated by members of the group but using that childcare was not always uncomplicated for mothers juggling other responsibilities as well as the specific needs of their children.
- The food provided in the History Group was viewed as demonstrating a level of care and value for individual researchers. The variety in the food seemed to mirror the diversity in terms of cultural backgrounds represented in the group.
- When the group was in conflict, researchers sometimes questioned their participation in the group. researchers described how distressing and difficult conflict in a group can be and the need for space to discuss and resolve conflict as well as support at difficult times in a group's development.

- The level of involvement in the group may have been a dilemma for some group participants. One researcher expressed her desire to do much more work on the project whilst at the same time, knowing her available time was limited.
- In the context of the pandemic, the History Group assumed a new importance in the lives of many of the researchers as a critical support group during very challenging times.
- Despite the impact of the pandemic, researchers were proud of what the group managed to achieve by way of tangible and lasting outputs from their work.
- While researchers saw the pandemic meaning that some work was passed over to paid staff, one noted that online meetings from home – rather than meeting in the more ‘classroom’ like setting of the settlement – meant that she saw a levelling taking place in relationships between History Group researchers and paid staff.

3.0 Researchers’ views

Nine of the ten first researcher interviews took place between May and July 2019 with the last one completed in September of that year. The length of these early stage interviews ranged between 16 and 67 minutes and the average⁵ interview time was 30 minutes. First interviews took place at the settlement. In the closing stages of the History Group, the main evaluator met seven History Group members for telephone interviews. The length of the second interviews ranged from 22 to 54 minutes with an average length of 36 minutes. All second stage researchers had also been interviewed at the first stage. All interviewees were parents; some identified as single parents and others were living with a partner or married. Section 3.1 explores the first stage interviews and section 3.2 looks at the second stage interviews.

3.1 Researchers’ views - part one

This section starts by exploring why researchers chose to take part in the project, and then looks at some of the practical aspects of their participation. It then turns to researchers’ views about politics and history before concluding with their reflections about the first few weeks of the project.

3.1.1 Why did researchers want to take part in SPAN: a hands-on history project?

In the opening interviews, researchers were asked what had led to them taking part in the SPAN History Group. Learning was a major theme in the discussions with researchers who wanted to discover more about SPAN, to build confidence and develop skills. These conversations also included researchers’ interest in the topic area, their desire for something challenging in their lives and wanting to build confidence or to help others. In many of the interviews, practical issues about timing and childcare, seemed crucial to participation. Also important, were the conversations that women had with community workers and friends at Wellspring Settlement and in other community settings. These conversations encouraged researchers to find out more and to get involved with the project.

⁵ Mean

Learning - The research content

The content of the History Group was of interest to some of the researchers at the start of the project. This part of the section explores researchers' interest in learning about SPAN, in learning about the local community and in taking part in a project about single parents and in the more broadly defined opportunity to discuss ideas and develop one's thinking.

Learning about SPAN

Several researchers discussed being attracted to the History Group because of curiosity and interest in the subject of Single Parents Action Network and its context.

LH What was it that made you decide to go along to the SPAN History Group?

R The reason I came was more for the research and the history... it wasn't about getting a job, it just seemed interesting...

Stage 1 Researcher

... obviously they looked really interesting, the topic and everything, it just seemed really interesting to me, something to get involved in...

Stage 1 Researcher

...it's exciting to discover there is this archive of the life of this unwieldy, lively, entity...

Stage 1 Researcher Correspondence

... for me the actual content is what's made me do ...[it's] a huge chunk of time in terms of my commitments, but I am really interested in the work of SPAN, and so that did feel like...worthwhile

Stage 1 Researcher

One researcher's interest in SPAN was sparked by her very positive experience of taking part in a parenting course that had been developed by the organisation:

I loved the parenting course, such a good experience, I learned so much from it, that was part of why I joined the group. The parenting course came from SPAN...

Stage 1 Researcher

The research topic captured the attention of these researchers and inspired their interest to engage with the project.

Some researchers' interest in the topic came from their political engagement. These participants were interested in exploring what had been achieved for single parents by SPAN in the past and what might be achieved in the future by a similar organisation. These researchers described their political interest in the project alongside their disappointment that SPAN was no longer in existence:

...I feel like there is this bright light that was SPAN, and that it has gone out. [If I had known about it, I would have]... connected with it quickly, as a... single parent who is ... actively interested in grass roots self-organising...

Stage 1 Researcher Correspondence

...[I am] learning about this organisation which seems like a really good organisation, that unfortunately has just stopped completely. ... nowadays there's...probably more need for

something like that ... childcare being so expensive...a lot of services being cut back, ...things like Universal Credit coming in...

Stage 1 Researcher

I want to see if there are any differences... between being a single parent say in the '90s and being a single parent now. I think things are very similar

Stage 1 Researcher

A desire for social and political change was vividly described by one researcher who noted:

... I think the other part that people are [feeling] is something very passionate about wanting to change things, wanting to be part of something which makes the world better. And I definitely feel that too...

Stage 1 Researcher

For the respondents mentioned above, being part of the history group was clearly motivated by their existing commitments and ideals to make positive change in the world.

A project about single parents

For some researchers the history project's subject of a single parent organisation was a key aspect of their motivation to participate. When asked what had led to their decision to attend the group, several women highlighted their personal connections to the issue of single parenting:

I was part of a single parent family... And I'm...interested to find out what they did then. How they actually helped people? Because it's all right saying it, but what did they actually do? And did it really have an impact on the people? ... And if life's better now for single parents, or if there's still support out there.

Stage 1 Researcher

...So, she came in to propose [the History Group] ... at the same time as the other group, so I was really torn because of the day ... but...as it's Single Parent Action Network and that I'm a single parent, so naturally I'm a bit like 'Oh okay, I'll hear about this'.

Stage 1 Researcher

LH *Yeah. And can you tell me a bit about yourself and what attracted you to becoming a member of the group?*

R *... I'm a single mum myself It's hard work at times ... I wouldn't change it for the world obviously ... but just being a single mum it is hard. So like hearing about this group and like the history of it I was like 'Oh this sounds really interesting' ...*

Stage 1 Researcher

For some researchers, however, the topic of a Single Parent organisation was a potential barrier because the focus of the project seemed to imply that non-single parents would not be welcome to contribute. Two researchers spoke about believing that they might not be appropriate members for the group:

...I thought this is a project for single mums only, so I just let it go, I thought probably it's not for me. But then I was talking to [community worker]... she again discussed it...I told her about [thinking] that this is a group only for single parents...

Stage 1 Researcher

...I got in touch with [community worker], because at first, I didn't know whether I was ... eligible to take part or whether it was just for single parents or not...

Stage 1 Researcher

One researcher had doubts about the group that persisted into the first few weeks in the group. She explained:

At the beginning it was really nice but there was a week where it was more focused on single parents and I thought, if it is only about single parents and their issues... I didn't feel it I could continue...

Later in her interview, she clarified:

R ...I had my doubts...

LH When it was so focused on single parents?

R It's not like I am against it or something, I really think it's important but I felt it may be, because it's a whole year commitment...It's a really big commitment and because I am not a single parent.

LH Yeah

R I feel like maybe...yeah, other people need it more than me

Stage 1 Researcher

Another researcher was reluctant to define herself as a single parent because of the negative associations that accompanied the label. Additionally, she identified with a culture that did not stigmatise single mothers in the same way. In spite of these complex considerations, the researcher decided to find out more about what the group had to offer. She explained:

...I wouldn't have thought I would get involved in a history project. But if it's a history project to do with parenting, single parenting, then I'm like, 'Oh yeah actually I'll get involved' but ... it's a bit weird, because I had a bit of mixed feelings around just getting involved in a single parent thing ...because ... my views around that whole branding of a single parent, I don't really like it. So I don't really want to associate myself with something like that...

Stage 1 Researcher

Researchers in the group had differing relationships to the topic of single parenting. Whereas some were inspired by the subject matter, for some, who weren't single parents, the topic of study was a potential sign that they might not be suited to the group. One researcher had more complex considerations about the topic of the research which were related to stigma associated with single parents and an alternative, and less stigmatizing cultural framework for defining parenting alone.

[Learning about the community](#)

For two researchers, their interest in the History Project was motivated by a wish to understand more about the local area in which they lived. One participant who was new to the area saw the project as a way to meet with local people and to possibly feel more connected. For this researcher, taking part in the history project was a way for her to develop her understanding of and sense of belonging to the city:

LH Where does your interest in research come from?

R I want to be part of this city, this community and I think it is important to know the history.

Stage 1 Researcher

Similarly, another researcher described the exploration of local history as a long term interest which joining the History Group would support. For this researcher, knowing more about her surroundings was an important aspect of her daily life:

... I just always have an interest in where I live...there's a few buildings around ... that I've kind of always wondered [about]...I've...got an interest in 'place' in general... There's a [local] History Group ... but never found the time to go to meetings... I just have a general interest ..

Stage 1 Researcher

SPAN's base in Easton was very close to the settlement. The closeness of the organisation that was being study was another way that researchers could potentially connect to the work.

Engaging with ideas

Several researchers were attracted to the possibility that the project would intellectually stimulating. For some researchers, the History Group offered space and time for thinking and developing their ideas and exercising their minds:

I had a lot of things going on ... and a lot of stresses in my life that I don't have now...now I feel like I'm ready to kind of get involved in something more intellectually stimulating... I quite like that aspect of it.

Stage 1 Researcher

... it was a personal thing because I've done a degree a few years ago and I've been a bit stagnant for a few years and I just wanted to get back into things...

Stage 1 Researcher

Relating her interest in the group to her personal development, one researcher described the History Group as a logical next stage in her development, following on from the previous group that she had been involved in.

...it just felt ... like a natural progression... to start using my brain a bit more ... I just felt like it was perfect timing for the next step, and it was all about progression, and I just felt like it was something I can...get my teeth into instead of just sitting back chilling ... we do quite a lot of like proactive things for the settlement, but this is something that I can really focus on...

Stage 1 Researcher

The research content inspired several researchers to join the group. For some, the topic of SPAN sparked interested because it was local or because it seemed to embody political ideals or because the project's focus on single parenting was engaging. There was also interest in the work which stemmed from a desire to engage with ideas and intellectual stimulation more generally.

Learning: personal development

Often, researchers reasons for joining the History Group included the opportunities for self-development. Researchers attended the History Group to develop their confidence and skills, to simply do something different or help move themselves towards career goals.

Building confidence and developing skills

The opportunity to develop skills was attractive to several researchers. One wanted to improve her communication skills generally:

What I want to be is more confident...to communicate with other people.

Stage 1 Researcher

For another person the project was seen as an opportunity to build confidence through tackling new situations...

The biggest thing is to build my self-confidence so that I can go to meetings, be more confident in public places...

Stage 1 Researcher

Two others mentioned a wish to explore creative skills within the History Group project,

I went to the settlement to one of the playgroups and saw a poster again, and it reminded ... so I then had a chat with her [community worker] and I felt as though I was interested in the ... potential for creativity.

Stage 1 Researcher

... I'm trying to work my way back to see what I can do... I've lost myself, I used to be really creative, really academic ... I love stuff like this but I feel like it's just gone and I don't know how to get it back.

Stage 1 Researcher

Only one researcher, who had knowledge of the History Group prior to the recruitment, said that she was interested to learn more about co-production in research.

... interested in both co-production and history and how those things work ... I'm definitely really interested in that, really interested to see how it operates, what it's really like...

Stage 1 Researcher

Several researchers spoke about joining the History Group as a way to explore particular interests or skills that they felt they had somehow lost along the way. One researcher talked about seeing the History Group as a way of recapturing things that had been important to her before a long illness:

... I love stuff like this but I feel like it's just gone and I don't know how to get it back. I've spent a long time...trying to get myself well, and now I think it's time to see if I can get my brain working again. ...

Stage 1 Researcher

Another person outlined a wish to return to enjoyable parts of her life that she had experienced before giving birth to a child. One of her motivations was:

...being a new parent...finding it difficult...[to] do the creative aspect of my life [that I did] before having a child, ... I've always been inspired ... going to the library and looking through books, and history ... So this seemed like a way to be able to get back to that...

Stage 1 Researcher

One researcher described looking forward to giving time and energy to something that was personally rewarding:

...I actually come and get to sit down and...focus on something that's for me and not for anyone else, so get...to do something like in my own time... without a child, so ... which is quite nice.

Stage 1 Researcher

These accounts demonstrate the success of the project recruitment which was specifically aimed at people who wanted self-development opportunities (Appendix 2).

Doing something different

Researchers showed appreciation of the unusual and uncertain nature of the history project. For some researchers, potential for enjoyment on the project appeared to be enhanced by the openness of the task.

"Then I thought yeah it's a good idea to join this and see how it is and stuff. Yes, it was good, a good experience. I mean it's something really different. And plus the culture I come from, you wouldn't probably think of something like this there..."

... I just thought let me just try something different I wouldn't usually go for.

Stage 1 Researcher

Another saw "...the potential for something exciting..." in the History Group Project.

Stage 1 Researcher

And another said she was "fascinated" by the subject.

Stage 1 Researcher

Researchers' orientations to the idea of a project about single parents were mixed. The interviews unearthed both that researcher were attracted to the project *because of* the subject matter, as well as those who wondered if they would be welcome on the project because it was focused on SPAN.

Working towards paid employment or changing career

A few researchers expressed a hope that taking part in the year long History Group might broaden opportunities for taking up paid work or developing their careers. When asked how they hoped to benefit from taking part in the History Group, they replied:

well just my career change, it's about just getting different experiences doing something that I wouldn't have done before.

Stage 1 Researcher

...potentially another way into a different career path maybe, I don't know, have some training around...archives and that kind of thing.

Stage 1 Researcher

One researcher was motivated to get involved in the project, at least in part because it was led by the University of Bristol. In the SPAN History Project, this researcher had found a possible route into working with the university when other channels had failed:

Though I don't have...good experiences with the university...it still made me think, it's a good idea to go with the group ... it has really been my dream to pursue my [my academic career]...obviously you don't want to let go the idea of getting involved with some study with the university, which is quite prestigious...

Stage 1 Researcher

Despite a lack of good experiences in the past, this researcher sees the project's association with the university as a clear motivation for engagement.

When researchers talked about what had led to them take part of in the History Group, they offered wide ranging reasons for their participation. The motives for involvement included wanting to learn more about the topic and to develop their skills. Several mentioned wanting to do something that would be intellectually stimulating. These descriptions give the impression that projects like the history group need to be mindful of aspirations of potential participants. Several researchers gave the impression that the project had many potential advantages that they were hoping to explore in the group.

3.1.2 The practicalities of participation

Certain practical aspects of how the History Group was organised seem important to researchers' participation in the group. The timing of the group, the opportunity to have two-way conversations with staff and the availability of childcare were all highlighted as important factors which supported researchers' decisions to attend.

Timing

Several researchers highlighted the importance of seeking out activities which fitted in with their parenting responsibilities. Timing was a key issue for researchers who needed to balance their participation alongside other commitments such as work and dropping off and picking up children from school:

... [it] just felt ...actually that's like perfect timing.

Stage 1 Researcher

...the day - it was so perfect, I am not doing anything on Tuesdays so I was like, why not?

Stage 1 Researcher

Conversations about attending the group

Conversations with the History Group facilitators and other members of staff in community settings, seemed central to researchers' decisions to take part of the History Group. When asked about what motivated them to get involved, researchers often referred to conversations that they had with particular individuals connected to the study or to other groups that they were involved in. Although women remembered seeing posters and hearing information about the group, they seemed to place particular value on having the opportunity to ask questions and discuss aspects of their individual suitability for the group.

I saw a poster on Facebook... And then I went to the settlement to one of the playgroups and saw a poster again... And then... I got in touch with [community worker]...

Stage 1 Researcher

... I was approached by someone... I went to a parenting class and the group leader... she approached me ... through someone else. And I thought if she thought it would be good for me, then maybe it would be.

Stage 1 Researcher

I did a course in my little one's nursery, it was voluntary ... it was something to do with volunteering... And then she said that I might be interested in this research.

Stage 1 Researcher

I thought I would just go to BS5 and chat with [community worker]. I thought it was a good chance for me so that's why I went.

Stage 1 Researcher

Several researchers were introduced to the History Group while they were attending another group either at Wellspring Settlement or elsewhere. researchers were therefore able to find out about the group alongside their peers.

An important aspect of these advance meetings about the History Group was that researchers were engaged in two-way conversations where they could ask questions and gain support. Researchers were given the space and support to consider whether joining the group would be relevant to their own circumstances, skills and interests. In the following example, a researcher describes her meeting with a worker at another project:

...[we] had the one to one she asked me, what I did academics-wise... and I told her about my [studies]. And then she said that I might be interested in this research.

Stage 1 Researcher

For one researcher, the History Group seemed to neatly follow on from the group that she was already attending at the centre:

...it was a bit unfortunate that it was run at the same time, but I guess it was like ... I...thought well that would be [a] better option to the group that I'm already in...I've been in that group for a long time... SPAN group is only a year, so say after a year if I wanted to...I could even go back to that old group I was in previously.

Stage 1 Researcher

At the beginning of her interview, the same researcher reflected on the process of pre-meetings with the group facilitator. She highlighted the very positive impact that these conversations had on the success of the group:

LH ...you were just saying you thought all the groundwork really paid off on yesterday's first History Group meeting.

R Yes. So [community worker] had met with all of the History Group members bar one, and I think some of them she'd met with a couple of times...she'd had these one on one meetings ... and it just really struck me what a difference that made. You know often I think in the first meeting [of] a group in my experience...people are really quite tentative, they're quite shy, quite nervous, and I mean obviously there were some nerves; we all had some nerves, but it just really felt like people came and they were ready... I was really struck by how confident [community worker] was, that she really got the group off to a very confident dynamic start. ...I think it's also because she knew the people. And ... it was great, and I just felt like that had really been very...effective.

One researcher was also strongly influenced by a friend. She asserted that her friend's enthusiasm and support to attend the History Group was the most important factor in her making her decision.

LH Okay, and what was it that made you decide to come along to the group?

R [Friend's Name]

LH Okay tell me about that, what did she say to you?

R She was like 'You're going to love it, this is you':...interviewing people. Like these places ...about history, to know more about history ... so she's like 'You love these kind of things, so just come and join me' – I was like, 'yeah why not?'.

Stage 1 Researcher

The availability of childcare

With the majority of researchers involved at the start of the study using the crèche service, childcare provision was perhaps the most important aspect of the 'offer' to History Group members. One researcher outlined the importance of childcare in her ability to consider attending any meeting or event:

So when you're a single parent and it's difficult for you to get involved in things, when you see something, 'Oh look that's got a free crèche' you feel like you're welcome somehow, it feels like 'Oh that's for me, that's something for me'. Whereas when you see other events and you see 'Oh this is a women's event' and it's an evening...you think well obviously that's not something that's for me.

Stage 1 Researcher

For this attender, the availability of childcare was not just a practical issue. It was an important aspect of her feeling welcomed to a space as a single parent. The offer of the crèche was also appreciated by another researcher who valued the child- free space.

...I .. get ...to do something ... in my own time... without a child

Stage 1 Researcher

Two researchers also mentioned that the provision of free, onsite childcare was a key factor in supporting attendance at History Group meetings. Childcare seemed to be an important part of description of the project as well-organised and a positive group experience.

LH And if you had any advice for us organising something similar what would you say?

R ... I think you've all done really well to be fair, like I don't think really there's anything to improve...Yeah like even the food, like you've done really well and you've organised a crèche, so I... I think it's spot on really...

Stage 1 Researcher

When this researcher mentions the food being offered alongside childcare, she seems appreciative not only the gift of the food to researchers and children, but also the fact that by providing lunch group organisers have helped to ease what might otherwise be a difficult time for mothers who would then need to rush home to feed their children.

3.1.3 Researchers: politics and history

This section starts by exploring the levels of political engagement identified amongst the researchers that found their way to the History Group. It then continues by exploring their feelings about the value of history in general and then the history of SPAN in particular.

Politics

In the first interviews, researchers were asked whether or not they were interested in politics, and if they had ever wanted to do anything to change something that they thought was wrong or unfair. Specifically, researchers were asked if they had ever joined a campaign group or political party to change something. Nine out of the 10 replies to these questions are categorised as four kinds of orientations to politics which are; not political, political/ not active, political/active and activist (see Zani and Barrett 2012)⁶. An example of researchers' replies in each of the categories is outlined below.

'Not political'

Of the 10 researchers interviewed, only 1 participant was represented in the 'not political' category:

- LH *And we want to know what kinds of people are interested in joining a project like this, and in particular if people think of themselves as political – do you think of yourself as political?*
- R *No.*
- ...
- LH *And some people do things like campaigning about an issue that's important to them or you know housing rights or human rights, that kind of thing, and you know other people join a campaign group – have you ever been involved in anything like that?*
- R *No.*

Stage 1 Researcher

'Political/ not active'

Three researchers are defined as being 'political but not active'. These researchers said they took an interest in politics but had not joined a political party or taken part in any political activity outside of voting:

- LH *... do you think of yourself as somebody who's interested in politics?*
- R *I try not to be... It's half and half, it depends ...on what it is.*
- LH *Okay, can you tell me a little bit more about that?*
- R *...obviously the whole thing with like Donald Trump and stuff like that... it's just annoying, and...Brexit and stuff like that ... that's what I mean when I'm like half and half, cos like we voted and like even if we voted not to leave, we're still leaving. So like I'm just like 'Well you might as well not ...'*
- LH *...And some people have joined ... have you ever joined a campaign or done anything like that? - or wanted to even?*

⁶ One of the responses has not be categorised because the response was not clear. Categories encompass Zani and Barrett's (2012) description of political participation: "Political participation takes a number of different forms, including both **conventional** forms which involve electoral processes (e.g., voting, election campaigning and running for election), and **non-conventional** forms of activity which occur outside electoral processes (e.g., signing petitions, participating in political demonstrations, displaying a symbol or sign representing support for a political cause, membership of political campaigning organizations, writing letters to politicians and public officials, etc.)."

- R *Yeah, I wouldn't mind joining. I have thought about ...something like that...So yeah, my like doors are open for that. ...*
- LH *...Have you ever taken part?*
- R *No.*

Stage 1 Researcher

'Political/ active'

Three researchers who are members of a political party and/or occasionally take part in campaigning have been defined here as political and active:

- LH *Do you think of yourself as someone who's interested in politics?*
- R *... No, I don't know, I get too passionate and angry about it, so ... saying that I paid to be the Labour Party, so ... I'm passionate about hating the Tories. ...I've got a lot of empathy...I wanted to save the whole world – which I can't possibly do...I feel I'd get too angry ... all I care about it is that people aren't undervalued in any way – we should all be the same.*
- LH *And have you ever joined a campaign group or done anything else where you've felt like things were unfair?*
- R *Well I went on a protest in London two years ago... Which was really weird for me, cos it was thousands, like a hundred thousand...it was to get the Tories out after the Grenfell...That was amazing...*

Stage 1 Researcher

'Activist'

There were two researchers for whom politics seemed an integral part of their everyday lives. They were involved in more than one political campaign and seemed to spend a significant part of their week actively engaged with political concerns:

- LH *...have you always been interested in politics?*
- R *Yeah, I think so yeah. My family's very political.... I am involved in some other groups, because I did get a bit involved with ... the climate youth strikes and extinction rebellion...as it kind of went on and they had that ... week of action, then I thought well this is something that's quite significant, like I want to get involved in this because they're having an impact. Because that's the problem with politics... sometimes I go on protests and do other things as well, but half the time it's like why are you doing it? Because you don't really feel like it's going to actually change anything...*

Stage 1 Researcher

History

When asked if history itself matters, all of the researchers who were interviewed answered 'yes'. Their reflections on the value of history included exploration of the relationship between history and the present and future, descriptions of how history could be used in everyday life and appreciation of the possibilities for our imaginations and feeling brought about by a knowledge of history.

History: the present and the future

Several researchers spoke about history's role in the present. For these researchers, history has the potential for guiding both individual and collective action in the present and future. For example, one person said:

... I think it can inform the present and the future.

Another person, related her answer to the work that she was doing with SPAN and her hope to gain personal and perhaps career benefits through gaining an understanding history:

LH ... I have got the question now about history in general. Do you think that it matters that people know about history?

R History? I think is a political topic ...I think...I have more interest in learning about UK and SPAN and the group. I think if I understand more about the history, I will know...what I should do in the future.

Stage 1 Researcher

For the following researcher, knowledge of the context of changes to social policies was crucial to understanding, and taking advantage of possibilities for change in the future:

It's just interesting to look at trends, patterns. What's happened before and why? ...When you look at a policy it's only made because something's happened, they don't just come out of thin air, it's because of something. Just like laws – it's happened because of something, so I think it is important to look at history and understand and see any change.

Stage 1 Researcher

History as power in everyday life

Researchers also offered personal stories about the need for historical knowledge in everyday life. The following accounts, explore the role of history within relationships with neighbours and others:

LH Do you think it matters whether people know about history or not?

R ... yeah definitely...

LH Why do you say that?

R ...we can learn lessons from history, and also... it's ...good to know where you come from, where your neighbours [come from]... I think it's good for understanding each other, one another... to know...the context of their lives or their past...

Stage 1 Researcher

For a researcher who had migrated to the UK, knowledge of UK history had the potential to improve her engagement with people who might criticise non UK cultures:

... you need to know where they are from. What the town or the country went through to be able to understand... with this project, there was a video where single mums in the past, they had to give their babies up...you need to know all of those things...if some ignorant person comes to you and says stuff about your culture and what's that? What's that? You can say, 'listen, your country also has been through that'... You are able to stand and...be part of it, know about it, if there are conversations going on...

Stage 1 Researcher

In the opinion of another researcher, historical knowledge could support challenges to an unwelcomed renewal of nationalism in the UK:

...I think it [history] matters a lot ... it's something that I feel really quite strongly about. I think people don't know anything... you know we're told so many lies about history actually.

And I think especially...now with the current climate with everything becoming so ...nationalist... often a lot of people ... you know they might not even learn much about history in school anyway because they're not engaged in school...

Stage 1 Researcher

The effects of history on thinking and feeling

For two researchers, exploration of the past was thought to lead to different ways of thinking or feeling. The first researcher considers the effect of history on our imaginations and the second explores how a lack of understanding of history might lead to a feeling of being lost in the world:

Does it matter? Yeah like what captures our imagination and sparks our creativity matters... Yeah it matters... not because you can align the past with the present and make some neat ...transfer ... but we are always learning ... history allows you to do something ...I think what's good is if you're provoked to think afresh ...

Stage 1 Researcher

...history is...where you came from, what your roots are, like what your ancestors did, how they lived, what was their culture –it's everything probably you are... My [child] was born here, but down the line if he doesn't know about what his roots are, then he would be lost, he doesn't know what he is and who he is. So obviously everyone has to know about the past, where they came from, what they belong to...

Stage 1 Researcher

The value of the history of SPAN

Researchers spoke about the value of SPAN's history in their replies to the question, 'does the History of SPAN matter?'. The responses focused on the potential for SPAN's history to inspire change and learning.

One researcher presented a strong argument for recording SPAN's History; she pointed out that the absence of groups like SPAN from history discourages campaigning against and challenging the status quo. Talking about the work of SPAN, she said:

It could get lost, it's like this is a group, this is what they did ... and ... especially when it comes to groups that campaign for example – we don't know a lot about that. That's why a lot of people do naturally think ... 'if you protest or campaign about something, you're not going to change anything'. Because all that in a sense is written out of history...so I think it's important...

Stage 1 Researcher

Further, she saw the importance of highlighting the inclusive practices of SPAN in arguments for providing similar services now:

... to say well actually this support existed before, this is not some strange thing ...actually people were doing this before ... in terms of you know let's do a course, [that] let's ... people have a course with a free crèche - as if ... that's something that people haven't done before, so actually people understand...what we've lost...

Stage 1 Researcher

Two researchers felt that SPAN's history should be recorded, simply because of the significance of its activity and its achievements:

LH *Does the history of SPAN matter do you think? ...*
R *Definitely. Because, single parents, it's a big group now...I feel like the support should always be there. Yeah, people should know about SPAN, about women helping each other. Such a big important group.*

Stage 1 Researcher

...from what I'm learning about the group, they were...quite instrumental nationally and on an international level. ...They were working ...[at] a really interesting time, a lot of the stuff they did was sort of interracial stuff, ... it was really important – again especially at the time. But as we were sort of talking about last week, there's loads of things that we can kind of carry on from the way that they worked...

Stage 1 Researcher

LH *And thinking about the history of SPAN and what it means to you, does the history of SPAN matter, do you think?*

R *Yeah, I think it does. Maybe I didn't before, but I do now. I also think that whatever the history ... we need to ask everyone not just the leaders of it. I think sometimes the people who are low down see a lot more than the people who are higher up, and I think sometimes their opinions are more important because they see it for what it is.*

Stage 1 Researcher

Two researchers explored the potential for SPAN's history to give learners information about how to campaign for or execute change. This researcher outlined the value of exploring SPAN's history so that it can tell us about organising together for specific changes to policy:

...when you're thinking about policies and things coming into place, things happen for a reason... we all know about the 15 hours free [childcare], and then the 15 hours for 2 year olds and I'm [thinking]...'where did that come from?' Was there any involvement with SPAN? And the 30 hours, where did that come from? Is it off the back of SPAN? And did other organisations come in and start campaigning?... I'm thinking actually SPAN was quite big and very involved and very influential... there's a lot of things that's happening now that maybe if it was back in SPAN's heyday, they would have been able to really voice local people and try... to get [something] better for the community ... I don't really know who's doing that now.

Stage 1 Researcher

Interestingly, this researcher was also hopeful that, having seen the methods and achievements of SPAN, a similar campaigning group would emerge from the History Group:

...Maybe it really is a shame that they've gone, so I'm interested to see what they've done, so what lessons can be learnt and is there anything that anyone else can do ... or even just have that awareness. Because you know when people start talking then you know a little group will start forming, and then after the whole year of this project something's probably going to come of it, just because this has happened – and I think that would be great.

Stage 1 Researcher

Another researcher was similarly hopeful; she felt that the History of SPAN might have important lessons for people who want to collaborate on many different issues:

I'm interested in what we can find in this archive that captivates and connects us to it, through its human stories - and what they might tell us - about ourselves and about each other and about trying to do stuff together.

Stage 1 Researcher Correspondence

Most researchers highlighted the importance of history to the present and several could see ways that the history of SPAN might be available to guide individual decision-making, campaigns or future work.

In this section we found that researchers' levels of political engagement were varied with one defined as 'not political', two as 'activists', three as 'political/not active' and three as political/ active⁷. In terms of their ideas about the value of history, the majority held a strong belief that history mattered and that the history of SPAN was also important. The history of stand was considered important because it had the ability to inspire or support change in the present and future.

3.1.4 The first few weeks

This section explores researchers' views of their time in the History Group in the first few weeks. It covers researchers' experiences of getting to know and trying out the History Group, the group atmosphere, issues of respect, mixing with different people, 'comfort zones' and louder and quieter voices in the weekly meetings.

Getting to know the group

Where researchers already knew others who were attending the group, they noted that this had made starting in the group an easier task:

LH *Did you have any expectations of that first meeting? What did you expect might happen?*
R *... I understood that the first meeting would be a little bit less formal, quite informal. And like you know it was a little bit similar I think to what I expected in terms of ...more kind of settling in, ice-breaker, 'getting to know you' activities, so we did a bit of that, and we did find out a bit about SPAN I think. But I think ...that was nice, I think for me I knew a few people already in the group.*

Stage 1 Researcher

Where researchers did not know other group members, the role of the facilitators in introducing researchers to the group seemed important.

I am not used to being in big groups and I didn't know anyone in the group before I went ... [community worker] is nice and open. I met [community worker] before the group...At the beginning it was a bit uncomfortable but after a few weeks it was ok.

Stage 1 Researcher

'Trying out' the History Group

One researcher spoke about the first few weeks in the History Group as a kind of trial where she would not fully commit to being in the group before seeing what it was like. For this researcher, the starting period in the group was part of the process of making a decision about whether she would attend in the long term.

⁷ One person's reply was unclear.

...when I first came in, I didn't think much about it, I just thought let me do it and see how it works...When I saw that Jamilia video and then mothers giving up their children and stuff, so that was really ... so that really made me interested in it.

Stage 1 Researcher

History Group atmosphere

Overall, researchers seemed to value the time that they spent in the group in the first few weeks and there were positive comments about a friendly, supportive and inclusive atmosphere. The following examples emphasise the success of group facilitators in creating an environment in which people felt at ease.

Researchers spoke fondly about a routine that had been established in the History Group in the following examples:

R *I've really enjoyed it – I think it's quite a nice relaxed atmosphere. You know you come in, you know you've got a coffee and got snacks to start off with, get your lunch afterwards – so it's kind of nice like that, you get a break, it's quite easy and relaxing.*

Stage 1 Researcher

LH *... And has there been anything that you found enjoyable in the group?*

R *Yes - all the giggles and the laughs and having tea together and ... yeah, sharing the things they have been through... yeah everything probably, all the stuff.*

Stage 1 Researcher

Several researchers felt so comfortable in the group that they were unable to recall any negative aspects of the group, even when prompted to do so:

R *There are many people, they are very friendly, they have many ideas...*

LH *... And is there anything you don't like about the group?*

R *Don't like? I don't know... I like it so much.*

Stage 1 Researcher

LH *And if you had any advice for us organising something similar what would you say?*

R *...I don't think really there's anything to improve.*

Stage 1 Researcher

LH *...And has there been anything that you found unhelpful or not enjoyable in the sessions?*

R *No, not so far.*

Stage 1 Researcher

'Respect'

When asked about their experiences in the group, two researchers spoke about mutual respect as an important aspect that made the group an enjoyable experience. For one researcher, the positive nature of the group overall was associated with the mutual respect between researchers:

... I think everybody has been really respectful of each other ...yeah that's been really positive.... I think everybody's listening..

Stage 1 Researcher

One researcher spoke about the excitement she felt at being in the History Group and highlighted the relationships of respect that she observed in the group. She hoped that with time, this would deepen and develop:

I think everyone's interested to hear everyone else... I feel really excited to be in the room with the people that I'm in the room with and I want to hear their stories and their views... I get a sense of ... interest and mutual respect and kindness, ... it feels like a safe space, people seem to feel confident to speak their mind... it's good – it could go in a bit deeper. I'm hoping that ... give it time.

Stage 1 Researcher

For these researchers, mutual respect in the group was demonstrated through group members listening to each other and sharing their experiences.

Mixing with different people

Several researchers spoke about their enjoyment of mixing with different people in the group and others expressed disappointment that there wasn't more time for discussions in the meetings. When a researcher was asked what she had enjoyed in the group, she resolutely replied:

...I think meeting the group, the girls in the group, it's like everyone's from different places, everyone's got ... a different history... so ... it was really interesting ... some of them...it's the first time to hear what they're saying. It's ... something new in my life...

Stage 1 Researcher

Like the researcher quoted above, another respondent highlighted the group discussions and mixing with different people as something that she particularly enjoyed and wanted more of in the group:

LH *And has there been anything that you've found particularly enjoyable so far in the History Group?*

R *... [when we were asked to work with different people] I think that worked really well, and I prefer that because you gravitate to the person next to you otherwise. So I think that should be done a lot more to encourage us to get up and join with other people - I thought that was really cool.*

Stage 1 Researcher

Similarly, another researcher expressed disappointment that there wasn't more facilitated mixing in the group in the first few weeks. She said:

R *I really just enjoy the interactive bits and then the feeding back. I really enjoy those bits of the group. I just think that we should mix it up a little bit. The last session was a bit like, 'come and work with someone that you haven't worked with before', and everyone sits in the same place, next to the same person. So you get your twos – the same twos...*

LH *...So has that been similar throughout?*

R *Yeah but it was only last week they kind of voiced that, 'maybe try and work with someone that you haven't ...' yeah, more of that please.*

Stage 1 Researcher

For at least one researcher, the pleasures of being in the group were a significant part of her life which is shown in her description of the other group members as 'friends and family'.

... And coming to SPAN is like ... it's a part of me now, SPAN...Yeah it's like the more I come...the more it becomes like part of me. It's like they're ...my friends and family now. Yeah it's been a while now, it's been like 3 months.... at the beginning I wasn't that comfortable but now I'm really comfortable ...

Stage 1 Researcher

Out of the comfort zone

Researchers discussed the welcome challenge of taking part in the History Group, including meeting people from different parts of Bristol, being asked to take part in activities that felt uncomfortable and, the challenge of meeting new people in an unknown setting. The following researchers explored and reflected upon these challenges and rewards in their interviews.

LH ... And you said it was quite daunting at the beginning....Tell me about how it's been since then.

R I find it really daunting because different parts of Bristol are very different...the area I'm from compared to this area ... I didn't realise how much I didn't step outside of my own area ... even in just Bristol – all of us are so different... I felt really out of my comfort zone and I found it really hard. But then I was trying to think to myself, 'I want to open up my world in order to open up my [child's] world'. So it was a good thing to get used to different areas, different people...and that's what I thought about a lot on the first few sessions.

Stage 1 Researcher

The following researcher spoke quite passionately about a moment in week three of the History Group that she had enjoyed. In that meeting, researchers were asked to imagine a celebratory event. Although, the exercise was challenging, the researcher seemed excited:

LH ...what have been the most memorable moments from the group so far for you?

R The thing I really enjoyed, I always remember, is when everyone was...feeding back their thoughts on the day that we got our piece, whatever it is, and talking about who would be there, what it would look like...I really liked that bit.

LH ...can you say a little more about why that was great, why that was a moment for you?

R It's because at the beginning when they were trying to explain what we should do, I was like 'That's not my thing' – to sit down with your eyes closed and imagine ... and I kind of go into it ... I can see a vision, see how I'm going to feel...

Stage 1 Researcher

Similarly, a researcher who was apprehensive at the first meeting of the group also found the session enjoyable and was motivated to return:

LH ...So did you know what to expect, or did you have any expectations of that first meeting?

R No, literally... when I first came ...I met the people, they were so lovely, from the first meeting. And I was a ...bit nervous so I wasn't talking at all, it was just like, 'Hello, hi' and that's it. But ... it was interesting...what everyone was saying and ...how the meeting was going,.. the group. ... it was so interesting... I was so excited for the next meeting...

Stage 1 Researcher

Loud and quiet voices

Occasionally researchers referred to the presence of louder and quieter voices in the History Group as a problematic issue. For example, one researcher expressed her frustration with particular group members who tended to talk a lot in the group, while recognising that this was common to 'every group':

LH *And has there been anything that you've really not enjoyed, or found unhelpful?*
 R *It's just like the same in every group, some people just can chat too much about the same thing...people go on too long... I don't even realise I've stopped listening completely... It's just keeping it more succinct I think, because you can get lost in the information sometimes.*
 Stage 1 Researcher

One researcher, was keen for facilitators to take a more assertive role in the group to allow less confident voices to have more space. Talking about how the group was going, she said:

... everyone's just speaking freely – and obviously in that way...you're having a free open discussion ... But you have to be wary that some people will dominate the discussion and some people won't say anything ... and sometimes it's nice just to actually talk in pairs and then feedback. And even when you feedback you can just nominate people, and that way it's a bit more equal, rather than certain people just talking without any limit on what they're saying. And you've got to look at timing as well in that way, so you've got to say okay, I'll just have to stop you there because we haven't got a lot of time. There's nothing wrong with being a little bit more authoritarian...

Stage 1 Researcher

However, in contrast to the experiences explored above, one researcher noted that the group participation was, more or less equal and she valued the group being a space where attenders were:

...listening to each other and making time and space for different people's perspectives and not ... there's not been some like awful voice which is just like obliterating everyone else and everyone's rolling their eyes like 'Oh God we have to listen to this again'. Which you can get in a group setting like that and it's quite hard to manage – especially at the beginning because you don't want to also stamp on someone's voice...

Stage 1 Researcher

On the same topic, another researcher expressed a strong opinion that all researchers should contribute to discussions in the group and, where people were quiet in the group, there should be clearer encouragement and an expectation that they should speak. She felt that this was a shared responsibility on the part of the whole group, stating 'we should try to help them':

R *...I personally think that everybody should talk, no matter how they...*
 LH *Tell me more – so you're feeling like everyone should speak?*
 R *Yes, what I mean is that there might be some people who probably are not much into it...*
 LH *So are some people silent?*
 R *Yes exactly... I mean probably we should try to help them ...*
 LH *Yeah, help them speak more?*
 R *Yes exactly... because I think this is probably a platform where the people who won't talk much should talk more.*

Stage 1 Researcher

The issue of who speaks and who does not speak was identified as an important aspect of being in the group and some of the observations came from researchers who were frustrated by dominant voices, but there were also those who valued the listening that took place in the group and those who believed that quieter members should be encouraged to increase their participation.

A slow start

Several researchers spoke about the pace of the History Group being too slow or slower than they had anticipated. Introductory and preparatory sessions in the group seemed to lead to frustration amongst some who were keen to get on with the research. One researcher said:

I think it dragged a bit at the start, but I think it's cos we had like people coming and going and not really knowing what the group was about, so like it slowed us down a bit.

Stage 1 Researcher

For one researcher, the evaluation workshop (held on Week 3 of the History Group) was a barrier rather than a support to the research:

... there was some stuff that was a bit like basic and simple and slow, ...we didn't really do much ... we had some kind of evaluation thing didn't we with yourself...I felt like maybe something like that would have worked better at a later stage where we'd already started our research question ... because it's all a bit vague isn't it at the moment?...It wasn't bad, it was quite fun...but then some things are fun and you think 'How useful is it?...

Stage 1 Researcher

Researchers were divided in their sense of how long it took for the group to begin deciding the precise nature of the research question. One researcher expressed her frustration that the research question was only tackled in week 7 of the History Group:

R *... it's been a bit slow... I sort of thought the first week, say hi, introduce yourself, and then next week, talk about what's the question...I was very eager to get going...It seems like it's been a very long time.*

LH *To get to that session?*

R *Yeah and like one session was just like watching, just watching a documentary, and I felt like that was a bit of a waste of a session, so I was a bit frustrated.*

Stage 1 Researcher

Other interviewees thoughtfully reflected on the length of time needed to prepare for the research and, although several researchers suggested that the pace in the group had been too slow at the start, they also considered the reasons why facilitators had planned the group in this way. One researcher remarked that the group included people from many different backgrounds, some without any prior experience of research.

So there's been ... the preparation time to get to the point where we're actually thinking about a research question ... longer than I maybe thought it would be. But ... I think it's been worthwhile...

Stage 1 Researcher

In a few of the interviews researchers outlined the unanswered queries that they still had about SPAN:

...I don't want to be thinking about SPAN as a group... I [want] to see where it came from – who was that person? How did it come to [their] mind? and how did [they] actually manage to get together SPAN? How did SPAN come into existence?...

Stage 1 Researcher

These questions may have been another indication that the group was moving too slowly for this participant.

The suggestion that the pace of the History Group could have been faster was not uncommon but certainly not unanimous as some researchers did not mention any problems in this area. In judging the pace for the group, facilitators were balancing the needs of a group which included people with extensive experience of research and others with very little experience.

Significant moments in the research process

In the initial interviews, researchers were asked to identify significant moments in the research process so far. Where interviewees were able to point out particularly memorable aspects in the opening term of the project, these were focused on the historical content in History Group meetings as well as two events – an evaluation workshop in week three and a conference in Birmingham in week nine⁸.

For some researchers, the opportunity to find out about SPAN from someone who had been pivotal in the organisation was particularly appreciated:

... And we had someone come and talk to us ...they'd been working ...with this project for... 10 years or more. So...she had ...loads of information to give us, which was quite nice.

Stage 1 Researcher

...it... took a while before we actually got into actually learning anything. ...we had SC in, and that was really interesting, so she gave a talk and I felt like ...I was able to use my notebook for the first time last week ... I wrote loads of notes for the first time...

Stage 1 Researcher

For one researcher, the visit by Sue Cohen, ignited specific questions that she seemed excited to explore further:

... it was great to get a sense of SPAN ... from her perspective... she was there at the start of SPAN...it certainly started to make me think about SPAN and its identity ... they were started out in St Pauls and it wasn't so long since the riots. And...it was an area of great ...empowerment on the street level...and that seems to me to be an important part of their identity... when they talk about grassroots...why that's so important. And then ... they really very quickly took on all this EU funding, so they're both this thing [radical grassroots organisation], and then they're also taking money from something so different from [SPAN] and [I am interested in] how those two [aspects] shaped together and how they held onto that, how they shifted....

Stage 1 Researcher

⁸ As research interviews took place between May and July, not all researchers had participated in the conference at the time of their interview. The researchers' experiences of the conference will be explored further in the final report.

This researcher's experience of meeting and talking with SC inspired her to want to explore the context of SPAN's beginnings and the impact on its development.

Learning about stigma and racism

At the time of their initial interview, two researchers were struck by a film that had explored the issue of racism. Their accounts both show their assumptions were challenged in the group meeting:

... a film on racism last week...I think that was good. You don't always realise what's going on, or you like to think .. everybody's nice – and that's not the case. So that's quite hard.

Stage 1 Researcher

LH ... And has there been anything memorable for you so far? ...I'm wondering if there's anything that sticks in your mind that's happened so far.

R ... when I first came to UK, I had this feeling that probably racism and things like that don't exist ... at least in this country, because it's the biggest democracy of the world. But then seeing the video, especially the video, and experiencing a little bit of [it] myself, I thought that, 'no, that's not [true]'... so this has kind of stuck into my mind...

Stage 1 Researcher

Visualising History Group achievements and the Modern British Studies Conference

One researcher, described a significant moment in the Evaluation Workshop when the group was asked to imagine an event that might take place one year into the future. At this event, the History Group would show members of the public what had been achieved over the year. The aim of this 'dreaming' exercise was for participants to gain a sense of what they might like to achieve with a project that was, at the time, very open and unknown. In the following interview extract, the researcher conveyed the vividness of her imagined scenario and her pleasure that her picture as also reflected back by others:

...it's like we're all standing really tall and ... really put together an amazing piece so we've got all these different types of people...just putting something on – [a] showcase... and I was speaking to everyone else and they were saying similar stuff - seeing similar people in the same room...

Stage 1 Researcher

Another researcher was animated when she described a visit to the Modern British Studies conference in Birmingham. She noted that she had gained confidence through travelling and taking part in a presentation with the History Group:

LH And if you think back, what would you say is the thing to remember most so far?

R The conference...

LH Tell me about the conference.

R We were all nervous...that day, we were all like 'How is it going to be?' – it was like my first time to go out, do some like talking in front of people. So ...I was so nervous. But we did it, and I did it as well, and ... I was so proud that I did it... we had fun; it was a really nice day. You're not going to forget about that.

Stage 1 Researcher

The *Modern British Studies* Conference was attended by SPAN project researchers and facilitators as well as representatives from two other research projects. Informal feedback about the conference trip was very positive.

3.2 Researchers' views - part two

Seven researchers were interviewed for the second time as the project was coming towards its end in June and July 2020. At this stage, History Group sessions had moved online because of Covid-19 and the group was preparing for a final project event in July 2020. The project was significantly disrupted by Covid-19, for example, the unveiling of the main project output was postponed indefinitely and the main closing event had to be moved online. The circumstances around the group's ending were unusual and unexpected and this is reflected in some of the responses.

In this section, we consider researchers' reflections on their time on the project. We start with exploration of the project's achievements and then explore different areas of learning. The issue of power is then examined alongside the structures used in the work. The section ends with consideration of the benefits and demands of History Group membership from the point of view of the seven researchers.

3.2.1 The achievements of the SPAN History Group

In their reflections on project achievements, researchers discussed four key themes: first, a sense of celebration and pride in their work; second, their expectations of the project compared to the reality of working on the project; third, the impact of involvement in the history group on individuals; fourth, a sense of fear or discomfort involved in doing the work. It should be noted here that this evaluation report is focused on the process of co-production research and a full evaluation of project outputs will be available (Barke et al forthcoming).

Celebrating achievements

The researchers interviewed at stage two were proud of what the group had achieved. For example, one researcher describe the group's early presentation at a conference in Birmingham as 'uplifting' and 'really well placed'. This was an event that featured as significant in the reflections of others. One researcher remembered the group conference presentation towards the beginning of the project as a key moment in her understanding and engagement with the History Project:

LH *Could you tell me about your interest in SPAN over the year*
 R *I wasn't very interested from the very start....I thought, am I in the right group? I couldn't even understand what was going on most of the time...I think it was doing the interviews...then I think I was more interested to learn more. It was more that we did things – not just writing and listening, it was the experiences that I need to do at the beginning...Birmingham was a big thing to do for me.*

Stage 2 Researcher

Similarly, when one researcher talked about an introductory event for ex-SPAN staff and volunteers, she emphasised the event's value for History Group members as well potential contributors to the study:

I attended the event at the community centre and that went really well. ... the event was really good and I think, yeah, it was really nice for us... for the group to meet members of SPAN as well as the other way around.

Stage 2 Researcher

The experience of planning and attending project events provided points of focus for involvement that were meaningful and motivating to researchers. But researchers also valued the permanence of some of the History Group outputs.

A planned ceramic mural captured the imagination and praise of several researchers who looked forward to seeing the completed work. One researcher outlines that enthusiasm,

LH *So, of the things... of the things that you've managed to do, what stands out for you?*
R *Even though we haven't seen it yet, I think that artwork is going to look amazing and it's going to be there forever....And it's one of the things I voted for...*

Stage 2 researcher

This researcher highlights a key priority for the work that was identified at the start of the project: that the outputs should be a long-lasting record of the work of SPAN. Sadly, because of Covid-19, the work was not yet available to be viewed in Bristol and it was unclear when and where this would happen.

When discussing the commemorative SPAN mugs, one of the History Group members showed their intention to create a gift for people who had been involved in the project. She saw it as a:

.. nice take home thing ...for everybody involved.... everybody that interviewed us and ex-SPAN members as well as members of the group and sort of maybe some other people, would get a copy of these mugs.

Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher really hopes that project outputs can be used to connect to project participants and to show gratitude for their involvement.

Engagement with the project outputs was not only a way to celebrate the work of the group but also a way to stay connected with it. Despite her prolonged absence from regular group meetings, one researcher showed her pleasure at viewing the project film.

...I've seen... watched the film, it was lovely, I thought it was amazingly... amazing how much was sort of captured in a really tiny nugget of film

Stage 2 Researcher

The process of creating the outputs of the History Group was a crucial aspect of researchers' engagement throughout the project. The presentation at the conference, an early SPANers event, the design of the mugs, and the film, all provide solid evidence of the group's progress and ability. These achievements seemed to build confidence and trust in the group.

Expectations and realities

Most researchers felt that the SPAN History Project would, in time, achieve or even exceed its expectations. Taking the Covid-19 issues into account, researchers remarked:

... once we've done the event online [and]...the artwork's up ... I think it's done more than I thought to be honest. Once the leaflet's done and the cups... you know, that's unexpected.

Stage 2 Researcher

well, we've done well to get to the end considering... the weird circumstances we're currently in...

Stage 2 Researcher

One researcher who had worked on the design of the mugs, talked about how goals of the project had been adjusted because of lack of time.

we ran out of time... and we didn't have the... the sort of time to put into doing ... any sort of an exhibition. At one point, it was going to be that we were going to maybe tour it...

Stage 2 Researcher

Time constraints of the project were mentioned by several researchers in different contexts. There seemed to be worry that the project goals might not be achieved because there was not enough time. For one researcher, this anxiety was relieved once the project artist had been engaged. In her interview she pointed out that:

... when we found that artist, I felt more like, yeah, this might happen now, because I was always thinking, how are we going to fit all this in? I thought... that people might get worried that ... it wouldn't ... done, kind of thing.

Stage 2 Researcher

One researcher reflected on being pleasantly surprised that the group had been involved in producing a film:

...I didn't think we would end up making a film and I am so proud of everyone, the hard work they did, we end up doing something.

Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher's delight and satisfaction is related to the collective success of the group rather than any personal achievement.

In discussion of the project outputs and achievements, only one researcher mentioned academic publications as an important aspect of the work. With a background in academia, she prioritised publishing over other possible outputs. She explained:

For me, if I come out... with something, I mean writing-wise... a paper...I would be really pleased and I will... I will feel that, okay, ... this is something I have achieved,...coming from a research background... the research for us ends... when we do a publication... when I take part in a publication...I will be more happy.

LH ... so that's completion for you?

R Yes, yes.

Stage 2 Researcher

When asked about what the project had achieved, researchers turned to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work. The difficult circumstances of the groups' final stages were considered to have impacted. A researcher remarked, "well, we've done well to get to the end considering... the weird circumstances we're currently in..." (Stage 2 Researcher). Another researcher commented that, aside from the delays in the project brought about the Covid-19 pandemic, the project had been working towards the plans. Another agreed that more could have been done, had covid-19 not interrupted the work (Stage 2 Researchers).

Many researchers seemed impressed by what the History Group had managed to achieve towards the end of the project. There was however a feeling of being set back by the pandemic and that more could have been achieved without that disruption. Setting aside the impact of the pandemic, time constraints were mentioned by several researchers and there seemed to be some concern that the project might not or did not have enough time to achieve particular goals.

Individual and collective effort towards completing the outputs

In discussions about project outputs, most researchers spoke about the collective effort of the history group. In describing the process for the study interviews, one researcher reflected on her thoughts at the time:

...you are really interested in the topic and you want to know more about it ... I thought it was gonna be a lot harder than it was.... a lot harder...[it was] a really helpful experience for me... I was thinking to myself] I can do this...I am not gonna be afraid...it was my first time...Everyone was like helpful, helping you as well, not just like you dealing with it ...
Stage 2 Researcher

Here the researcher remembers having to address her fears and uncertainty about doing the interview. To succeed, she draws on her own determination as well as the group's encouragement. She shows that the interviews were the result of collective effort and encouragement from the group, as well as her own personal effort to overcome the challenge of doing something new and demanding.

Similarly, in her description of an early visit to the Birmingham conference, the following researcher highlighted the importance of attending the event as a group:

That was... a really nice experience...we were all a bit scared because it was a bit out of our comfort zone. And kind of going and presenting this project that...we were sort of just at the beginning with really... to academics was kind of quite daunting... it was really nice to go as a group and work on it together ...we... got a really nice response from people and ... it was good for us all ... stand up and... and say our... our bit... and ... us all ... feel ... proud of the project and what we were doing....

Stage 2 Researcher

For this researcher, the group experience and mutual support was an important aspect of coping with the fear of doing something new and challenging.

Participation in the filming was a proud moment for another researcher who noted the importance of support from the rest of the group. In her description of the film project, she reflected on her unexpected ease in the role of interviewer:

The interview for the film was another experience...the girls were pushing me...'why don't you do it?'. You're not ready to do something and [then you do it and] you feel comfortable...For me to be in a film...[that was] one of the biggest things for me

Stage 2 Researcher

The importance of being part of the supportive group was raised by a researcher who was disappointed that the film had not involved more researchers. In her reflections on the process for filming. She said:

...I just wish we had more time with the filming... because there was only two of us... it was good, but I just wish there were more of us on it.... it would be nice if we could add the others...Because on the day... [the other researchers]...were there and... they were going to do a chat, but we ran out of time...Even though the researchers weren't bothered, I was, because I thought even just two more people, that would have made sense...

Stage 2 Researcher

For this researcher, group participation in the outputs really mattered. It seems that something was taken away from her own achievement in being on the film by there not being more of the group represented. This researcher also highlights one of the difficulties of this kind of work. Decisions and plans may be collectively agreed but the practicalities and resources may lead to significant changes to agreed activity. The researcher above described an unwanted change to the agreed plan that was beyond her control.

However, another researcher valued the independence of doing an interview without the group. In the following account, she appears to have gained confidence, partly because she was able to competently complete the interview by herself:

... the first one I did, I was actually just going to sit in and observe...But I felt comfortable enough to actually ask questions...it went really well...I then felt confident to actually just do one... do one on my own...Like, it was good to just like actually just do something on my own, like, independent of the rest of the group...And it was... it was good, because I felt relaxed...And well prepped and comfortable to do it...

Stage 2 Researcher

In contrast to the previous quotations which focus on the group experience, the researcher above highlights awareness of her individual development as an interviewer.

The History Group offered opportunities for supported group and individual achievement. There seemed to be a strong connection between researchers' confidence to undertake independent actions and the wider support given to them by the History Group.

3.2.2 Learning on the project

When asked what they had learned from taking part in the project, researchers reflected on gaining knowledge about SPAN, developing research and communication skills and learning about different cultures. Being a member of the History Group was also an opportunity for personal development, building confidence and exploring parenting.

Learning about SPAN

Learning about SPAN was mentioned by researchers who showed engagement and interest in the work of the organisation:

...we had got to learn so many different things ...I had no idea when I started that there is something... something called SPAN...But it was great to learn about the things they had been doing for the single mothers...

Stage 2 Researcher

For one researcher, the interest in the topic was something that she might continue once the History Project ended:

... I have learnt a lot about self-help organisations and about self-help organisations for single parents. Now I have more interest [in] it. It could be that I return to [my country] and,...still learn about self-help organisations because I think it's a good way to help single mums...

Stage 2 Researcher

Researchers seemed to be inspired by learning about SPAN's work. One described SPAN as an 'amazing organisation' and another considering its existence as 'a big achievement'(Stage 2 Researcher).

In the evaluation interviews, several researchers highlighted the importance of meeting face to face with people from SPAN as a way to understand their work. For example, one researcher said:

I think it... speaking to real people gave you more of an insight of what it was like at SPAN, than it did just reading about it...Because you can never really feel emotion when you just read, can you?

Stage 2 Researcher

Similarly, the following researcher reflected on her experience of interviewing compared to reading about SPAN:

For... for me, the best part was interacting with them... when it comes from their mouth, you know, ... it's quite a different experience.

Stage 2 Researcher

In person contact and experiential learning was valued by researchers. The emotional connection with study participants inspired connection and commitment to the research work.

In the evaluation, one researcher expressed disappointed that there wasn't more learning about SPAN. For them, the History Group's activity was more focused on producing research outputs than she had anticipated:

...That's one thing that was kind of like missing – or maybe it wasn't missing, maybe my expectations... were wrong....For some reason ... I thought I'd be learning a lot about SPAN... as well as finding ways of how to showcase... their work...

Stage 2 Researcher

When a researcher reflected on the *kind of* history of SPAN that was being created by the project, she highlighted what she saw as an imbalance in the focus of the research. She had anticipated that the project would be more focused on the beneficiaries and users of Single Parent Action Network, rather than those who were paid staff and managers. She said that the work had drawn attention to:

... the top people in the organisation....So, I felt it was a little bit heavy on that side.. my expectation was more about the people on the ground and the parents... the service users...I thought it was going to be more about looking at the impact it had on the actual single mothers, it... it did look at that...But I just felt... my involvement in it and... what I can see ... was a lot of ... the workers at SPAN, especially the... the top...level and the managers as well.

For this researcher, the impact of SPAN is the most important factor in its history. The above criticism may be an indication of a lack of input from researchers in how potential interviewees were sampled for the study, or the difficulties in recruiting interviewees who had used SPAN services.

Overall, researchers appreciated the chance to find out more about SPAN, especially the opportunities to engage with people who were involved in the organisation. However, there was a criticisms about a lack of historical content of the project and a suggestion that the content was focused mainly on the leadership of the organisation.

Research skills – organising, archiving and interviewing

As planned by the facilitators, the History Group was an opportunity for Researchers to learn research skills. For one researcher, being in the group led to reflections on work that she had done in the past:

...it was good to watch how the group was run and how planning really does make a difference. That was good, because I've ran groups in the past that haven't gone well!... I think it proves planning makes a massive difference to how it runs.

Stage 2 Researcher

As well as knowledge about SPAN, another researcher felt that she had gained skills in organising:

LH *... has the group achieved what you thought you might achieve in the year?*
 R *Yes, [the group has] achieved a lot, I think I know a lot of knowledge about stuff - organisation and skills....*

Stage 2 Researcher

And another was able to explore archiving:

I did manage to get a session in the archive with Ellie, the archivist, and she just sort of talked me through, you know, her processes of what she's doing, so that was really good, because that was something that I really wanted to do and get out of the project.

Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher's account shows that she was able to pursue a personal learning goal while working on the project.

Learning about and doing the research interviews was a challenging but positive experience for most researchers. The first quotation (below) is from a researcher who completed only one interview and the second from a respondent who was able to practice her skills a little more:

...that was the most difficult thing.. I've not interviewed anybody like that before, so...if I'd done it a second and a third time, I would have got kind of a bit more competent at doing it... It went well and I think it was good to have, you know, and I had a lot of questions prepared and things. So, it was good to have done all the preparation...

Stage 2 Researcher

... I wasn't sure about it... was how it's going to be... I hadn't interviewed anyone...and it went well...it was a good experience that phase, I mean, you got to hear from them about

their experiences and how they formed SPAN... it was kind of a first time experience... I think I did a few interviews...Had a... had a different experience from each...

Stage 2 Researcher

researchers were able to gain knowledge and practice in a range of relevant research skills whilst volunteering on the project. The areas of learning included interviewing, archiving and organisation skills as well as understanding the process of a research project. researchers were able to build on existing skills for their development in the group.

Communication skills

For some researchers, where English was not their first language, the SPAN History Project was a space to practice communicating in a supportive environment:

R ... I think the biggest improvement for me is more confident than before. At the beginning ...I [was] a little shy and I don't know how to talk with other people and so now I think it's better than before...

LH ... you say you were a little shy. Is that because- because of your English or is it because you were shy anyway?

R I think because my language is limited

Stage 2 Researcher

R ...I think I can probably interact more confidently with people around now... it's really hard when you are from a different background and you don't sound English and...Your accent, the way you talk and the way you... I mean, it's really difficult...But then I think I have... I've probably learnt to deal with it now...In a better way.

Stage 2 Researcher

In another part of the interview, this researcher added more about the impact of the group on her communication. Her regular attendance and feeling of respect from other group members was an important driver for her increased confidence:

.... I've probably learnt how to interact better with the people... it wasn't that I wasn't confident before, but probably with time, you leave certain things behind, ... you don't bother about people looking at you like you're not English, or you...You don't... you don't talk the way they... do or...your accent and things like that...probably even if... I wasn't making sense, I wasn't made to feel that I wasn't right...I mean, my opinion was respected. That's what I wanted to say.

Stage 2 Researcher

The group experience also played its part in the learning of another researcher who reflected on her time interacting with the group as another aspect of learning:

... I've learnt about...working in a group... of total strangers I suppose. Well, we were...thrown together and I don't think I've had that experience before... there's been lots of things learnt from that I suppose, listening and...just having to accept differences in opinion.

Stage 2 Researcher

Disagreements and conflict in the group were also a source of learning for one researcher who described this part of her learning:

When you are a group you....making decisions... respect each other, everyone have different experience so you need give them a chance to speak...and respect, you have to listen to what they are saying

Stage 2 Researcher

In their reflections, researchers were able to point out ways that the group had helped them to develop communication skills. For people who were learning English, the group was a supportive learning space. The group was also a place to practice and observe group communication issues as they arose.

Learning about a different culture

The History Group was also a space where researchers could gain experience of different cultures. For one researcher, this was focused on understanding more about English culture. Through her interaction in the group, she was able to identify similarities and differences between her 'home' and UK culture:

...I think this is a good way to know the culture of Britain and it is another way to know how English people [work together]. I think it's really different. Sometimes it's the same but sometimes it's different. We have a different culture so it's a good way to learn British culture.

Stage 2 Researcher

A researcher who was born in the UK, talked about the diversity of the History Group membership as something that she valued. The experience of cultural diversity in the group was something that she might seek out in the future:

...it's made me think... maybe it's helped me think that I've really got to try and kickstart my life a bit more and... because I did enjoy it and I enjoyed... I know it sounds silly, because not everyone gets it, but the diversity of the group, we were all so different.

Stage 2 Researcher

researchers reflected on the relationships and conversations exposing differences of opinion and cultural background as a positive aspect of their engagement with the group.

Building confidence

Several researchers spoke about having increased their confidence through participation in the project. Here, a researcher who was a recent arrival to the UK, describes how a feeling of confidence and comfort was received from the group:

...this group makes me more confident and comfortable and warm, where I belong and not unconfident. A lot of people encourage me and I think [that] makes me comfortable and warm....Yeah, for example when [festival name] is coming and members ... they [said] we can celebrate ... so they ordered traditional food and we celebrated....and it made me feel warm.

Stage 2 Researcher

The whole group's celebration of a festival was valued by the researcher.

For a researcher who had had her first child, the history group was particularly important :

LH *... can you tell me of any ways that you feel you've benefitted from being in the SPAN history project?*

R *I think it helped build my confidence up quite a bit, especially from the beginning... when I first started the group, I was kind of just coming off maternity leave, just sort of going back into work and I think, you know, being a new mum was feeling a little bit kind of delicate... just finding my feet*

Stage 2 Researcher

Confidence was also developed by doing the work of the history group: leading a focus group, interviewing and making decisions in the group. The following extracts show the three researchers' attributing their role in the History Group to increased confidence:

R *...When they said, "Oh, we need somebody to... ask the questions..." "Oh, do you want to do it?", and I just felt like, yeah, maybe...yeah. Why not?...So, it was good experience, because usually I'd just be ...no, let someone else do it. But I [said]...I'll do it. And it...was really good.... It was interesting, because actually you got to sit there and listen to it, and I feel like I've... learnt loads just hearing them speaking.*

Stage 2 Researcher

R *... When I went for the first interview, I thought... I don't know even if I would be able to ask any questions or not. But ...when we went there, it was... really good.... I've probably learnt how to interact better with the people around...I would say, probably confidence wise.... it wasn't that I wasn't confident before...*

LH *What... what was it about being in the group that... that gave you that... more confidence about that do you think?*

R *... everybody has been so nice and they have made me feel comfortable all the time...I mean, my opinion was respected, that's what I wanted to say.*

Stage 2 Researcher

R *My personality is much stronger than before, now I can make my own decisions as well.*

LH *Has being on the project changed you in any way?*

R *It has been a movement for me ...from one point to another point...it was a big change for me*

Stage 2 Researcher

The role of the History Group in individuals developing confidence is emphasised in these accounts. Researchers described a clear connection between their confidence in their abilities and their time in the group. Although researchers identified specific areas in which they felt more aware of their skills, the interviews also give the impression that some of the researchers had undergone a more widespread transition towards seeing themselves as more self-assured.

Personal development

For one researcher, exposure to the group and its diversity had sparked a desire to be less cautious and more adventurous:

...now I need to make our world bigger, because I think when I... you tend to, like, lock yourself away a bit...I think if I open up my world more, the way I see it is that means I open [my child's] world up more...And I think that that's all from the group.

This researchers' reflection show that she is leaving the group with a feeling of optimism about the expanded possibilities that may be available to her and her child.

A researcher who was born outside the UK felt that she had adjusted her view of single parenting as a response to experiences in the group. In the interview she described a gaining understanding of the diversity of single parents:

... the place I came from...there wouldn't be single mothers like there are single mothers in the UK... we don't live separately...We don't leave them on their own...if somebody is a single mother, she is only a single mother if she is divorced and she's ... back with her parents... Back home, it's not normal, so... it's... it's really something different for me...But then with time, you learn, okay, this is not something which doesn't happen...This does happen and it's normal... and it's okay.

Stage 2 Researcher

The exploration of SPAN's history led to a researcher reconsidering her identity as a parent. She commented:

R ...it's helped personally...

LH Is that something you'd reflected on before?

R Not really... that's not like a label I would try and put on myself, not... I didn't even want to consider myself like that. And I never even stopped to feel or to look at myself in that way...And I think that might just be a cultural thing... That, you know, I've got my mum around the corner and my sisters and my brothers and my dad and stuff, so it's like not really on my own...So, yeah, it's just been a different kind of learning for me and different kind of experience...actually looking back in history and just looking back and seeing, like, politically and just how society and community was as a whole...

Stage 2 Researcher

The three researchers above describe the opportunities for informal learning brought about by the project.

This section shows researchers' description of the History Group as a unique setting for researchers to learn about SPAN and how to do historical research. The researchers also offered evidence of more informal learning about cultural difference and communication. researchers also spoke about increased self-confidence and changes to attitudes.

3.2.3 Developing ways of working

This aim of this section is to explore researchers' experience of the framework which guided the way the history group operated. There were a few aspects of the group that were set up towards the beginning of the project. The History Group met on Tuesday mornings at the Wellspring Centre, a crèche was available for younger children and it was facilitated by a community worker and two University researchers. Outside of these factors, the History Group developed a number of ways of working that were integral to the experience of researchers. This section starts with a brief exploration of researchers' reflections about the beginning of the project and goes on to explore issues of attendance and flexibility discussed in the interviews.

Delving into the unknown

For some researchers, the beginning of the project was difficult. The central aim of co-produced research is that it creates a space where University researchers and others come together to create something new. In this project, the broad topic of study was known but the research question, methods and research products were developed within an ongoing conversation in the group. The following quotations give a picture of unease and discomfort with the unknown that was felt by researchers in the first months of the project:

...it was hard in the beginning but then in the end we enjoyed it...because in the beginning, you don't know why you are coming and what is going to be the coming next...In the beginning we had to be patient.

Stage 2 Researcher

... I don't know whether that's what I expected at the beginning of the whole process... but then I guess I didn't really know the full extent of what... what I was getting myself into necessarily!

Stage 2 Researcher

These accounts outline the level of risk that might be involved for someone considering a commitment to a project like the History Group. All research projects contain uncertainties because they seek to find out something new. In co-production research, where research questions and methods are co-created as part of the process a high level of uncertainty is inevitable.

There may however be ways that non-academic researchers can be more comfortably guided through this process. One researcher gave an argument for changing the order of different aspects of the research when she outlined how the interactive elements of the research had inspired her interest in the topic:

... we watched the clip and it was really interesting... I wish we did it the other way around at the beginning... like, we did those kind of things with the people first...And got to know them, and then started researching...Because then we would have been researching... to me, something that was real and something... maybe I would have been more passionate about it, because I didn't really... know at the time, what I was doing.

Stage 2 Researcher

When looking back at the fourteen months of the History Group, one researcher argued that consideration of the outputs needed more time and the exploration of the research question could have been achieved with much less time (Stage 2 Researcher). Another researcher reflected on the slowness of the 'developing the research question' session:

I think it went on a bit long...It went on a really long time coming up with the research question and I can remember thinking, oh my god, you got loads to [get done in] this amount of time and we spent months on just the question. But obviously they knew the process...and they... they knew what was coming each week and they'd already planned it all...And they knew what they was doing. And as time went on, I could tell that and I just felt confident that it would be done regardless.

Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher reflects on the effects of not knowing at the beginning of the project. She seemed to feel a sense of pressure to get the work done, without knowing how it would be done. By developing trust in the university researchers, the community researcher gained confidence in the process of the work.

The above accounts show that there is risk involved in taking part in a research project where activities and outcomes are not known from the outset. Trust in the project hosts and facilitators as well as the use of interactive and engaging discovery methods seemed to aid the navigation of these uncertainties.

Changing levels of involvement in the group

Several researchers noted how life events such as changing job, illness or family events effected their attendance at the History Group. Different levels of involvement of the group were unavoidable over the 14 month project and despite some difficulties, it did appear that individual researchers, facilitators and the group as a whole were able to manage this.

The History Group had an inclusive atmosphere and ethos. Where people could not attend the group, effort was made to keep people informed and connected through various communications. The spirit of inclusion of group members who were not able to attend was expressed well by one researcher:

the opportunities is always there for... for them to input on another platform, whether it be email or WhatsApp...So, that's...been a good thing, so even if they haven't able to attend for whatever reason...they've still been able to... feed things into the group... Which is pretty good.

Stage 2 Researcher

A new job led to a researcher ending attendance at Tuesday morning group meetings. However, she was able to participate in the group in meetings with the community worker and conversations via WhatsApp and unplanned meetings with group members. She said she still felt like 'part of the group...' (Stage 2 Researcher). In contrast, another researcher described her role in the group as 'peripheral' after she began full-time work and could no longer attend regular meetings. Although she was still able to keep in touch with the group, she considered herself to be somewhere outside of the group.

... although I still am engaged in the sense that I get information about how things are going, you know, I get emails and I... am on the WhatsApp group, I wouldn't call myself an active member... I'm not there every Tuesday discussing, I've not been involved in the shaping up of the project and the... you know, all the good stuff that's clearly going on. So, my impression is as an outsider really, rather than as an insider.

Stage 2 Researcher

Turnout at History Group meetings was sometimes irregular with attendance at the Tuesday meetings ranging from two to eleven. Some researchers spoke about difficulties caused by variable attendance alongside the group's practice of gradual decision making that aimed at finding a consensus. When I asked about her role in the group in autumn, one researcher confided:

Well, it was... yeah, it was quite... it was quite difficult. We did a ...series of...workshops and some sessions... during the group on Tuesday's, where we...tried to figure out what ... we wanted from the outcomes. And kind of then managed to...whittle it down...It became a bit tricky if people weren't... were there one week, but not the other week...

Stage 2 Researcher

In the context of an unfolding co-produced research project with sometimes lengthy processes for decision-making, occasional unavoidable absences could have an effect on the group members' relationships with the wider group. One researcher reflected on her feelings after a decision was made in her absence:

R *...I did miss the two vital decision making meetings...*
LH *So, what was it like when you came back and the decisions had been made?*
R *Oh, it wasn't great... I just felt like I was left out... yeah, when it's... it was out of my [control]..., I wasn't very happy...*
LH *Yeah.*
R *But I... I felt like they did try to [include everyone] ... -they just had discussions on... on WhatsApp...But ... I just missed...All of the conversation over WhatsApp....*
LH *Coming back... was it easy to get back in and be on board with the outputs?*
R *I was on board, but... it did take me a while to get back into the fold. I just felt like all this stuff had been done and I wasn't part of it, so I just didn't feel like it was mine...But as it goes, once we kind of went through it, it was fine, I could agree with it...*

Stage 2 Researcher

Although this researcher acknowledged that effort had been made to include her, she was understandably disappointed when she returned to the group. She describe a sense of ownership of the project that was lost when she came back to the group. By talking to the group about these thoughts, she was able to find her way back to a more comfortable place in the group.

Discussing a similar time in the group's development, another researcher who had not attended regularly, spoke about her discomfort at being asked to vote in group decisions via WhatsApp:

... there were a couple of times when people were choosing the... the outputs,...And I definitely fed into some WhatsApp... ideas development... what could we do, and I... I had some ideas... some stuff... around community mosaic work, that kind of thing. ...I shared some of that...But... then there was a vote and I felt really uncomfortable being involved in the vote, and I said that... I haven't been to the sessions...I've put some ideas in, but I haven't been there and involved in the discussions...

Stage 2 Researcher

The level of involvement in the group may have been a dilemma for some group participants. In a statement from one researcher, it is clear that she would have liked to have taken a more substantial role in the project. Expressing some conflict between her desire to be involved and her ability to give time to the project, she said:

... I just felt like I wanted to be more involved, but time constraint-.....It's good that the project can still go ahead and decisions can be made, even if the deadlines are quite tight...without having to rely on the volunteers who are giving those two hours and are really pushed to give any more.

Stage 2 Researcher

In another part of her interview this researcher expressed a view that consistency of group members attending was a key aspect of the project running smoothly. She seemed disappointed that the higher and more consistent attendance at the start of the group was not maintained throughout:

...it's just always nice to have, like, consistent numbers every week, isn't it?... Yeah, a small amount ... a large amount of numbers, as long as it's... it's consistent...that was the most important thing.

Stage 2 Researcher

The History Group developed an inclusive way of operating which meant that researchers could keep in touch with the project and remain members of the group whether or not they were able to attend the regular meetings. It is clear that researchers appreciated this flexibility. However, the sometimes irregular attendance was occasionally problematic for the process of co-production and attempts to build on the previous work of the group.

Time

In the second interviews, time was sometimes a reason given for things not going to plan on the project, and researchers sometimes had difficulty getting to the community centre on time for History Group meetings.

When asked about barriers to participation, one researcher said that the timing of the group and her distance from the venue was a significant issue:

LH ... And has there been anything that's made it difficult to you... for you to participate in this project?

R ... even though I was... left straight from drop off at school, I still was late sometimes... with traffic. And also, obviously worrying about time with getting back for school runs and that, because of being a single parent...A bit hard.

Stage 2 researcher

Another researcher, found balancing her time in the group with other commitments difficult:

I had another part-time job and my childcare only covered my part-time job. So... it was always a childcare stretch...

Stage 2 Researcher

After some months, this researcher stopped attending the group after getting a new job but she stayed in touch with the group throughout the project. Here description of the 'stretch' of childcare will be familiar to many parents, especially single parents. Despite the considerable effort made to create a project that was accessible to parents, some of the attenders struggled to attend.

One researcher was disappointed to miss out on learning about film editing because not all researchers were able to attend at the times and days offered. The practicalities of organising childcare and the availability of contractors and an editing suite meant that the space could not be found for researchers to explore film editing.

Researchers seemed appreciative of the time they spent on the project but for some, getting to meetings was sometimes difficult because they were fitting it in with school runs, childcare and sometimes work. For some of the researchers, the History Group meetings did not easily fit into their week.

3.2.4 Roles in History Group

It interesting to note the History Group researchers' reflections on the different roles offered to paid and volunteer researchers on the project, hinted at in the quote used above where one researcher expressed their wish to be more involved, but being pleased to see that 'the project can still go ahead and decisions can be made... without having to rely on the volunteers who are giving those two hours' (Stage 2 Researcher) Another researcher was more explicit in describing two distinct parts of the project: one that included the History Group researchers and another area of 'background stuff' that did not involve History Group members:

R ... some parts of the project, it feels like it could be run without us and other parts of the project [feels] like they need us, like, the more of us the better....

LH So, when you say some... parts could be run without you, what sort of thing do you mean?

R It's probably just the background stuff. And to be honest, like, it's not like they said that we can't be involved, it's just that time was short and I guess a lot of people haven't got time outside of the two hours on a Tuesday...

Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher also questioned the fact that the facilitator roles were fixed and there was no expectation that community researchers would take the lead in the group:

I think the group was so much organised from outside that people just accepted that those were the organisers, and that was not part of what was expected... those expectations were not ever made.

Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher's comments about acceptance of the way things were, perhaps suggests that further discussion about roles in the group may have been helpful.

Another researcher spoke about this issue in terms of ownership of the project. To this researcher, the project was owned by the university and not the community researchers:

...my sense of it, which was that there is a... that these are the people who own the project. During the week, outside of a Tuesday, they will work on stuff, go through notes and then provide something to the group to work from on Tuesdays...And that... that was the accepted format, which meant they owned the project.

Stage 2 Researcher

In further analysis of the different roles of History Group researchers and paid university researchers. This researcher said that she had hoped for more open discussion and negotiation about the roles within the project that might allow for researchers to have more control:

[University researchers could have said] "we are... you know, what we can offer here... we've got this co-production setup, what we can offer is the [investment]...we are actually paid to put some time into this, this is how much time we have. What parts of this should we spend our time on?... we are a resource to the group effectively... We can dedicate this time that we have been paid, and we also have some responsibilities to the funders...that we have to fulfil as part of our contract ... with the university and with... with the funding body....." That was not explicit and I think that would have been really good...It would have helped everyone and it would have been, like, genuinely empowering, like, everyone would have understood a bit more about university funding and structures and expectations...

This researcher usefully imagines a different approach to the work that might have been taken, highlighting the broadness of the term co-production and the different ways that it can be understood.

For at least one researcher, it was important to give time to discussion of the issue of power held by different people in the group. She brought her previous experience of shared decision making to her role as a History Group researcher:

... my other experience in life has been doing stuff... in non-hierarchical shared decision-making forums, particularly in kind of Grassroots communities... I'm not saying those worked beautifully, they're really challenging... but I've had a lot of experience of that... I was kind of expecting more of an engagement with those kinds of power dynamics at the outset.... And it seemed like there was a great reluctance to do too much of that stuff... to me that's really integral to everyone feeling it's fair and that they understand what's going on. And I felt like there wasn't enough laying of that groundwork ...

Stage 2 Researcher

At an early stage in the project, a researcher questioned the issue that History Group members were not involved in facilitating the group. As a result of a conversation outside of the group, a few researchers were invited to facilitate a History Group meeting:

... we kind of went to do this session, but it was... there was such opposition to it [from other researchers] because it hadn't been presented as an opportunity for everyone to do and they didn't understand why we'd been picked out to run it....

Stage 2 Researcher

Looking back on the session, the researcher noted that the whole group had not been involved in the decision about who would facilitate. This early experience seemed to affect the researcher's participation in the group afterwards.

Considering the positions of History Group facilitators and researchers on the project, two researchers questioned the boundaries of roles on the project and suggested other ways that the project may have been organised. The reflections above show that the researchers came to the group with a willingness challenge the co-production process and to propose alternative ways of working.

3.2.5 Describing the History Group

In the evaluation interviews, researchers were asked how they would explain the project to other people they know. This was a way of understanding the History Group from their point of view. Researchers sometimes spoke about the History Group's activity in terms of the historical research. For example, one researcher said:

... we've been finding out... SPAN... a.. Grassroots Bristol based group that came ... together in the late 80's, 90's. And we've been looking... how that organisation grew, and speaking to some of the people that were involved and recording their stories... we're a group of... of mums who have been brought together to look at that... look at their history... and ... find ... creative and alternative ways to... share that... with the wider public.

Stage 2 Researcher

Other researchers talked about the group in broader terms. The following respondent, defines the History Group as a women's group focused on empowerment:

- LH *What would you say that you were doing on Tuesday mornings? How do you describe it to somebody else?*
- R *Talking about women...And how to make them... make them strong...And how to make them face... face challenges and how to make them stand for their rights... Probably women talking about women!*
- Stage 2 Researcher*

In another description the researcher highlighted the exchange of ideas in the group as well as the opportunities for social contact:

- And I always say this is a great organisation if you go there you can know a lot of different people and have different ideas....*
- Stage 2 Researcher*

Even though they were engaged on the same co-production project, researchers defined their experience in different ways by emphasising different activities and experience within the group, mirroring their different expectations of the project in the first stage interviews. For some researchers, engagement in the group was a very personal activity that was mainly focused on the relationships and discussions within the group. For others, there was more emphasis on the history-making role of the group. These responses suggest that the History Group was successful in providing opportunities for supported social engagement alongside the more focused work of the historical study.

3.2.6 Making decisions

A key challenge for any co-production project is how it includes collaborators in decision-making. The interviews for this part of the study, outlined the researchers' pleasure and enjoyment of reaching decisions on the project, alongside the difficulties and disagreements that arose.

When asked about making decisions on the project, one researcher outlined their appreciation of the feeling of respect gained from being asked to contribute to decision making, as well as gratitude for participation in decision making being a choice for researchers. Looking back on the work of the researchers, she said:

- R *...we were making decisions on most of the things...most of the details*
- LH *What was that like?*
- R *It was interesting, they were respecting us...wanted to know our opinion but no pressure to take part if you didn't want to, if you are not interested you can say I am not interested and that is it...*
- Stage 2 Researcher*

Several researchers expressed the pleasure felt when decisions were easily made and there was broad agreement. For example, while describing the decision to choose the artist for the History Group commission:

- ... On the day when we had the interviews with the three [artists], usually you would expect... not arguments, but disagreements and it would have went on forever to choose*

who was right, but every single person in the room chose Carrie, so that was so nice, it was like done and dusted!...It was like she was the best person for the job and there was no swaying anyone from [that]

Stage 2 Researcher

Discussing the same event from her point of view, a researcher who sometimes had difficulty understanding English, described a straightforward process and a clear outcome:

LH Is there anything out of that time that you enjoyed a lot more than anything...

R ...I think when we had interviews with different artists we chose the best artist I think... even though my English is not very good I got to know her idea and what she wanted to do and what she can give us I think everything was clear I think it was a good experience for me.

Stage 2 Researcher

Discussing her involvement in the group, another researcher valued an inclusive process for shortlisting which allowed her to include at least her second preference in the shortlist:

... there was a time when we were...going through how each individual was rating a particular applicant... it came to a point where... everyone had their first or second preference...shortlisted...But...I didn't...And instead of just saying, "well, tough... tough luck", they thought...how can we change it so we've got everybody's first or at least second choice? It's the best thing to do...And it was still fair...I just felt like that was really good, because I feel like they didn't really have to do that...

Stage 2 Researcher

Some of the decisions in the history group were much more complicated than others. Defining a list of possible research outputs and then prioritising these took several weeks. Discussing this phase of the group, one researcher commented specifically on a challenge noted above – that not all researchers were able to make all meetings:

...We did a ... series of... workshops... during the group on Tuesdays, where we ... tried to figure out what...we wanted from the outcomes. And ... then managed to ...whittle it down... It became a bit difficult when... one of us has missed a session....So, that was just difficult I think for...everybody in the group to ... navigate... I'd say one of the most challenging bits of... of the whole project ...

Stage 2 Researcher

Researchers noted awareness of different kinds of decision-making processes in the group. These included consensus approaches as well as voting. The following researcher outlined the value in these clear processes in preventing the project from becoming unfocused:

... there's been sort of processes in place that, ...have been ... used... to help us ... reach a kind of mutual decision...I think if we hadn't had some of those...more formal processes in place, we might have just got a bit lost. ...And although that sometimes those things didn't necessarily bring the results that people wanted I suppose..... you know, and we've been consulted at... every... every little thing... I feel anyway

Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher reflects back on the methods used in the work and, weighing this up, she feels reasonably pleased with the input that researchers have had.

Another researcher spoke about occasional need for anonymity for researchers making choices in the group:

LH *And can I ask what you thought about the process that you used?*

R *Yeah, I thought it was quite good, but sometimes I think you need to do things anonymously for people who are insecure or might follow what other people are doing...*

Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher appears to have been concerned that researchers might make choices that were based on expectations of others in the group rather than their own desires and choices. (Note, anonymous voting was used in the second observed history group (Section 2.2))

While most of the interviews reveal that researchers felt engaged in decision making, a small number pointed to a sense that some decisions took too long to make - when looking back at the fourteen months of the History Group, one researcher felt that consideration of the outputs should have been given more time and that the exploration of the research question might have taken less time. (Stage 2 Researcher) – or that some decisions appeared to be off the table. Looking back on the project and reflecting on the kinds of decisions that were made in the group, a researcher asserted that there were limitations on the types of decisions that were made in the group:

... there was lots of content stuff which has been shared, it's like the structural stuff has not been shared and the....

Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher wanted the structures for the project to be more open to negotiation. She did however acknowledge that much more time would have been taken up in these kinds of discussions and that researchers might struggle to offer more time to the group.

One researcher who was critical of a lack of power sharing reflected on the limited time available in the group as practical barrier to more focused engagement from researchers:

... I think given the funding requirements and the need to get to a destination within a very tight deadline really, given that nobody knows each other and they're only meeting once a week for two hours really ... It's really tough... in... the projects I've been involved in where there's been much more...real non-hierarchical decision- making and... shared responsibility ... the involvement has been much more intensive than that...It's been several meetings a week, lots of discussions around... outside of those, you know, it...

Stage 2 Researcher

One of the interesting aspects of this quotation is that it makes a clear distinction between the 'us' which is history group researchers and the 'them' as facilitators of the group.

In considering their experiences of the decision-making on the project, researchers expressed gratitude and praised the methods of engagement. Some researchers appreciated the deliberately inclusive measures used to gain agreement and input from researchers. However, there was also some critique which asked for the structures used by the group to be brought into debate with History Group members. What is striking in the case of this critique was recognition of the time that this would involve – something that researchers acknowledged was limited. There was understanding of the time that a more thorough-going co-produced method that delved into structures and not only content and outputs would involve.

3.2.7 The benefits and demands of being in the History Group

Friendship, belonging, and community

Several researchers discussed how being in the History Group had led to them forming valued friendships with group members. One researcher emphasised this point by saying:

... I met really...lovely people all along and it has been really nice. I mean, even if when we planned to move [away]...I will still be in touch with most of them... it's been a good experience.

Stage 2 Researcher

And another emphatically said: "... relationships that I've made with people on the group have been...positive..."

Stage 2 Researcher

One researcher felt that relationships had become closer when the group had to move online as a result of Covid 19. She looked back on her time in the group and remarked:

...I've loved being part of the group, I think it's been amazing... I don't know, I feel like with this lockdown... you feel like you're closer to people, even though you're not seeing them....Because people are opening up more about their own lives...Chatting about their own kids and things. So, I think we've all become closer because of that ...I feel more on the same level...

Stage 2 Researcher

Often researchers described a feeling about being in the group that appeared to go beyond individual friendships towards a feeling of belonging. Expressing her gratitude at the end of the interview, one researcher said:

I want to say thank you...This is a great group. A long time ago I was involved as a volunteer in a nursery and in my son's primary school but SPAN (History Group) makes me...comfortable, I think this is a great self-help organisation ... It's a good journey in my life. I am so appreciative...

Stage 2 Researcher

Researchers described feeling more of a sense of belonging to their local area as a result of their work with the group. The quotations below show us how membership of the group had a kind of snowball effect where contacts in the group led to a wider feeling of connection:

...[I am] feeling a sense of greater connection with different parts of my local community... I actually got to know some people in a deeper way. And actually, they connect with some other people, that... my neighbour knows... it's opened up my community in my local area, in ways that I find really enriching.

Stage 2 Researcher

R *...it's a nice sense of community.*

LH *Could you say a little bit more about what that... that is for you?*

R *...we ... communicate on regularly and... it's... about the project but also sharing ... other things... And, you know, recently during this...pandemic, I think that's been a really nice way*

to ... keep people ... in touch with each other. And we've also been sharing... other projects that we might be working on or we come cross, or things that we think that might interest people...now that we know a little bit more about each other. Also... just in our... roles and places in the community, we've...come across each other in different ... aspects of our life, and that's been really nice... To ... build on those connections outside the group as well.

In the example above, friendships and contacts in the group appear to have become a network of support for some of the researchers.

Many researchers talked about the History Group being a place where they had made valued friendships. For at least some of the researcher, the History Group had been a gateway to wider networks of support and interest in the local area. As the project went on, History Group members became connected in different ways, some unrelated to their first meeting in the group.

Careers and employment

History Group members were able to draw on support from the group facilitators in the form of references for their time on the project or practical support with job applications and letting researchers know about available job opportunities (*Stage 2 Researcher*). As well as practical support for employment options, another spoke of her membership of the History Group resulting in a shift in expectations of a career:

... it's made me kind of like look at different opportunities at the University of Bristol as well, and I would have never, ever kind of even thought about them as an employer...And now I think, oh actually, I'm going to see what... opportunities there are... paid opportunities.
Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher shows how engagement with the history group has led to her reflection on wider possibilities for her career, although the impact of membership of the history group on individual's careers was hard to measure in interviews undertaken before the project had finished.

Inspiration, empowerment, making a contribution

researchers seemed inspired by finding out about the work of SPAN. One researcher was pleased to hear about the organisation's approach to inequalities and felt that it was ahead of its time:

I think SPAN was amazing, because I know it was... oh god, this is going to sound really bad, but it started in the 80's...being gay and racism, it was probably worse then. So, the fact that they covered all those bases...I just thought was amazing.
Stage 2 Researcher

For another researcher, connections made with people who were active in SPAN, was particularly valuable:

... [It's] really inspiring to have contact with some of the founders with that project and really interesting to hear some of their stories... I definitely feel like I've benefited from all of those things...
Stage 2 Researcher

One researcher's reflections on her time in the group led to her identifying a shift in her view of her ability to take action on issues that matter to her. The study of SPAN had led her to think about actions that she might take towards change:

... just seeing just normal people, mums that grew up in the same area I grew up or in Bristol, raised in Easton. Doing it...Like, actually just seeing that they were doing it and seeing the changes that they actually made...Like, coming together. It made me feel like, actually, it is something that I could do, it doesn't have to be just for someone else... if you feel strongly about something...So... yeah, so I think being part of the history group really gave me that confidence...

Stage 2 Researcher

Engagement in the History Group was a source of pleasure, inspiration and empowerment for some researchers. Most of the researchers interviewed seemed deeply effected by their time in the group.

Time to myself

One researcher looked back on her time on the project and appreciated the opportunity to have time to pursue her own interests. The chance to be in the History Group came when she was adjusting to being a mother:

... having that time to myself every Tuesday morning, to do something that I've ...wanted and chosen to do was really important... and I think... really helped me...Looking back on it, ...you don't necessarily notice these things at the time...But, yeah, looking back on it, I think it... it definitely helped build up my confidence again.

Stage 2 Researcher

This issue of having time to oneself was reflected on by several researchers in the first interviews.

New experiences

One theme that emerged in some of the interviews were the opportunities that participation offered to try out something new. One researcher talked at length about the researchers' visit to a local gallery:

LH *I'd love to hear your ... take on that trip you did to Spike Island, to the gallery and just ask how that was for you?*

R *I really enjoyed it actually. Only because I... that's not somewhere where I would go....And that's now somewhere where I would [go].... it just felt good to see something....Like, to actually see something, I...see an exhibition....And then actually, we got to speak to the artist as well, which was really weird, because we didn't think we were going to meet her... And she had time to, like, talk and engage with us and it was really good.*

Stage 2 Researcher

In this quotation, the enthusiasm for the visit is based on the newness of the experience. The visit supported the work of the history group by offering an example of an exhibition and it also raised the possibility of a similar visit in the future.

Hospitality

For several researchers mealtimes were an important part of the experience of the history group. One researcher praised the food highly for its diversity and novelty and also the organisers' commitment to catering for different diets:

... you don't expect to go to a course where they're going to feed you and that, and good food as well....I've never experienced that, and vegan and stuff, it was... And I think the diversity as well, because we had like Somalian food and... oh god, ...so it was all foods I probably wouldn't have had...

Stage 2 Researcher

The food provided in the History Group demonstrated a level of care and value of researchers.

Childcare

While looking back on their time in the History Group, some researchers talked about difficulties accessing childcare while in the group. For example, one researcher was concerned that her child would not settle in the crèche:

LH Have you... has [your child] had childcare... from the SPAN project at all?
R No... I didn't take him to any of it, because I didn't know how well he'd cope...I could have took him, but I thought if he didn't cope, then that would have meant I'd have to leave, so I...I have to think about things like that too.

Stage 2 Researcher

The importance of childcare for participation is demonstrated in the following example of a researcher who brought her baby to the crèche:

LH ... did it feel comfortable using the crèche straight away? What was that like sort of knowing that there would be a crèche and...?
R being new to all this, like, mothering thing, I ... almost had...too higher expectations of him and me... I knew the people there because... we had been going to the playgroup there since he was little. So...that really helped to know that... he knew the faces thereAnd they're just really supportive and... halfway through when everyone would have their tea break, I'd nip down and see him ... they were always really good... I said, if he's unhappy at all, just come and get me, I don't want him to be unhappy. So... it was difficult at first,... but they were great and it was really... yeah, really great to have that there, to be able to take part...But yeah, I look back now and think, god, he was really little!...

Stage 2 Researcher

The researcher is thankful for space in a crèche where she knows the staff. However, her account shows some of the stress involved in being a new mother in the History Group. The flexibility and support of History Group facilitators and crèche staff was essential to participation.

The importance of childcare on the project has been discussed in part one of this section. At stage two of the research, these researchers outline some of the difficulties experienced by researchers, despite the clear offer of a crèche. These researchers highlight the need for flexibility in support for childcare.

Conflict and difficulty in the group

Conflict or difficulties in communication and relationships were mentioned by all of the researchers taking part in the stage two interviews. The inevitable conflict which arose in the group was often difficult to manage for group members. One member of the group vividly described her feelings about a period of heightened conflict in the group:

... that was just difficult ... for... everybody in the group to ... navigate... The conversations that we had ... got a bit heated sometimes ...and, you know, wanting everybody to feel like they had input, but at the same time.. .we were having to move the project on... I'd say one of the most challenging bits of... of the whole project I think, for me...

Coming back to this issue, later in her interview she said:

... I came away thinking, you know, I didn't really want to be part of this... to feel angry or upset ... But that kind of... stays there and it's part of the process, then it's okay... you carry on.

Stage 2 Researcher

Spaces for co-production aim for all to feel empowered, respected and valued. On occasion, individual researchers' feelings were far from these goals:

...There was one session when I felt really badly treated actually... like, I had no way of feeling comfortable offering my voice anymore in the group... this was supposed to be like a fun, nice project, I didn't expect to be having to confront that kind of feeling

Stage 2 Researcher

Looking at her time in the History Group overall, this researcher said:

... I've found it really personally challenging

Stage 2 Researcher

For some researchers, the periods of conflict understandably led to feelings of not wanting to be in the group:

LH *....And is there anything... over the year that's made it difficult for you to participate in the group?*

R *At times there have been confrontations... there have been moments when I was like, okay, this shouldn't have happened and... when you feel like, okay, I shouldn't have been here, because I don't want to... I want everything to be calm and peaceful...*

Stage 2 Researcher

researchers were understandably effected by conflict and difficulties in relationships in the group which led some to consider whether they should continue attending. The researchers took the opportunity of the closing interview to reflect on these difficult experiences in the group and as they looked back over time, it seemed that for most researchers these periods of conflict were a manageable part of the longer process of collaboration.

In this next quotation about discord in the group, a researcher looks back on her behaviour in a situation where she was having difficulties with another group member. It shows the 'good' outcome from a situation of conflict:

R *... I think there's been a few arguments in the class...*

LH *... what it's like being in the group with things like that?*

R *At the beginning... it was a nightmare, I said... I can't work with her, I can't cope with that...I spoke to [her]...And told her how I felt... we agreed that she maybe needed to bring it down*

a notch and I needed to bring up a notch! ...So we could meet somewhere in the middle...So, I did speak to her about it and I felt better about that after.... So, that helped me cope with it a bit more I think, because I tried to look at it on the flipside...

Stage 2 Researcher

In contrast to the examples above, this researcher seems to describe a more complete resolution to the conflict.

It can also be noted that conflict was not the only reason why researchers might feel distress or discomfort in the group. One researcher spoke about difficulties balancing her work as an academic researcher and a volunteer researcher on the history project:

.... I was an academic, but totally not involved as an academic in the project. But it meant there was like this natural affinity with certain kinds of ways of doing things, which really easily set me up for agreeing with the people who were running the project, ... I just had this uncomfortable feeling...

Stage 2 Researcher

This researcher seemed to have difficulty holding her role as an academic researcher alongside her membership of the history group.

Being in the group was not always enjoyable and a few researchers spoke about occasions when they wondered if they should be in the group. Their accounts show how difficult conflict in a group can be and the need for researchers to have space to discuss and resolve conflict as well as access support at these difficult times.

3.3 The impact of the coronavirus pandemic

A mixture of disruption and refocussing as a result of Covid comes across in the interviews with History Group members and also characterises the interviews with Contributors (Section 4.3). Like others, researchers found the pandemic challenging, and especially the move to home schooling and/or shielding.

'I've just found it a lot harder to be, one, stuck at home, and two, to learn to be a school teacher basically ... and I've found that quite overwhelming and challenging,' one History Group member explained. The challenges to continued engagement with the project while balancing new responsibilities were shared by other researchers who also found home schooling 'really, really, really hard.'

Stage 2 Researcher

For some, continued engagement with the project via weekly Zoom meetings was too challenging. For others, however, while meeting online via Zoom was new, this became the one fixed point amidst the chaos of the changed situation and they valued the continuity it provided. As one explained, 'I've been kind of working my week by that meeting ... that's the only thing that's constant.' As they continued, 'it was just great to be able to have some focus and some distraction and still actively ... get on with stuff like we were doing pre-Covid.' Another expressed both 'surprise', but also satisfaction, that 'they kept it going' despite, and amidst, the challenges of Covid (Stage 2 researcher).

Researchers talked of the way that the group assumed a new function as a critical site of support amidst the challenges presented by Covid. One welcomed this as intentional on the part of the facilitators, explaining that initially there was no pressure 'to keep this project going,' but rather a chance 'to meet up and just check in.' However, as they explained, 'after a few weeks it was like, all right, let's start with business ... in a still quite informal way, but a very productive way.' The opportunity to connect was valued by group members. One described how, 'when we talk on Zoom we can encourage each other' and how the WhatsApp group had become a space not only to 'communicate ... regularly ... about the project but also sharing ... other things' and 'sharing life in general.' The value of other members of the group came across in interviews, with the group assuming a different and greater value than before for some. One explained how being part of the group meant that she felt 'warm and more comfortable than before' and helped her to know that she was 'not alone.' For those unable, or uncomfortable, to communicate over zoom, the WhatsApp group enabled them to feel engaged with the project and kept 'up to date' (Stage 2 Researcher). One researcher who was not able to attend zoom meetings, was still able to record content for the final group presentation via other channels.

Group members were proud of what the group had achieved, especially given the disruption of Covid. One explained how she felt that 'we've ... done well to get to the end considering ... the weird circumstance we're currently in' and was proud that the group had 'something' to 'put ... out there' in the midst of the lockdown by way of tangible outputs from the research. However, there were some reflections that roles within the wider group had shifted. In particular, there was a sense that given the limits to engagement posed by the pandemic, that some of the work had been effectively handed over to the paid staff on the project, rather than being shared more equally. For one, it seemed that the importance of getting the story of SPAN out there overrode a desire to stick to the original plan to coproduce all elements of the project. 'I haven't put a lot of effort in, to be honest, so the fact the others ... the three Js [paid staff on the project], I'm glad they're doing it.' But while they noted – and were thankful for – what can be seen as a shift of power within the project, they also signalled that the changed circumstances of meeting – online from home, rather than in the neutral space of the Wellspring Settlement – meant that all were 'opening up more about their own lives' and also – virtually – their own homes. The result was not simply that 'we know each other more than we did,' but it also left this respondent feeling 'more on the same level' with others, most significantly the three paid staff who 'had to do it from their own home' with the merging of professional and private lives that the lockdown created (Stage 2 Researcher).

4 The views of paid staff and consultants

Summary: The views of paid staff and consultants - part one

Understanding co-production

- At the start of the study, contributors showed different understandings of what co-production was and what it would look like for the SPAN History Project. This included differences about who would be co-producing the work. Despite disagreement, contributors seemed motivated to negotiate ways forward and develop a shared understanding of the project.

Quality in the SPAN History Project

- Contributors showed concern for the quality of the work that would be produced by the project. The successful involvement of a group of History Group members was considered essential to the work but for ex-SPAN staff, the backgrounds of History Group members and their ability to relate to the issues within SPAN's work were also important.
- University staff were concerned that the work of the project should be well-received in academic settings such as journals and also generate engagement and interest from wider public audiences.

Roles and relationships of stakeholders

- SPANers were valued as important contributors to the project by members of the project team. However, the role of the SPANers was a source of disagreement in the early stages of the project with contributors having different understandings of what their role would be.
- Some contributors were concerned that SPANers might be side-lined, or become merely 'objects' of historical study in the research process.
- Contributors highlighted the many resources and skills that were brought to the work by representatives from the University of Bristol.
- Preconceptions about the university were considered to a barrier to engagement with members of the public and community organisations. A potential disappointment for contributors engaging with universities was that they might 'hold back' from using their experience to guide the research project.
- The contribution of the settlement was appreciated by all contributors who saw that it offered the space for the History Group meetings as well as the time of centre staff. The centre was considered a good place to develop relationships between university and community researchers. It was also valued because of its experience and reputation in community development work.
- The availability of the crèche as well as multiple other projects including parenting classes and debt advice services were other advantages of holding the History Group at the settlement.
- Several contributors held multiple roles in the group. In the opening months of the project, some contributors found it difficult to define their own role on the project. Project members had worked closely together on previous research projects so that some of the university and community staff knew each other well. The project involved collaboration between individuals who had knowledge of each other's motivations and ways of working.
- The evaluation interviews give a picture of a group of experienced contributors willing to engage with the complexities and potential difficulties of co-production research. At the start of the project,

differences were exposed and contributors began to negotiate how the research would be done and who would be involved.

Recruiting community researchers for the History Group

- At the start of the project, collaborators held detailed discussions about what kinds of people might be invited to join the History Group. These discussions were an important phase of the project where contributors discovered each other's expectations and hopes for the work. Although essential, these discussions may have delayed the practical work of gaining interest and commitment from potential History Group members.
- At the start of the study, there was concern that the History Group would include a diverse group of people to reflect the local area around the settlement and also the work of SPAN.

Process and content

- There was evidence and concern that the project contributors were more focused on the processes and methods used on the project, rather than the content of SPAN's history.

Summary: The views of paid staff and consultants - part two

Power and participation

- Contributors from the university and the settlement noted the pressure of time in the later stages of the project. Several contributors expressed a view that they would have preferred more time for archival analysis and historical investigation on the project.
- A few contributors reflected on the university ethics requirements and questioned its timing and length within the History Project. Respondents considered approaches to improving the way that ethical considerations and processes might be incorporated into future projects.
- In the second and third terms, researchers were able to have their say in many of the decisions made about the project. They were also involved in defining what the process for decision-making would be.
- The project Steering Group included all project contributors with an invitation to History Group members to attend the meetings. The group had met six times as a forum for stakeholders to oversee and support the project to achieve its aims.
- Despite the considerable effort that went towards organising inclusive participation in the work, barriers to participation were still evident. Taking part in research interviews was identified as something that was difficult for researchers to balance alongside their parenting and other responsibilities.

Contributor roles

- The success of recruiting History Group members and their continued commitment to the project were considered major project successes. The role of the community worker responsible for recruitment and support of researchers was considered crucial to the success of the project .
- To support recruitment to the History Group, project collaborators had several discussions about who the History Group was seeking to attract.

- The roles of project team members were defined and noted in a project meeting at the start of the project. However, project contributors also devised ways of working as the project evolved and changed its focus and the roles of project contributors developed over time.
- Contributors sought ways to respectfully include SPANers as co-producers of the historical research. There was some unease that SPANers might become 'objects' of research processes rather than being engaged and respected as research partners in the work. For contributors who were also SPANers, the need to sometimes switch roles could be demanding.

Trust

- The length of the project allowed relationships of trust to be built over time. The beginning of 2020 started well with several clearly defined outputs to work on and a group that appeared to be working well together. The group developed supportive ways of working which came to the forefront when Covid-19 and government restrictions severely impacted on the lives of group members.
- In the second term, there was conflict and tension in the History Group which was stressful for researchers and contributors. In managing decision-making in the group, facilitators were also required to address the feelings of disappointment, anger and anxiety (See Facer and Enright 2016).
- A contributor suggested that more time might have been needed at the start of the project for Steering Group members to develop more trust in their working relationships.

Communication

- There was a need for clear communication amongst contributors. This was considered particularly important where agreed activity was adjusted. A contributor also highlighted the need for discussion of the practical aspects of communication including expectations about the regularity of meetings and preferred methods of communication.

Emotions

- Most reflected on their emotions during the project and noted some anxiety during the work. There were moments of intense emotion in the group which had an impact on contributors.
- The History Project involved several overlapping groups of stakeholders who had a high level of personal investment in the work.
- Contributors recommended an approach to conflict that explores differences and allows time for facilitators to observe the emotions and dynamics in the group.

Covid 19

- The pandemic saw not only a shift in focus for the project, but also a redefining of the nature of the co-production. It made History Group participation in certain aspects of the project more difficult and contributors expressed some unease about this.
- While the pandemic impacted on project plans, the effect was mitigated by the strong relationships that had been built up between participants over the course of the year, the stage of the project (that was shifting from research to outputs) and by the clear leadership offered by the PI and project team.

4.0 The views of paid staff and consultants

This section of the report will explore the interviews with seven paid contributors to the SPAN History Project. Part one examines key themes identified in the first interviews with paid staff and consultants (contributors) and part two explores contributors' reflections towards the end of data collection phase of the evaluation.

In this section, respondents are identified as university or community representatives or consultants. There were three University of Bristol staff, two Wellspring Settlement employees and two consultants working on the project. All interviewees worked part-time on the study.

4.1 The views of paid staff and consultants - part one

This section aims to describe and examine topics of focus raised by project contributors at the beginning of the project. It begins by exploring different understanding of co-production and the idea of 'quality' in the work of the project. The roles and relationships of different representatives on the project are then explored alongside looking at recruitment of the History Group. The chapter ends by looking at the balance between the focus on the content of the research and its processes and methods.

4.1.1 Understandings of co-production

It has been well documented that co-production is a very broadly defined term that is used in a range of different contexts (Bell and Pahl 2018). At the outset of the study, some contributors expressed concerns that different ways of thinking about co-production would negatively affect the project:

sometimes I almost feel I don't want to use the word 'co-production' because I think when you start talking about co-production there's then a feeling that everybody needs to co-produce everything... And you can co-produce at different levels...

Stage 1 Contributor

... [contributor name] had a different idea of what co-production would be, a different idea in fact to [contributor name] and a different idea to [contributor name] about what co-production meant on this project. ... it's so central to this project, and it might put the History Group members in a tricky situation ... where there are expectations of them that they're not going to fulfil.

Stage 1 Contributor

This contributor saw an urgent need to clarify understandings of co-production on the project in order for the work of the History Group to be effective.

For another contributor, defining the role of SPANers on the project was vital:

... who would be included having participants as subjects, when we start to talk about the third group which is ... you know there's a university group, there's the community group, and then there's the SPAN members. So how do we deal with that? It's interesting to see the theoretical approach then flexing around the practical process. So I'm interested to see how

the academic structure works with that, and being really hopeful that it will flex around that and respond to it.

Stage 1 Contributor

This account makes a distinction between the academic contributors' understanding of co-production ('theory') and the ways that the project might unfold in real life. The contributor seeks flexibility from university researchers in order to find a way to include SPANers as a kind of third partner in co-producing of the research. This was particularly important for an interviewee who was also a former SPANer who found their understanding of the co-production process disrupted:

... everything we should do now should be co-produced, we should not have subjects, we should be empowering people, teaching people, getting them involved ... and then all of a sudden we have the university and Barton Hill Settlement and the researchers, and then I thought 'Oh I've become a subject of my own co-produced research' because the SPANers started popping up ... And then it seemed like they were just going to be interviewed at some point, so they became subjects themselves, and I think that was a hard thing for us all when the penny dropped, we all went 'Oh ... we might have overlooked something here'.

Stage 1 Contributor

Despite their apparent disappointment, the same contributor showed optimism about the project's team's ability to come to agreement about the issue. With their extensive experience of co-production, they viewed what they described as a 'curve ball' as a common occurrence in co-produced research:

... every time you go through this process of co-producing something, there's going to be curve balls, and we're going to have to get used to dealing with them if we want to do it better and better. ... I think there's a good mixture of strong enough people to make sure we ... work it out, talk it out. Yeah I don't think there's like any barriers to making it work, I just think it was a slightly unexpected consequence...

Stage 1 Contributor

This issue was also raised by an academic researcher on the project who was keen to explore how the project would develop ways that were inclusive to SPANers

... in some ways they become research objects don't they, rather than research subjects - and it's kind of what would co-production look like to bring them into the process?

Stage 1 Contributor

This contributor seemed open to discussion of different approaches to the project and was motivated to ensure that SPANers be included in the co-production process.

In the early stages of the project, there were different understandings about what co-production was, who would be part of the co-production process and how the work would include and respect the stakeholders on the project.

4.1.2 The quality of the work

Most contributors showed a concern that the study should produce work that was of significant 'quality'. It is interesting to note how this was defined by the respondents. When asked what they hoped the project would achieve, one contributor replied:

... the hopes were always ... here's this very involved group, majority single parents, who are really keen to know and archive the history and relate to those who are involved in the history, and record it in different sorts of ways, whether it be the things that appeal to them, you know in quite organic ways, which could be through arts, media etc. So expect the unexpected really in that. And that's what's always exciting I think about co-produced work. ... yeah that we have a great documentation in different sorts of forms of the history.

Stage 1 Contributor

For this respondent, the quality of the work is dependent upon the membership of the History Group and their interest in the work. The contributor highlights the importance of contributors having representation from single parents who are equipped to 'relate' the contributors within SPAN's history.

In considering the quality of the work, a university employee highlighted engagement in the products of the study as an key aspect of the work's quality:

I think it's really important that we have something at the end, that we produce something that actually shows the history of SPAN. So whatever that is. ... that is actually quite ... good ... It's something that people would actually want to do or see or engage with ...

Stage 1 Contributor

When they start by asserting the importance of 'having something at the end', they perhaps hint at the uncertainty involved at the beginning of co-production studies where outputs are unknown.

For some contributors, an important indication of quality in the work was publication in a well-regarded academic journal. A university employee hoped that by writing a well-received academic paper, the project would have an impact on historical research more generally by promoting the value of co-produced work.

... I think we genuinely would love to write ... that the group would write an article that really stands up in a top peer review journal. So that ... the research itself is really important, but that also we could maybe write an article that is ... a way of convincing ... a ... sceptical historical audience of ... the potential of different types of [study] ... you know especially things like analysis.

Stage 1 Contributor

For this academic researcher, there was a potential for the history group to bring valuable new insights to the historical analysis.

In the view of one consultant, an important sign of the quality of the work would be how well it engaged with those who represented the history of SPAN. They asserted:

... when [SPANers] heard ... that this project was going on, and they were like up in arms. Well ... 'Where do we fit in? Nobody's asked us' - I was really struck by that. If you talked about a challenging time that was a very interesting one. And if this project doesn't absorb their knowledge and contributions then it will have failed, that's how I would see it. That's what I would say. What would have been the point you know? ... You have this from all

around the country and beyond, ... there may only be a handful in the end, but saying ... 'I want my voice heard in this' .. if that's not heard, well what's the point?

Stage 1 Contributor

This contributor is critical of the lack of engagement with SPANers in the early stages of the project. They viewed this engagement as crucial to the success of the project.

Contributors to the study emphasised different aspects of quality that they hoped for on the project. Engagement was judged an important aspect of the work by all parties and there was agreement that involvement of a group of committed community researchers was crucial to the project's success. Contributors were also concerned that the work produced by the History Project should be valuable to its audiences. Project contributors who were ex-SPAN staff were also focused on the backgrounds of History Group members and their ability to relate to the work of SPAN. Former SPAN staff on the project strongly highlighted the need for SPANers to become partners in the co-production process. University staff were concerned about how the work would be received in academic settings such as journals and also generating engagement and interest from wider public audiences.

4.1.3 Roles and relationships of stakeholders

This section examines contributors' views of the roles of different stakeholders in the study. Accounts about the role of SPANers are followed by views on the roles of community and university representatives on the study.

SPANers

Several contributors addressed a sense of duty and respect for the SPAN organisation and for its former volunteers and staff. Discussions between the project team had caused concern from contributors outside of the university that the team had not yet agreed an active role for SPANers in the project.

One contributor was wary that:

... somehow the SPANers could be marginalised within [the project] ... They hold that history ... You know they don't hold all of it, but they hold parts of it, and they too want that recorded if you like. So where do they fit in? ... it's again how to bring the SPANers into the project

Stage 1 Contributor

While valuing the important contribution that SPANers had to offer, one contributor also anticipated the possibility of difficulties, where SPANers might seek to direct or be unhappy with what the History Group might find.

SPAN isn't an organisation that sits over there as ... a building and an organisation, it's something that really matters to people ... it really impacts on their lives, and that's really great in terms of going and interviewing people and it's beautiful data to get, it's really lovely to hear those stories, but it's also ... there's going to be a lot at the end. And yeah that's a lot of responsibility for the group I think, and for us, but hopefully again having those different voices in the project will help that from day one. ... I [wonder] what if they choose the question- that everybody is thinking, no don't do that, or ... the final outcomes, if they're not something that people agree with.

This account vividly outlines the dilemma that on the one hand, passionate engagement and interest in the work from SPANers is desirable because they are central to the work giving it input and energy, but this type of engagement might lead to added pressure on those who are tasked with doing the research.

In discussing the place of the SPANers on the project, one contributor saw a potential area of confusion for History Group researchers who were being given a clean slate and encouraged to think broadly about research questions and methods, whilst also being asked to include interviews with SPANers in their work.

And that we're saying [to the researchers] oh yes, do whatever you like, and then there's like 'Oh no you can't do what you [like] ... you've got to go and talk to them'. ... But there is a sense in which I'm like 'Oh but all those people ready to talk, they must be spoken to' ... But then another part of me is 'No that's too much, that is too much for the group' ... and also you know I do wonder about whether there's a way round it – I don't know.

Stage 1 Contributor

Similarly, another contributor outlined their view of SPANers, feeling that their contribution to the work should be led by the History Group

... I've definitely been thinking of SPAN as ... I never think of it completely as subjects, but sort of as subjects actually to a certain extent ... and part of that is about the community ... sort of the history group feeling confident in that this is their project, that they're defining ... I also feel with that it's quite useful that ... I think all of the history group, haven't really been involved with SPAN, so we're kind of neutral on what happened when and how. You know that's quite useful for me, but ... I suppose the history group need to set the questions and the methods, and then decide really on what they want to say - and the input from SPAN needs to be by the history group's invitation ...

Stage 1 Contributor

This researcher is perhaps revealing a feeling that the process of research is being disrupted by efforts to engage SPANers at this stage of the project. For those trained in research skills, the research methods for a project are usually only decided once the research question has been defined.

SPANers were valued as important contributors by some and important potential contributors by others in the team. The role of the SPANers was a source of disagreement at this early stage of the project.

University of Bristol

One consultant who worked closely with the University of Bristol praised the academics involved in the project for their experience of co-production, interdisciplinary backgrounds and their commitment to the project. Comparably, an academic contributor, highlighted many of the attributes that academics and the University of Bristol brought to the project including research skills and 'access to pots of money'. They went further to suggest that working with the university might bring 'social capital' to community organisations enabling them to access networks and possible future funding through their association with the institution. (Stage 1 Contributors).

A university contributor outlined the way that funding led to a structure for the work:

In a sense it's ... about funding. So ... the university brings the funding, and sometimes because of that funding you bring the structure and the timeline, which I think is actually really helpful. As soon as you have that you can start framing the project. ...

Stage 1 Contributor

One contributor remarked that the university had 'authority to give a voice to people's experience or to this as a process' and also experience gained in:

... lots of projects that are similar to this, so being able to feed into the process from experience has already been really useful ... the platform of their academic knowledge, so being able to offer new ideas or directions or comparisons with other work is really useful. Yeah I'm hoping it offers a space to think actually ... cos here feels very much a doing place, and it's actually quite difficult to get out and think properly...

Stage 1 Contributor

In addition to sharing experience and knowledge, engagement with the university offered the possibility to find space for thinking about work that was often reactive and busy. This contributor contrasted the space of the settlement and the university highlighting a potential benefit of the collaboration (Stage 1 Contributor).

In addition to the praise and acknowledgement of what the university had to offer, there was awareness on the part of one university contributor about the ways the university and its staff might be perceived:

... when you're working with people outside the university ... inevitably there are sort of preconceptions about academics and what they do, and I'm sure we have preconceptions about people in the community and so there are some kind of barriers to just working together as a group of people. I So I think that is a challenge.

Stage 1 Contributor

The preconceptions could be barriers to collaboration with community organisations making discussion about university requirements within partnerships difficult to raise.

Conscious of the demands of academia, one contributor remarked:

it always feels a bit sort of awkward as an academic to say ... you know I need to do this as a publication, because you know clearly that doesn't really have much currency outside of academia, but you know we do have to do it.

Stage 1 Contributor

The issue of the high value given to publications within academic institutions was identified as a potential point of difference in collaborative work. In their description of the issue, the speaker is conscious of how the world of academia might be viewed from the outside.

For one consultant, the association between the university and its ability to unlock funds for community centres in deprived areas was uncomfortable. They said:

...[the] University of Bristol brings the money and that's a bit icky, I feel slightly icky about it, but it's really true and really important that you know it's got access to these resources that would not lead their way to Barton Hill

... You know lots of people have really difficult relationships with it and feel excluded, there is also ... at the same time this sense of there is some possibility there. And there's open possibilities ... that I could develop myself, or that my children could have a better life or whatever ... whatever people might attach to it, and that that's important. And that's important to people not just in the university but outside of it, and that value of thinking and studying and research. ... a sense that there is something valuable and it's not just about the dosh kind of thing ...

Stage 1 Contributor

This account shows mixed feelings about the funding that the university was able to unlock, which, for this contributor is both uncomfortable and potentially valuable.

One of the consultants on the project was concerned that the university staff might step away from using their expertise with the aim of giving control to community researchers. She outlined that:

..[they] seemed to be suggesting, that if the group didn't particularly want to interview people, well then that wouldn't happen ... but I think that that's not the way to go around things, because that's not the coming together of knowledge and learning. I know that Josie will ... they will be in it. I know it, but what I mean is ... what I think about that is how academia shares its knowledge of this sort of work in previous times, you know – that's what they bring to it, and hope that they will bring that.

Stage 1 Contributor

Here, a contributor who has considerable experience of working with and for the University of Bristol, outlines a hope that university researchers will share input and expertise to guide the project's researcher methods.

Contributors highlighted the many resources and skills that were brought to the work by representatives from the University of Bristol. They also outlined some potential difficulties in relationships, including the perceptions of the university and the potential for university researchers to hold back from using their experience to guide the research project.

Wellspring Settlement

The contribution of the Wellspring Settlement was appreciated by all contributors who saw that it offered the space for the History Group meetings, the time of the centre staff, the crèche and other useful resources. The Settlement had expertise in the community development methods that were essential to the work. Settlement staff were able to give attention to building relationships with community researchers. A university contributor outlined the many contributions of the organisation:

I think it's the reach into the community ... specially on this project, ... that support really, locally. ... I think that finishing stage and being able to support people is so useful ... So for [the community worker] to have that, to be based there, to know that and for Barton Hill more widely to be able to engage with them I think it's really useful ... and just have access as well to that space. And hopefully get connected more to other things that are happening if they want to ... but I think there is a really nice holding space, particularly for me when the project ends. ... it's been amazing to have somebody there on the ground whose job is to recruit...

Stage 1 Contributor

For another contributor, the space at the settlement was a good alternative to spaces available at the University of Bristol:

It's really great that there's a space that's not the university actually ... you know it's got a history hasn't it and a whole set of perceptions, and it's in a particular part of the city, and it looks a certain way, and it is a certain way. ... Like it feels really important to have this hosted by something that's kind of more embedded and local and neutral. ... something hopefully safe about that space ... holding that space as a kind of safe space that's ... to try and create a more level playing field between all of the participants. ... there's something really valuable about just the kind of topography of like this building in this part of the city, rather than the building we're sitting in now in this part of the city ... which maybe for some people could feel quite an intimidating or alien sort of space ...

Stage 1 Contributor

For this University contributor, the settlement was the better place to develop the more equal relationships imagined in the project planning. In their account they contrasted the potentially 'intimidating' and 'alien' space of the university to the 'safe space' offered by the settlement. Another contributor spoke about the friendly' and 'welcoming' aspects of the Centre in contrast to the more formal spaces at University.

Another contributor valued the partnership with the settlement because it was 'located in a diverse community' had a 'long history' and had a 'a good CEO who gives an open door to this kind of work ... does a lot of work around communities, empowerment'. Importantly, the project also had a crèche with availability for researchers (Stage 1 Org interview).

A community contributor described the settlement building as 'a normal sort of setting ... with 'a good cluster of activity that's happening here that's a real advantage.' The availability of the crèche as well as multiple other projects including parenting classes and debt advice services were, for the community worker essential aspects of the building that supported the work in the History Group.(Stage 1 Contributor).

One community worker remarked that the settlement was, in some ways, very similar to SPAN in its ways of working. She also praised the community development approaches of both organisations – highlighting the contribution of the settlement to the History Project she said:

The community end of things isn't as easy as people think... Getting people on board, building trust, engaging ... participation stuff is very very hard. Luckily we got [community worker] and [they are] really good at it. ...organising things around people's real lives and children is really hard.

Stage 1 Contributor

There was agreement that the settlement had many benefits as a venue for the History Group. Often contributors compared the building to the university as a friendly, safe, 'normal', diverse and active environment.

Multiple roles and blurred boundaries

One of the contributors spoke about their multiple roles on the project, as a consultant and a former member of staff at SPAN. She viewed the prominence of SPANers on the project as holding both negative and positive aspects

...I wasn't even there that long, but I do feel really attached to the organisation. So yeah, SPAN brings this network and that comes with pluses and minuses you know obviously, yeah around who might not be included in that and those sorts of issues. But just this really seems quite a tight network of people and a sort of string of connections that mean that wow it's going to be really interesting products that are produced ...

Stage 1 Contributor

A University contributor also identified some of the tensions in the group as a concern over who might take 'ownership' of the history. They outlined the groups that might have a claim on what the History of SPAN is and how it should be 'written'.

there's a kind of challenge about ... like in a sense whose history is it? Is it the history of the SPANers, or is it okay for a group of 9 or 10 community researchers who maybe weren't involved in SPAN to also tell this history? Or like a couple of academics? ... you know that whole thing. I think that tension's always been there or that question's always been there, and I think it's probably come to the fore again and it's trying to think a bit about that relationship.

Stage 1 Contributor

They saw these issues of 'ownership' of the history as central to the early part of the project and to how some of the initial differences on the project might be resolved.

In the opening months of the project, contributors sometimes struggled to define their own role on the project. For example, for the evaluator/ critical friend to the project, was sometimes unclear about when they should take part in project activities and when they should stand back. The account shows that at times their desire to understand the emerging structure of the project meant that they might be too close to the work and fail to allow the reasonable distance needed to evaluate the work. Describing this issue they noted

'... and I'm sort of desperately trying to get to grips with the project, but then feeling oh actually I need to let them get on with it'

Stage 1 Contributor

This section has considered the different organisations in the study as if they were separate bodies. The organisations were not distinct from each other; by considering SPAN, the University of Bristol and The Settlement as separate organisations, we disregarded the long history of collaboration between the organisations including, the University of Bristol establishing the settlement in 1911 and working on the development of a university presence at the settlement at the time the History Group was being established. It is important to note that several project members had worked closely together on multiple research projects so that some of the university and community staff knew each other well. Three contributors to this section had been staff at Single Parent Action Network and also had links with the University of Bristol. One of the History Group researchers was also a Trustee at the settlement. This project was not only a partnership of different groups or organisations, it was collaborations between individuals who had knowledge of each other's ways of working and motivations on the project. This prior experience supported collaborative working on the project.

4.1.4 Recruiting researchers to the History Group

Recruitment to the history was an important task for the project team to consider and the necessity for diversity amongst the researchers was a recurring theme in the first stage interviews. The following paragraph outlines the position of the community worker who was responsible for recruiting participants to the group. She explained that when she began recruitment, in conversations with potential attenders, she was:

... asked and have to give concrete answers... on an academic side there's been more of a 'no just keep it open' – and I think there has been a tension with that... I've needed it to be more defined, because people are asking me to define it. So I think just ... yeah, it's taken quite a few weeks to get to who are we actually looking for.

Stage 1 Contributor

Once they began to tell people about the group, they quickly realised that they could not answer some of the questions that were asked. For the community worker it was crucial to have an explanation of who the History Group was aimed at as this would guide and support her recruitment.

The following quotation outlines the issue of recruitment described from the point of view of a university contributor.

I don't want to do too much engineering of the group. But then at the same time I've really struggled to have some diverse groups, and I would hate this to be a completely white middle class group. So I'm struggling a little bit with that in terms of managing diversity, but also not engineering too much - that I think is a challenge.

Stage 1 Contributor

The contributor is concerned to be open to anyone who might want to join the group, but keen to have a group that is not 'completely white middle class'.

With these approaches towards recruitment that are described above, it is unsurprising that the recruitment issues were discussed several times in the project planning meetings. The concern for a 'diverse' group was often a concern about ethnicity/ 'race' which was linked to SPAN's work and reputation.

SPAN was definitely set up as an inter-racial group...that's what the group should reflect. And I've always been really aware that all of us on the staff team are white, and feeling a little bit uncomfortable about that and thinking actually this could easily get swung into a kind of a – who accesses it easiest kind of group.

Stage 1 Contributor

For this community worker, the 'whiteness' of the staff team was an additional reason to move towards more targeted recruitment to the group.

Conversations about the diversity of the History Group took place within the context of wider discussions about how the project would approach the issue of race in its work. A university contributor organised a race equality development session for the whole project team. The purpose of this was to develop a common language and less discomfort about talking about race. The contributor argued:

...we're talking about a group [SPAN] that held race as something really important, that needs to be a part of our conversation in the group, and we all need to feel comfortable

talking about that. ... That's why I'm sort of thinking at the moment, in all these feelings I have about how are we talking about, what words are we using, I feel like it's really important we address them and we have ... not where we're using the same words, but we all sort of have the same lexicon.

Stage 1 Contributor

The only black contributor on the project raised the issue of race in their interview. When asked if there were any gaps on the project team, they considered the importance of race in the origins of SPAN and suggested that expertise in Black history might be needed on the project.

With the apparent focus on race in the study, one contributor was keen to hold on the other issues of disadvantage that were likely to affect the project.

I think race is a very evident [issue]. So I think that is really important, but I think it is also very important not to forget the other characteristics... I mean class is a huge one, it's huge for the history of SPAN and it's a huge in the dynamic of the project as well I think. And you know you can also imagine in terms of the issues that may come up in the group – disability, possibly sexuality you know. So I do think it's a spectrum, I think ethnicity and race are very much at the front of my mind, but I think it is important not just to think about it in those terms.

Stage 1 Contributor

There was considerable discussion about who the group was intended for, including questions like: Would the group include men? Would it include people who had been involved with SPAN? Alongside questions about how to recruit a diverse group of attenders. These issues were resolved and a diverse team of researchers was recruited for the group. In considering future similar projects, the community worker suggested:

I think if I did it next time I think this whole bit of: Are we targeting people? Or, who is the group that we're trying to gather? Maybe I would have pushed up the agenda, because that's my priority in my role. Cos I started recruiting before we actually had that down, and ... in some ways that's part of the process of ... I can see that ideas have to roll around and be talked about, but ... yeah it became a bit hectic before we started the group of actually trying to really find people.

Stage 1 Contributor

The issue of recruitment gives an early example of how the priorities of community and university partners were negotiated in discussions between contributors. From the point of view of the contributor above, important conversations to clarify desired membership of the group would have been better placed if they had happened earlier in the process. It seems that important issues were defined within the process of recruitment where questions raised by potential participants caused collaborators rethink issues around who would be included in or targeted to join the group.

4.1.5 Process and content: the focus of the work

The views of a consultant who had been a members of staff at SPAN for several years, show a concern that the actual history of SPAN might not be prioritised in the project outputs. She was concerned that the start of the project had shown a disproportionate concern for the processes involved in the study and that this might undermine the quality and breadth of the historical research. The contributor noted that:

...one doesn't want so much focused on process and methodology, and not actually record that history – that really rich history ... If I have a concern at the minute it's to ensure that that happens ... so, where is that going to be?... How is that going to be disseminated? The actual history. Because the recent history of it is such that it has an impact on present times in a dramatic way.

Stage 1 Contributor

For this contributor, there was an urgency for the history of SPAN to be shared with a widespread audience. They outlined the risk that the focus on the processes and research methods might overshadow the historical content. From the point of view of an academic researcher, this was the challenge of:

... keeping the focus on research, and ... making sure that [there is] enough time to actually do the research as well as the sort of facilitation. And yeah making sure that we sort of keep thinking and reflecting and documenting, rather than just get caught up with the momentum of doing the project - I think that's a real challenge...

Stage 1 Contributor

The focus on methods and process highlighted by the contributor above, did appear to be supported by contributors' interviews at this stage of the project. When asked about their personal inclinations to the four research main research questions (see above), interviewees almost always focused on issues to do with co-production and history making rather than the content of the History of SPAN.

This part of the chapter has analysed some of the more complicated aspects of relationships between those paid to work on the SPAN History project. The evaluation interviews at this part of the project give a picture of a group of experienced contributors willing to engage with the complexities and potential difficulties of co-production research. At the start of the project, differences in approach to the work were visible and contributors began to negotiate how the research would be done and who would be involved.

4.2 The views of paid staff and consultants - part two

This section analyses issues raised by project contributors towards the final stages of the evaluation. Contributors met for second interviews in the last weeks of the History Group meetings when meetings had moved online because of COVID 19. We begin by exploring the issue of power within the co-production processes then explore the roles of contributors and their organisations. This is followed by exploration of some of the emotions present within the process and consideration of trust between contributors to the project. Part four looks at the achievements of the project and its potential impact.

4.2.1 Power and participation

Issues of power and control are central to discussions about co-production. When academics begin a co-production research project, they are signalling a aspiration to share power with non-academic institutions. Power the was a main concern of the two main community organisations represented in the study. Single Parents Action Network was an organisation which aimed to challenge institutionally structured power relationships by supporting activism by single parents (mainly women). The Settlement is a community organisation that works with members of the public to increase local participation and engagement. The Settlement uses a model of Asset-based Community Development which seeks to support community and individual development by building on the strengths of participants (Harrison

2019). This part of the chapter will engage with the reflections of contributors about power and participation in the History Group project.

Time on the project

From a community partner's point of view, contributors (and perhaps researchers) were asked to work at a pace which was too fast and therefore effected their ability to participate as effectively as they would have liked:

LH ... So, if I say to you, think about a decision that was made on the project, is there anything that comes to mind?

C Well, I suppose one thing, and this is always going to be a dilemma and it's very understandable, is like the timeframe, the schedule. ...It kind of doesn't leave much- academics have projects to do in timeframes, because it relates to their job or the... the actual agreement with whoever is funding it...And so, it's like this is going to be the schedule. So, immediately it's like, how co-produced is that? When it's decided at what pace we'll work... the schedule is not always that flexible...

Stage 2 Contributor

At another part of the interview, they looked at things from the point of view of the university acknowledging the restrictions around funding:

it's not a criticism, because you kind of apply to do a piece of work and they're like, "Yeah, you've got this money and then you've got to report on it in, you know, January 2021"... it's kind of fixed, but...that don't... doesn't really allow for true co-production...

Stage 2 Contributor

For this contributor the structures of research funding embed some control on the side of the university contributors. Her desire for 'true co-production' shows a longing for equal control within research co-production.

Looking again at this issue of timing and structure, the early feedback from community researchers had suggested that the History Group had got off to a 'slow start' and had taken some time to settle into activities related to the historical research (see section 2.2) This was also a concern when organisation representatives reflected on the pace and structure in the group at the beginning. Considering the length of the ethics process, a contributor from outside the university, was critical of its effect on the work of the History Group. For this contributor, the project had:

... reinforced, that whole elongated process of ethics...And how one... goes through that in a co-produced way. And... what a stranglehold it has on...]... on the [process], ...[it] needs to be eased up at times. Because it... it can be quite formulaic ... and [does] not understand the realities of... people's lives...that's a broad statement...

Stage 2 Contributor

With experience of the ethics process, this contributor urged the university to develop more tailored approach to ethics when working with communities.

At the end of the project, the criticisms of ethics processes seem to have been taken in by academics on the project. Considering what they might change if they were doing similar work in future, the project lead noted:

...there was a lot of ethics at the beginning and process at the beginning, and at the time it felt like that was unavoidable... now I think the... the idea of having a taster course for four weeks and then bringing in the ethics, would have been a good idea. But I think partly, I was anxious because I'd been involved in projects before where we'd never really nailed down the ethics... and so, we weren't able to use the data...

Stage 2 Contributor

In this account, the university researcher describes their experience on previous projects which led to concern about not gaining necessary ethical approval for use of research material. This previous experience was the context for the university team's early efforts to gain researchers' consent. The speaker reflected back on the first few weeks of the project and noted that, at the time, this kind of approach to ethics had seemed 'unavoidable'. With hindsight, however, they were able to agree that there were other options for ensuring the project had ethical clearance.

Making decisions

After starting in the spring of 2019, the History Group had a long summer break which was followed by an intensive period of organising an event, planning the project and completing oral history interviews and making decisions about research outputs. The period was a productive time in the group but also a time where conflict in the group dominated some of the meetings and where contributors became anxious about not having enough time to do the work. A University contributor emphasised the issue of time in their description of the project and their reluctant decision to close down discussions and to move the project forward:

... it was just about time, and never... never having enough time for what you want to do, and having to just be... but ...hav[ing] to be quite decisive.... some of the decisions around the... the venue for final event. ...You know... we kept on getting more and more input from the group and more and more ideas, and... being so responsive in going up and kind of investigating all of those, but it just got to the stage where I had to say; we need to just stop now and make a decision because... we could carry on like this indefinitely.

Stage 2 Contributor

As well as re-counting the lengthy processes of decision making, the contributor underlines their own power to bring discussions to a close and to move the group towards a clear decision. And, although university contributors were acknowledged as having more control than others over the pace of the work, the quote above also suggests that the contributor felt themselves to be running out of time as date of the event drew closer.

From another university contributor's point of view, the project had been more relaxed and flexible than other research projects. Describing the pace of the work, they noted:

... we needed to take it with the pace of people in the group, and I suppose in previous projects I've been a lot more focused on the timeline. And... I felt like on this one, we couldn't be, and that's been..... it's still been okay. It worked out in the end... so, I guess that's quite a big learning curve, from the early stages we were able to give the time that the group

needed. And they needed a lot... quite a lot of time upfront to get to a place where they were ready... and that's okay....

Stage 2 Contributor

In the first term there was an attempt to share power between paid contributors and volunteer researchers with the suggestion that researchers lead parts of the group sessions. Due to no fault on the part of the researchers, this attempt did not go well and facilitators were understandably concerned to protect researchers from these kinds of negative events. Looking back on that time in the group, a contributor commented:

... I want to avoid setting up things that are going to fail. ... in some ways that's probably where we came to holding a lot more of the activities and doing lots of preparation in between groups ... and coming proposals or material, rather than starting from blank pieces of paper, and that seemed to support the process much better... for this particular group.

Stage 2 Contributor

In their description of this attempt to share power in the group, this contributor usefully highlights the experimental aspects of co-production work where trying out different approaches to working with groups may be necessary.

The way that decisions were made was influenced by the group after they worked together for some time. One facilitator recounted the change in the way that decision-making was approached after a period of conflict in the group:

...we learnt a lot from the previous sort of conflicts.. [and we changed] to do a different decision making process, which was showing everybody what the results of people's votes were for each candidate, and then having an open discussion about how people wanted to arrange how to interview. So, there was less control from the facilitation... and there was more discussion from the group about how they wanted to do it. But maybe... maybe that was only possible because we'd been through this kind of conflicts around the outputs, and people had learnt, you know, how... had they wanted to make decisions and what input they wanted to make, maybe.

Stage 2 contributor

Here the facilitator describes the change in the group's approach as a possible aspect of the group's learning through more difficult times in the group. The group appears to have been very active in a move towards more collaborative modes of decision-making.

History in the History Group

In terms of the way that sessions in the history group were structured, there was concern from some project contributors that there wasn't enough history covered in the Tuesday morning sessions. One contributor raised this issue :

...this was a history project but where was the history?... It was...so much around process, methodology, group... building up group dynamics ... which of course are absolutely... essential. But within that... where were the voices of the single parents?

Stage 2 Contributor

In their review of decision making in the project, one of the researchers considered whether fewer decisions in the group could have made a difference to the opportunities for doing more historical research.

- LH *... is there any learning for you around decision making and perhaps, you know, think from things that have gone well or not gone so well?*
- C *... this is just what springs to mind, I think maybe we should... it would have worked better if we'd started with some draft research questions and we'd had a suggested output. So, for example, we'd said we're going to make a piece of public art... I think in a way... that would have... freed up more time for actually doing research in the group. ... the decision making was always a little bit fraught, and that's just...the nature of things, because... when you decide... when you make a decision, you rules things out. ... And some people really hate ruling things out and find it really difficult, and... painful. So,... in retrospect, maybe we should have had fewer decision making points.*

Stage 2 Contributor

In this passage, the university researcher considers how decision-making might have been more purposefully used in the group. The time required for the decision-making was substantial and if there had been fewer decisions, more time would have been available for historical research.

Another contributor noted that original plans to support researchers to engage in different activities were not fully carried out (Stage 2 Contributor). Although the plan had been that some researchers who were interested in the archive would focus on that, the actual progress of the work led to whole group sessions looking at artistic outputs and the documentary film. It wasn't clear what had led to this change of direction it may have been the researcher's preference or the pressure of time pushing leading the group towards a shared activity.

The project Steering Group

The project Steering Group was the main forum where project collaborators met to give input and have oversight on the work of the History Group and advise on issues that required consultation with the wider project team. The Steering Group met every 3 months and included all paid contributors and space for two History Group researchers (see section 2). A university contributor felt that this aspect of the project had gone reasonably well although they noted that the model may have frustrated one or two History Group members.

... I think that having sort of non-academic participants involved in the project management... I think that's definitely something I would want to... do more of actually in the future....And I think... do you know what, I think a really big thing is just realising that one size doesn't fit all, that the way we did it worked quite well I think, for a lot of people in the group. But there were one or two people in the group for whom it was just frustrating and, you know, a different model would have worked a lot better for them.

Stage 2 Contributor

Considering the Steering Group, one community contributor felt that the History Group members invited to the group were not clear of their role in representing the group as a whole. When asked how they felt that part of the project had gone, they replied:

- C *... I guess it worked okay...I think there was issues around having representation from the group that wasn't terribly well thought through...And caused us some difficulties, but I'd say that was down to us not having...I think it was a bit of a knee-jerk reaction to have people in...Without much though about what it means for them and for us...*
- LH *Could you say a little bit about what didn't feel right for you?*
- C *I'm not entirely sure that the people that came in, knew how they were representing a group...when you go to represent a group, that group has to instruct you almost...And that would have been fairer. So, I suppose it's just around having frameworks, boundaries, expectations spelt out...*

Stage 2 Contributor

The issue of time may be relevant here again in these two accounts where the community contributor considered that the expectations of History Group researcher representatives had not been as carefully communicated as they might have been.

The University arranged the Steering Group meetings and sent out agendas. Meetings were chaired by an independent chairperson who had extensive experience of working with communities and universities. However, it was up to the facilitators of the History Group and others to bring issues to the Steering group to be discussed. A community contributor and SPANers talked about their disappointment that a particular issue had not been open to discussion in the broader forum of the Steering Group. Discussion the removal of a representation of a Black person on one of the commemorative ceramics, they reasoned:

... I just think it would have been an interesting thing to... for us all to look at together...I would have loved to...As a mix... you know, like a mixed sort of whole project group...in the Steering Group maybe... because actually, it means we've chosen images which are suitable for now, so how much is that a true representation of something in history?...And... and I suppose it also brings up what the mugs are, you know, are they... are they part of the history or are they, you know, pointing to the archive? You know, what... what they are? I think that's really interesting.

Stage 2 Contributor

In the interview, the contributor raised a broad issue about what history is and what the History Project's policy might be in terms of authenticity of the historical record. The fact the contributor only found out about the issue after a decision had made was a disappointment.

The issue of authorship and the writing process within co-production had been a concern for in one contributor's previous co-production experience. They were however, please to note the university's willingness to work differently and to open up the process of writing to non-academics:

... it was really loosened up in that respect... I think there have been shifts as a..... in the way that writing might be done and co-authored etcetera, and I'm really pleased about that... that's my sense of it, that there's a discussion taking place was...Whereas before, I didn't feel... to begin with, I didn't feel that that was necessarily going to be open efficiently for discussion – and now I think it is.

Stage 2 Contributor

Barriers to participation

In this discussion of power on the History Project it is important to note that barriers to participation seemed to persist throughout the project. Several contributors noted that due to the limits on their time, researchers were often not able to take part in the project as much as they would have liked to. This was most visible when it came to taking part in interviewing SPANers who were the main participants for the oral history element of the project. One contributor noted:

those interviews that did happen on a Tuesday morning, when I've read them back, they're interrupted all the time by different people popping in and out accidentally..... they need to be suddenly finished, because it's like, "Oh my god, it's quarter to 12, we've got to go and pick up the kids". ... Or group members were quite often late for interviews... ... or they cancelled them with about ten minutes to go, which again... knowing this group, [I] totally get it... I think people would have engaged more in some of their research activity had it been easier to do so.... Lots of people really struggled to do interviews outside of the allocated group time... a lot of people said they could do things that they couldn't do..... which then led to them feeling quite frustrated....So, I think some of that was really difficult, because people weren't getting to do what they needed to do to feel completely involved...

Stage 2 Contributor

The constraints of time and availability of childcare were barriers to History Group researchers participation in the oral history interviews.:

...that was quite frustrating, and I guess... yeah, I think the only thing we could have done about that was to have childcare in place, that was not quite unlimited, but really solid. ... the crèche obviously stops at ten to 12... I'm thinking about it, I mean I'm not even entirely sure that would work.... So, it... that needs some tweaking and it needs some working out, it didn't fully work. I mean, maybe you needed, like, three people assigned to each interview... so that somebody could drop out. Because the interviews that happened were brilliant..... there were some absolutely fantastic stuff there, where people ask brilliant questions ... So, there's a lot of really good stuff there, but the structure of being able to find the right time and space for people to carry out that activity, was really hard.

Stage 2 Contributor

This contributor notes that, despite the considerable amount of will and thought that went towards organising the researcher interviews, the full potential for researchers to contribute to this area of work was not achieved because of the challenges of limited time and childcare.

4.2.2 Roles on the project

Recruiting History Group Members

The recruitment to the History Group was considered a success by most of the contributors. An interviewee highlighted the crucial role of the community worker who was responsible for signing up community members to the group.

... it really, really made a difference having someone whose focus was on recruitment, ...

normally when you're working as a community organisation, you... you've got someone... but usually they've got other responsibilities and other demands on their time. [Having someone] ... able to devote [their] time to that, and also their... skill-set was phenomenal... I didn't realise was how persistent they had been...[Not] taking silence... as a 'no'... These are the people who are, you know, still in the group.

Stage 2 Contributor

As well as engaging someone who had a clear responsibility for recruitment, the project success was related to the skills and persistence of that worker. The community researcher role was recognised by several contributors as an important aspect of the successes of the project.

The community worker who was responsible for the recruitment spoke frankly about how the work developed over time and identified areas where more clarity was needed in the introductions to the group:

.... I promoted the project as a programme, but where people would make their own decisions about what they were interested in pursuing... It was never presented as a self-running group... but I think there was some... there was some interest for people to have more... more control over the group... I think if I did a co-production again, at the beginning I would have a different conversation about expectations of ... control...in how decisions or content was being decided...Because I think it's okay to say that it's... it's being led by facilitators, and being really [clear about] what the areas of... of influence is going to be... from participants... It's just for clarity, I think maybe I had more expectation at the beginning of participants leading...

Stage 2 Contributor

One contributor described a change in the *kind of group* the history group became after the first term:

...it was definitely a course at the beginning, you know, I think there was a lot of teaching... and it was delivered... and that changed in the second term, and I think people found it more satisfying in some ways. But it also brought up a big conflict, because people wanted more control, but actually it wasn't possible...

Stage 2 Contributor

A contributor reflected back on their work on the project in its early stages and felt that they had brought their experience of working with single parents for many years to the early discussions. They outlined their challenge of several assumptions made by project partners from the university:

there was a line or two in the application which suggested these women were... would have of a low education and low qualifications, that sort of thing – almost like they... it disempowered them a little in that... I was able to come in and say... the people that you are engaging with, they're... you must not underestimate, you know, the... the level of knowledge they're going to bring to this project.

Stage 2 Contributor

The recruitment of History Group researchers was considered a success by all project contributors. University contributors were particularly pleased with the successes of recruitment. However, this part of the work was sometimes challenging for the contributor who took the lead responsibility for recruiting and supporting researchers. They acknowledge that the project had changed over time and suggested that clearer explanation about levels of control would have aided the project.

The roles of contributors

One contributor discussed their role in relation to their co-facilitators and the History Group:

there's a lot of us figuring out definitely each other's roles, but also simply just each other's way of working ... And try to work out where each other's coming from has been really good. I think the history group, the learning has... been similar

Stage 2 Contributor

Within the History Group, the facilitator roles seemed to be negotiated in the actual doing of the work. This contributor gives a picture of a practical experiment where facilitators learned as they went along.

A contributor expressed difficulty finding their way in the role of evaluator and critical friend:

And, you know, undertaking a formative evaluation that was supposed to have been independent...it... it wasn't really possible... I think I am independent and I am critical, but because of the nature of the evolving project, I... I have been part of the project at times as well...

Stage 2 Contributor

And another discussed their attendance at an early project event for SPANers:

... though we planned for the open day in the Steering Group, I don't think we planned sufficiently well... that it would be a very emotional day, that it would bring...[people]... from diverse situations and that some of that history needed to be recorded on the spot, because otherwise we might lose them, because... one or two of them had travelled quite far to get to that open day. So, my role to there.... I felt that we were... going to lose grip of some of the history there... I was really unhappy to begin with, at the beginning of the day...And spoke both to [contributors] in quite a... an emotional way. And they did listen and there was some sort of compromise worked out but interestingly as it transpired, it almost wasn't the setting to do it... because it actually was a coming together of people to remind each other of our history...

Stage 2 Contributor

The two accounts above give a picture of the emerging roles on the project. Ways of working had to be adjusted and negotiated over the life of the project.

For the contributors who had multiple positions on the project, switching roles on the project was sometimes difficult:

At times, it's been... I've had to literally remind myself what role I'm in before I speak!...I'm like, who... I'm like, who am I today? So, it could be that... it could be that I am [name] manager today. So, [name] has come and said, "This is happening", and I've said; okay, have you thought about this, this and this? Tell me more about this. ... Whatever, you know, definitely I'm in a management role. Definitely, at times, I feel my expertise in terms of working with communities ... is really valued...And then there's been other times where I've thought, oh no, you're talking to me as actually a SPANer now. You're talking to me as somebody who is like a subject or a... or a mine of information in terms of the historical context. Or a resource... you know, I'm a resource.

Stage 2 Contributor

In their role, the speaker felt respected for their long years working in communities but, as a SPANer they often felt uncomfortable, merely a useful 'resource' for the research.

Another contributor was concerned about maintaining a role outside of the History Group with an appropriate distance for exploring the process of co-production in a critical way:

... I think what's difficult to know is that you don't want to be too close, but you don't want to be too far away – and it's kind of trying to find a place to stand almost... That's a kind of at the right distance, but is still close enough to be able to see a little bit of what's going on...I feel like that's been the challenge...

Stage 2 Contributor

For one community contributor, the pandemic had led to large changes due to the settlement responding to the immediate needs of some members of the community for food and other basic items. The pandemic meant that one community contributor was rarely available to the project once the lockdown had begun. When asked about their role during lockdown, they said that they rarely been involved because of the emergency response to Covid-19 (Stage 2 Contributor).

The roles of project team members were defined and noted in a project meeting at the start of the project. However, ways of working within co-production are not fixed and need to change as the project develops. The project learned ways of working as it evolved and many issues had to be unpacked and discussed along the way. In these conditions, it is unsurprising that some of the contributors were concerned with defining and sometimes asserting what their roles would be. For contributors who were also SPANers, the need to navigate and switch roles on the project was also demanding.

SPANers' role on the project

SPANers was the name given to a group of former SPAN staff or volunteers who were part of a Facebook group and kept in touch with each other after the SPAN organisation came to an end. In this report, the term has been used more broadly to denote anyone who had either worked or volunteered for the organisation. Two SPANers were involved in securing the archive and in planning this project. Three SPANers were paid contributors on the History Project. A broader group of SPANers were potential key participants in the oral history interviews and also important stakeholders in the project. Early conversations between project contributors highlighted different understandings of the role of SPANers on the project.

One project contributor who was also a SPANer, noted that they had felt disempowered within the research process, discussing choices made on the project they said:

... I think there has been every intention for decisions ... to have been made together...And I think in this project, we've got some really kind of enlightened people who believe in co-produced research and who are... who have.. very good intentions. But I think sometimes, decisions just seemed to get made...

Stage 2 Contributor

This contributor acknowledged that effort was made work inclusively but, in her observation of decisions that, 'just seem to get made' she was perhaps describing a feeling of being unable to influence parts of the project in which she held a strong interest.

In another part of the interview, they expressed their disappointment that power was not shared with the SPANers. They looked at the decision making on the research and felt that SPANers had been excluded from decisions in a way that made:

.. the SPAN ex-workers and members became almost like subjects...Rather than have any power or equity in the co-produced, like ...And it felt awkward...So, everything I've said, like don't go look at people like they're in a zoo...Felt like it slightly happened to us. And... and I think that hadn't been thought through ...I think we sort of inadvertently became the subjects...Rather than the partners.

Stage 2 Contributor

This desire for further involvement was supported by a university contributor who noted that there was more to be done if SPANers were to be genuinely included in shaping the research and becoming full project partners.

I actually think this project has done a lot in terms of the history group being genuinely subjects...And not objects, but I think... in a sense, I think this was a moment where it was like, actually, how do we push that even further?...So that ex-SPANers aren't just people that... who are interviewed...But are people, in some ways, who kind of shape the interpretation... and the ... the stories that are told.

Stage 2 Contributor

Another contributor recommended more discussion of roles in similar co-production research, recommending that teams:

... be quite explicit about why you're there, what is the expertise? Like, it doesn't mean you can't contribute to other things..... there's something about...saying, [name], what we need from you is this... really recognise it. ... So, kind of talk it through and ... be very clear... I think some of that being quite clear up front... Sometimes these things are just never said... we just all assume...

Stage 2 Contributor

This contributor makes a simple and yet crucial argument for discussions about expectations of roles in co-production research. Where assumptions are made, misunderstandings might lead to confusion and disagreement in the process of the work. A strong argument was made for talking and making assumptions or expectations visible to colleagues on the project.

When working on the SPAN History project, contributors were exposed to strong feelings in themselves and collaborators on the project. It is clear that one of roles of contributors in co-production research is to manage the emotion that is generated within the work.

4.2.3 Trust

The long summer break seemed to have impacted on the group as an interruption to the group's forming. One contributor noted that, the second term required more trust building and reconnection support as group members returned to the project. With lots of momentum for the work and many decisions to make, powerful emotions including anger were present in the History Group. Although difficult issues were resolved, the conflict and tension which lasted for several weeks appears to have caused significant strain

on facilitators and researchers in the group (Stage 2 Contributor). In managing decision-making in the group, facilitators were also required to address the feelings of disappointment, anger and anxiety. Practical issues of engaging with film-makers, artists, archivists and evaluators were also features of the busy second month for the group.

Several contributors noted that, with the different pressures on the History Group's time in the second term, the historical research of engagement with the archive materials was limited:

...what...slightly fell by the wayside during that phase was the historical research, that we kind of [ran out of room] to do extensive historical research in the way that I had wanted us to do. And, you know, partly that is because we had to spend so much time thinking about the output, and then having this decision making process around the output.

Stage 2 Contributor

The beginning of 2020 started well with several clearly defined outputs to work on and a group that appeared to be working well together. The group continued work on a film and began to work with an artist on the main artistic output of the project. One researcher remarked on changes in the group as the time progressed:

...by the end of the process, they were, you know, really happy and confident in the group... and clearly sort of drawing a lot from it.... That has been a real eye-opener, I think ...just sort of seeing how good people are at looking out for each other, and how much... you know, many people kind of want to put other people at ease..., care and concern for other people, whether it's other members of the group or the facilitators or the guests at the SPAN event that we had...that has been really nice to see.

Stage 2 Contributor

This contributor seemed surprised by the level of care that was apparent in the group. This aspect of the group was made even more visible once the COVID-19 pandemic emerged.

Having time in the group to develop longer working relationships was appreciated by one of the contributors who noted the difference between working longer, and shorter term:

... I think it's been really interesting working with people over such a long period, because it really makes you realise how... how much your relationship can evolve and how much people's relationships in the group can evolve...there were some people who, at the beginning of the group were, you know, really anxious, ill at ease, felt... you know, completely, you know, like they didn't belong. And then by the end of the process, they were, you know, really happy and confident in the group... and clearly sort of drawing a lot from it.

Stage 2 Contributor

Outlining the importance of trust on the project, one contributor considered that more time might have been needed at the start of the project for Steering Group members in particular to get to know each other:

with the Steering Group, I think it just takes time to work out everybody's roles... to develop that kind of trust.

Stage 2 Contributor

Similarly, another interviewee believed the project would have worked better if the Steering Group had been given time to get to know each other more and to form as a group on the project:

... as everyone working on the project, we needed to form as a group as well, and we didn't quite do that... I've felt it... I would imagine that other people who are not in the day to day project, can sometimes feel sort of not quite part of it.

Stage 2 Contributor

A considerable level of trust was built in the History Group and this was the background for the visible growing confidence of group members. The relationships in the group developed over time and, with the Lockdown in March 2020 the group and the work continued with a focus on support for group members as well as completing the work. Within the wider project team, there was a perhaps a need for more scheduled time for discussing approaches to developing ways of working.

4.2.4 The importance of communication

A university researcher highlighted the importance of clear communication on the project by recounting their failure to communicate to one of the contributors to the design of the study:

... going back... to that decision not to recruit people with a connection to SPAN... I didn't communicate that beyond the kind of small operational group. ... And then later on...it came up at our whole project meeting, and I think it came as a real surprise to [colleague's name], and it was only at that stage that I realised, oh yeah, actually that was a big change... to what we'd agreed when we designed the project...and I... I needed to, you know, communicate that to people earlier on...

Stage 2 Contributor

Here the contributor notes that their failure to communicate a significant decision about a change to the original proposal. Such changes to the process of a project are not unusual but the lack of communication in this instance was an oversight that may have effected trust within the project team.

One of the contributors described the very good working relationship that had grown amongst the facilitation team. They outlined a basis of common understanding and then a process of regular meetings which included discussion of some differences or difficulties , the 'knots' in the relationships:

... we do have quite different backgrounds, but I think we also have quite a lot in common.... we probably have quite a lot of common ground in how we... just how we approach life, ... I think there was a... a... a good rapport there to build with. And then, I think really just that the debriefs and the planning sessions were very important. And [Name] ...is actually very good at challenging and saying, "Well, you know, I don't get this", or, you know, "Why... why would we do that?", or... whatever. ... Sometimes in those sessions, we would really kind of pick on a knot, and...talk it through and understand more where we were coming from.

Stage 2 Contributor

Another contributor recommended very basic agreement about how people should communicate including expectations about reporting, regularity of meetings and preferences for communicating.

4.2.5 Difficult emotions

In talking about the group dynamics within the History Group, one community contributor argued that issues related to difficult group dynamics were lengthened because of uncertainties within co-production research.

...There's a lot around co-produced research, about ownership and [that was] normal.... the whole forming/storming/norming/performing thing – I think the storming can be quite difficult when people don't really always understand what co-produced research is...Or their position or, like, the power play...So, I think that storming lasts quite a long time in these projects...

Stage 2 Contributor

Referring to Tuckman's group stages ((Tuckman and Jensen 1977) they argued that co-produced research might be more likely to have extended periods of conflict. They then went on to highlight the importance of addressing conflicts as they arise.

And I think you have to expect, in co-produced research, there will always be conflict, there will always be dilemmas, there will always be tensions, it's the nature of it.... But we shouldn't shy away from, but we should be able to manage it...

Stage 2 Contributor

They recommend an approach to conflict which is deliberately exploratory and gives time to focus on the processes and emotional at play in the work.

One contributors wished that they had shown more confidence in the earlier stages of the project and notes the worry that they felt about keeping people engaged in the History Group. They hope that in the future they will have more confidence about this aspect of the work:

... if we were doing it again, maybe just to have a bit more confidence in what we were doing, because people did stay and they did keep coming and, you know, I think that was something we were quite worried about. And we obviously... there was something about what was happening in the group that people liked...

Stage 2 Contributor

The unknowns and the need to let parts of the structure emerge through the process of co-production, did appear to spark anxiety in several collaborators.

After a contributor expressed herself forcefully to colleagues at the public event, they reflected on the event:

... I was really unhappy to begin with, at the beginning of the day...And spoke [to colleagues] about it in quite... an emotional way. And they did listen and there was some sort of compromise worked out, it was all around ethics again.

Stage 2 Contributor

And another contributor feeling that they needed to assert boundaries in their role in order to, "... continue on the project, you know, with reasonable mental health". Echoing the sentiments of other contributors on the project, one interviewee simply said: "...there was a lot of points in the process that I felt really anxious... (Stage 2 Contributors).

The History Project involved several overlapping groups of stakeholders who had a high level of personal

investment in the work and where structures and processes had to be developed along the way. It is not surprising then, that at times the project seemed to provoke strong emotions.

Reflecting on how people worked together, a contributor recommended more openness about feelings amongst co-production teams:

I'd say that's been quite difficult, I think I've learnt a lot about kind of process in terms of needing to name things. I think there were times when things were happening and they weren't named... is that because you're feeling anxious about this? [Laughs]. That you should talk about that? Just little bits of that, whoever that is.

Stage 2 Contributor

The account shows a hope that by discussing and 'naming' difficult emotions on the project, important issues can be addressed and resolved in the project team.

This section of the report explored the accounts of paid contributors on the project. This analysis has captured detail of some of the complex balances that are required with in co-production research. These include the pull towards attention to the process cf. the content of the work and between flexibility cf. structure. The uncertainties and necessary negotiation within co-production are likely to lead to some degree of emotional demand on all research collaborators.

4.3 The impact of the coronavirus pandemic

In the second interviews, contributors were asked what the impact of coronavirus pandemic and restrictions had been on the History Group and its work. The replies were centred around two main themes. First, the initial shock of Covid accompanied by awareness of the disruption to individual lives and group activity. Second, a refocusing of the goals and ambitions of the work that included a concern to ensure that people were supported and had what they needed.

Disruption of the work of the History Group

It really felt like we'd got over the brow of the hill and we were just freewheeling down the hill... in a really good way! [Earlier in the project] it had felt like... we were getting somewhere, but we were having to pedal quite hard. And then we just got to that stage and, you know, it just felt like, wow, this is all going to happen...now unfortunately we didn't know about the coronavirus outbreak!

Stage 2 Contributor

Paid contributors from the University of Bristol and the Wellspring Settlement all spoke about the pandemic as something that had disrupted the work. For the interviewee above – the disruptive effect of the pandemic was particularly disappointing because of she had felt a sense of ease and the project seemed to be picking up pace and 'freewheeling' to its conclusion. The pandemic threatened to obstruct the original project aims in different ways including halting the face-to-face group meetings and provision of childcare, prolonging the group's planned ending, reducing the capacity of group members and turning the focus of the project away from the historical research towards the support of group members.

The disruptive effect of the pandemic was most strongly expressed by a manager at the settlement who vividly described the early stages of the pandemic as a radical repurposing of the community organisation so that it could respond to the community's urgent need to mobilise to support people who were isolated, vulnerable due to health conditions or needing support with the challenge of parenting on a low income

during the pandemic. In a way, this was a larger version of what happened in the History Group where, in the early stages of the pandemic, the facilitators' role shifted from working mainly with the whole group towards supporting some of the group members to gain the help and resources that they needed to get through the initial stages of the pandemic.

In terms of research work, some of the activities that had been planned that seemed impossible in the context of the global pandemic. Activities such as interviewing and analysis, which would have involved History Group researchers, were reassigned so that paid staff took on a greater role in these tasks – something that staff noted with regret given their aspirations that these activities be co-produced. One of the key supports to the project that was removed by the pandemic was childcare and, without that, it was difficult to imagine how researchers might continue with their input. One contributor highlighted the near impossibility of researchers taking part in the historical analysis and writing whilst undertaking full-time childcare:

We can't hold off on the analysis, because otherwise the funding will be finished... so, we're going to have to do that without the group, and... that's a shame... I can't see a way that people can engage while they're at home, feeling stressed with kids... with doing analysis... I just don't think it'll happen... in terms of our research...that's the biggest impact... it feels like... the way people are engaging with the WhatsApp group feels like [they still want to] be involved. So, I think people haven't walked away, so I think people are aware it's paused rather than stopped – I hope.

Stage 2 Contributor

The contributor expressed disappointment that plans to write with researchers could not be implemented but, at the same time – there was a focus on making most of the available funding and also leaving the door open to researchers for engagement in the future.

There was mention of the pandemic's impact on the group cycle and processes. The pandemic stopped the group from ending at the planned time. Facilitators made the decision to continue group meetings online as a way of offering support and structure to group members, some of whom were isolated. Interesting to note here that one of the paid contributors also signalled the value of the regular meetings for themselves in providing structure to the week at a time of a high degree of unpredictability.

The new mode of delivery of group meetings was itself disruptive – meeting online without a crèche meant that children were often attenders or in the background at meetings. Difficult issues at home were apparent and changed the dynamic of History Group meetings with the blurred boundaries of home and work life that some of us have become used to during the pandemic. For contributors (as well as for researchers) this added a new dimension to the work that was sometimes challenging.

Refocussing the work of the group

Despite the level of disruption, the interviews highlighted the group's transition through a process of refocussing where, to some degree, the goals and processes were redefined in the context of Covid.

Providing support for group members was a clear focus, especially in the initial stages of the pandemic when the facilitators focused on supporting group members to access essential supplies, safe access to outdoor space and help with parenting issues. At that time, group meetings were more focused on the personal issues experienced by attenders than the History Project. A recurring sentiment in the interviews was that the face-to-face meetings in the group in 2019 and 2020 had been the basis for the support that the group was able to offer its members once the pandemic took hold. Support for each other was provided in online group meetings, phone calls and via the group's WhatsApp chat. As one respondent explained, with the onset of the pandemic, 'this has become ... more than just a history group, it's kind of a

group that's assumed a much more significant role in people's lives ... like one of those mutual aid groups that we've seen springing up' (Stage 2 contributor).

As the pandemic progressed, focus in group meetings shifted so that once again, the group's attention was on activity related to the History Project. The group planned an online event, took part in an evaluation workshop and listened to updates about the project. As the year progressed, contributors also adjusted expectations of researchers so that the completion and analysis of oral histories was now thought of as something most likely to be done by the paid contributors and plans for the History Group's writing became focused on describing and analysing the process of undertaking the research and taking part in the group rather than on the content of SPAN's history itself.

While Covid was clearly highly disruptive and necessitated an adjustment of the focus and goals of the group, one respondent suggested that the impact was inflected – and to some extent tempered – by the stage of the project. 'There's enough history there literally,' they joked, to mean that relationships had formed within the group to such an extent that members were able to support each other through the disruptive initial weeks of lockdown. Moreover, the fact that the project was moving into the delivery of output stage meant that this work could be continued, albeit in a changed form. As one respondent noted, the swift and decisive leadership offered by the PI in adjusting the nature of some outputs was critical (Stage 2 Contributor). The uncertainties of the situation demanded clarity that necessitated a shift in the established norms for decision making.

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5 On history and the history of SPAN: (How) Does History Matter?

Summary: (How) Does History Matter?

- Former members of staff at SPAN welcomed the history project as an opportunity for that history to be told to a wide audience.
- The two former SPAN members interviewed had different understandings of history and why the history of SPAN mattered. One saw history primarily as an opportunity to celebrate achievements and so was focused on ensuring a history of SPAN that was a 'true reflection' of its success. Another saw history as an opportunity for learning from the past and so was focused on the history of SPAN being told in a way that made its processes and methods understandable to others looking for an organisational toolkit. In short, while both saw telling the history of SPAN to be important, what that history was and why it mattered varied.
- The two ideas of why the history of SPAN mattered that emerged in the interviews with former SPAN members, can also be seen in the responses of the researchers. The idea of the history of SPAN as opportunity for learning was specifically experienced as offering up a tool kit helping individuals navigate contemporary activist organising. The idea of the history of SPAN as celebration was specifically experienced as inspiration and reminder that ordinary people can initiate change.

- These two ideas were joined by another. That this was local history mattered. Place was important. The proximity of buildings where things happened in SPAN's history to the day-to-day lives of the researchers meant that there was not simply greater connection with the history but also with place that had important implications for a sense of belonging in the city in the present.
- Examining the first stage and second stage interviews what is striking is how the sense of how and why the history of SPAN matters became not simply more nuanced and detailed, but also much more personal. It is clear that researchers have in a sense embodied the history of SPAN, reflected deeply on it and drawn connections between this history and their present lives. While there are three major themes (outlined above) that emerge in the second stage interviews, what also emerges is a deep and personal connection with the history of SPAN.
- Those one-step removed from the work of the history group tended, perhaps naturally, to reflect in more methodological ways on why the history of SPAN mattered. This served to highlight how those more actively engaged in the work of the history group embodied the sense that the history of SPAN mattered in more direct and experiential ways.
- The flip side of seeing the history of SPAN as celebration is a fear of that history being lost or marginalised. Here the archive emerged as a vital corrective and safeguard. To counter fears of loss, the preservation and protection of the archive were seen as ensuring that the raw materials of future history were available.

5.1 Interviews with the SPANers

Both of the two SPANers interviewed at the start of the study thought that history in general matters, seeing it as 'important' ('it's very important' / 'history is really important ... I've always considered it to be fundamentally important') (Stage 1 SPANers). They also saw the history of SPAN in particular as something that matters.

One thing that both agreed on was that the history of SPAN was a history that 'needs to be more widely known'. SP1 wanted the outputs of the project 'to be quite high profile' and 'make a statement' rather than being 'just done and sort of shoved away in a filing cabinet somewhere' (Stage 1 SPANers). In short, the history of SPAN was something that both saw as a history demanding not simply an audience but also a wide audience. However, while they shared this sense that the history of SPAN mattered, there were two different 'philosophies of history' (or ways of thinking about history) that emerged.

This sense that this was a history worth telling can be seen emerging from two strands of thinking that can be seen in the interviews. On the one hand, there was obvious pride in SPAN (and their own individual role in SPAN) and so this was a history to be celebrated. On the other hand, there was a sense that SPAN had learning to offer and so this was a history to be learnt from. While elements of both can be seen in both interviews, it would seem that the former was more important for SP1 and the latter more for SP2. Framing the goals of history rather differently, the two interviewees expressed – as a consequence – different levels of emotional engagement with the history project and different expectations for the project.

History as celebration – SP1 placed the achievements of SPAN – 'equally' – in a longer line of key figures ('all the great') in black history. SPAN 'made such a big impact and changed, I would say, thousands of people's lives.' Given this the history was one worth sharing – 'So It's an important journey that people went through, so I think it's really important to actually share the history you know.' While SP1 placed

more emphasis on this celebratory discourse than SP2, they were aware that ‘with all histories there are struggles, so it’s important to kind of like give a true flavour of you know the history of SPAN,’ which was something else they returned to later on in their interview where they reflected ‘there were obviously conflicts because you know the dynamic of different sorts of personalities and so on, but we worked through it.’ What is striking in framing history as celebration is that this meant that they articulated a ‘hope’ that the project would echo and affirm this view of SPAN and ‘do SPAN justice and give a **true reflection** of you know all the **great work** that SPAN did, all the diversity of people that have sort of **benefited** and gone through it, you know started off as volunteers then ... you know **SPAN was really good** at **empowering** women and parents, you know you went there as a volunteer and then ended up working at SPAN, and then ended up sort of representing it – so it was kind of like this journey that they empowered you to be involved with. So I hope it reflects that’ (Stage 1 SPANers).

With this sense of personal involvement with SPAN’s history and the way that history was represented (as true reflection), SP1 both expressed their own sense of ‘really want[ing] to be involved’ (stated twice in quick succession) and also that ‘dialogue with individuals that has been involved with SPAN’ was essential to ensure this ‘true reflection’ of SPAN’s achievements was safeguarded (Stage 1 SPANers).

History as lesson – SP2 focused more on the importance of SPAN’s history to be less celebration and more emulation, although they were quick to point to the importance of SPAN as an organisation. Specifically, they focused in on the learning to be drawn from the way that SPAN worked.

‘Well, I think SPAN was a very radical organisation. I think the way it was formed to be inclusive of difference right at the beginning so that everybody who took part had a contribution as to what would be done and how it would be done. That is still a lesson that needs to be learnt by all kinds of organisations I think. ... I think the other thing that helped to make SPAN so radical was the funding – having European funding just sort of broadened the vision so much and helped all of us to feel that what we were doing was really important as well. And it was a fantastic experience to visit other organisations doing similar kind of work in society and exchange views and understanding of each other – that was so important and exciting.’

Stage 1 SPANers

This sense of the importance of learning from process (and not simply celebrating achievements) emerged when SP2 was asked specifically what they hoped the history project would achieve. As well as ‘the straightforward history to know that this organisation existing and did all these things and was involved and changed people’s lives across the country and even further into Europe depending on

... because of our relationships with other projects through the funding system,’ SP2 reflected that ‘I just think that also stuff about the methods, the way we worked, is really important.’

Stage 1 SPANers

Given this focus on the processual, SP2 was less closely emotionally involved in the history project. Her involvement was one primarily of contributing ‘various bits and pieces that might be useful’ to the archive and saw it as ‘really good that it’s being gathered up’ (Stage 1 SPANers). But there was not the same sense ownership of this history as SP1’s sense of the importance of ensuring that a ‘true reflection’ emerged from the history project.

What emerges from SP1 and SP2’s interviews is how a shared sense of the importance of history and the history of SPAN in particular begins to unravel into two different meanings given to history that can perhaps be seen as celebratory and educational. These different motivations mean that there is not simply more or less focus on significance or achievements compared to focus on the processes or methods, but

also how the end product of that history should be judged: as ‘true reflection’ cf. organisational toolkit. These differences in thinking about history are ones also reflected in the different ways that the history researchers themselves reflected back on the project.

5.2 Interviews with researchers

The two different models of history – as celebration/inspiration and tool for learning – are ones that can also be seen in the interviews with members of the research group, although other themes emerge: in particular the importance of local history, place and a sense of belonging. The researchers were interviewed before and after the project and asked a broadly similar set of questions about whether history mattered and the history of SPAN in particular mattered. Across both, there was – perhaps not surprisingly given that they had signed up for a history project – a shared sense that history did matter. However, there were differences in how and why it mattered that reflected the broad divisions noted above, as well as differences in thinking between the first and second stage interviews.

Differences between first and second stage interviews

In both sets of interviews, interviewees expressed their sense that history in general mattered and that the history of SPAN mattered. The sense that the history of SPAN might be able to guide future campaigning work that cropped up in the first set of interviews but is far more pronounced in the second set of interviews. The second interviews contained a more detailed and nuanced sense of how and why the history of SPAN mattered and this became more focused on how and why it mattered to the individual researcher. There is a broad shift from the general – of course history matters – to the more specific sense of how it matters to me at this moment in my life with much more use of the pronoun I and specific reference to personal connections. It is possible to draw out a number of different themes from the interviews that broadly map out onto the two philosophies of history spelled out by the SPANers as well as introducing a third. It is also important to stress that the differences matter here precisely because they point to a deep personal encounter with the history of SPAN and a kind of embodied, very personal, set of connections being drawn between SPAN’s past and the individual researcher’s present.

Differences between researchers – the history of SPAN matters to me

History as Lesson: SPAN and Organisational Learning – The hope of one of the SPANers that the history of SPAN be an opportunity for learning comes through strongly in researchers’ responses. One researcher explained ‘I’ve been thinking about SPAN actually a lot recently and all the sort of anti-racist work and thing that they had in their ways of working, and how relevant they are today’ as they explained that they had become involved in a new organisation in the wake of BLM and was aware of SPAN ‘were doing all of that work back in the kind of 80s and 90s, and it feels like, you know, a lot of that stuff had slipped somehow and now it’s worth looking back and revising the way that they worked.’ They reflected ‘I’ve been thinking about the way they worked a lot recently’ (Stage 2 Researcher).

For another researcher, the organisational working that they particularly picked up on was the evolution of SPAN from a small to a large organisation, raising questions of the relative effectiveness of both and leading them to reflect ‘I think, in terms of the real relationships working through those really hard challenges of equality and all that other stuff, that gets harder as the organisation gets bigger and better funded’ (Stage 2 Researcher). In a sense, for them, learning from SPAN’s history was working more with it as negative model, than positive model (as for the first researcher).

History as Celebration: SPAN and Empowering Pasts – The other sense of history that came through in the interview with SPANers – history as celebration – can also be seen playing out in the researchers’ interviews, specifically with the history of SPAN’s achievements as inspiration. One researcher who

focused in on organisational learning, also expressed how learning about SPAN had shifted ‘their own understandings’ and ‘given people a revived or an increased sense of what’s possible’ that had ‘been good for everyone’s confidence and sense of what communities can do, what people can do.’ For another, it was learning that SPAN began ‘in somebody’s bedroom’ and then ‘just kept going and kept going and kept going and kept going’ that was a reminder that ‘actually people can change things, like, yeah, people on the ground can actually make a difference’ (Stage 2 Researcher). For this researcher it was also significant that the location of this change was close to home. Here is a third element that emerged in the interviews.

History as Connection with Place – One researcher spoke of history in general being about ‘your roots’ and this philosophy of history can be seen extended into a number of individual’s sense of their encounter with SPAN’s history. What is particularly striking is the importance of place. It is significant that SPAN’s work took place close to where researchers lived. One noted that they had been ‘hanging out’ in a place that they now knew ‘used to be the SPAN space’ and explained how ‘it was really nice to connect with those histories and have a sense of ... it just, yeah, gave me a greater sense of connection to this area.’ Another explained of the confidence that learning about SPAN had given to them because ‘it’s just on my doorstep’ (Stage 2 Researcher). Learning about SPAN was not simply learning about history but about local history and the proximity in space was seen as significant by a number of researchers.

5.3 Interviews with paid contributors

The question of how and why history in general and the history of SPAN in particular did feature in the interviews at the beginning and end of the project with partners. However, it remained more unspoken than in the interviews with other partners. In part this could be because the question was not posed as distinctly in these interviews, but also because this was a taken for granted assumption for the partners that had put the bid together for a project focused on the history of SPAN. University partners in particular tended to reflect more on the broader methodological issues of co-production and why such research approaches mattered, rather than the specifics of the history of SPAN. Those who had been heavily involved in SPAN tended to refer more to the specific importance of the history of SPAN although in rather different terms to both the SPANers interviewed and the history group researchers.

Examining the interviews with partners alongside the other interviews explored above, suggests two things.

Firstly, the absences in these interviews serve to highlight the presences in the interviews with history group researchers. That the history of SPAN matters comes through not only clearly in the interviews with history group researchers, but also personally and in a way that has a deep, embodied and experiential quality to it. This is missing from the interviews with those one stage removed from the research who played facilitator/evaluator/steering board roles.

Secondly, there is a very different tenor to the interviews with project partners, and especially those closely involved with SPAN, compared to the more celebratory view of history that can be seen in one of the pre-project interviews with a SPANer and a number of the interviews with history group researchers discussed above. Rather than adopting a celebratory tone, project partners talked of their fears of loss. History, and in particular the history of SPAN, was something that could get ‘lost’ or ‘a bit neglected’ and pre-project hopes were focused around preventing this wider tendency to lose the history of organisations like SPAN as

this is exactly the sort of history that gets lost repeatedly over generations, and it’s hard to find it and delve into it.

Stage 1 Contributor

These fears about loss reappeared in the second stage interviews where they found resolution in the physical preservation and 'protecting' of the archive. Although the outputs produced by the history group were seen as important, more significant in the eyes of one project partner was the protection and preservation of SPAN's archive and the fact that the wider group 'are all now invested in that archive' (Stage 2 Contributor). For them, it was not simply the history of SPAN that mattered, but the raw materials for the production of that history in the archive.

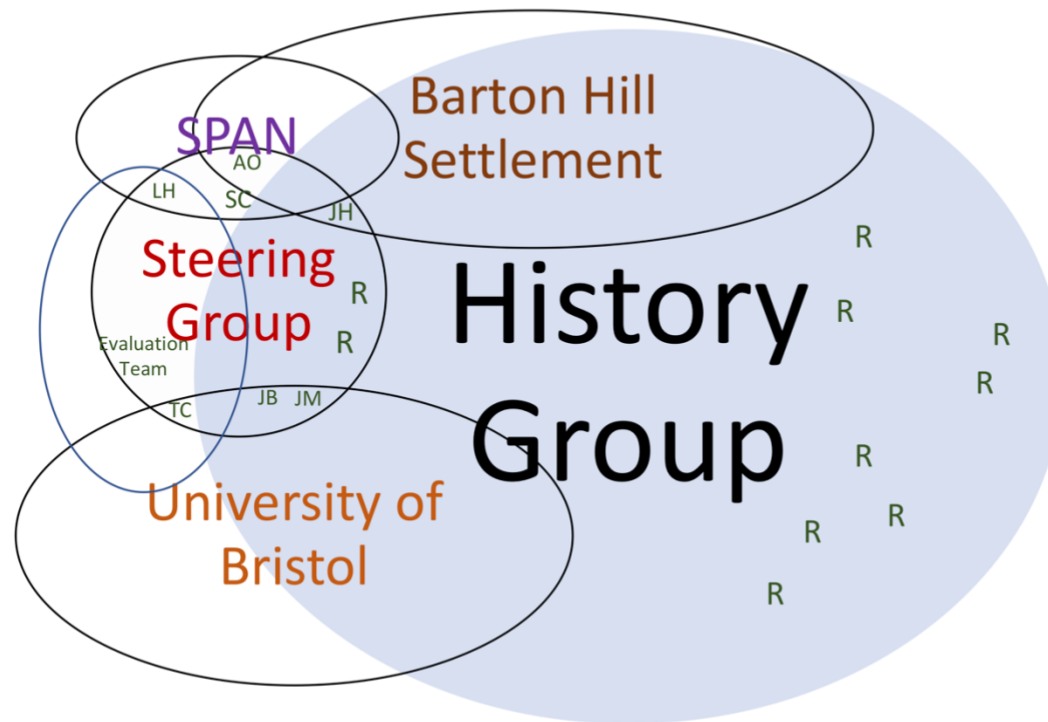
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: SPAN: a hands-on history project - a structure for co-production



APPENDIX 2: SPAN: a hands-on history project - poster

In the 1990's a group of Bristol women came together to support one another and make life better for single parents. They created the **Single Parent Action Network.**

**We want to tell their story
... and we need your help.**



Are you interested in exploring SPAN's history, working as a group to create and share their story?

Can you attend Tuesdays 09:30 - 12:30 from 30th April? (lunch and childcare is provided).

For an informal chat and to hear more contact

**Jude Hutchen on 0117 955 6971
Community Inclusion Office or email
judeh@bartonhillsettlement.org.uk**



In partnership with



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Email: admin@bartonhillsettlement.org.uk Website: www.bartonhillsettlement.org.uk
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Over a year long program we hope to offer you:

A Weekly group at BHS during term time on Tuesdays 09:30 - 12:30:

Working together to develop skills and training in research, collecting oral histories and archiving

Opportunities to visit local places of interest to the project (eg. MShed, Feminist Archive South)

Participation in a creative process to present the history to the public

Opportunities to present the group and history at conferences and to the local community

Experience of working with the University of Bristol and access to the University libraries.

Practical support to participate:

Childcare in the BHS Family Centre for weekly sessions

Tea, coffee and lunch on Tuesdays

Access to the Community Inclusion work space and computer at BHS

One to one support for personal and career development

A record of what your achievements:

Accreditation of the programme (if desired)

Certification of participation

A reference on completion of the course, and the ability to use BHS as a referee for future job/training applications.



Contact Jude Hutchen on 0117 955 6971 Community Inclusion Office or via email judeh@bartonhillsettlement.org.uk to find out more

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Appendix 3: Weekly focus of history group meetings

	Week	Focus
		<i>Introductions: Introduction to SPAN and Research Methods</i>
30-Apr	1	Frame the project, get to know one another
07-May	2	What is research? Overview of SPAN
14-May	3	Evaluation and reflection
21-May	4	Single parents: history and context
	Break	
04-Jun	5	SPAN
11-Jun	6	Historical Research
18-Jun	7	Develop research question/s
25-Jun	8	Research question 2
02-Jul	9	Conference Prep
09-Jul	10	Oral History
16-Jul	11	Writing interview schedule
	Break	
03-Sep	12	Catch up and visit the archive
10-Sep	13	Interviewing 1 - setting it up, consent and ethics
17-Sep	14	Interviewing 2 - having a go
24-Sep	15	Interview practice and final protocol discussion
		<i>Desk based research, Archive and Oral Histories</i>
01-Oct	16	Planning for Saturday event/Outputs 1: possibilities
08-Oct	17	Outputs 2: criteria
15-Oct	18	Outputs 3: Towards a decision
22-Oct	19	Budget/arts commission and oral history interview
	Break	
		<i>Designing/ planning outputs</i>
05-Nov	20	Archival material/Oral history interviews/desk based research
12-Nov	21	Archival material/Oral history interviews/desk based research
19-Nov	22	Archival material/Oral history interviews/desk based research
26-Nov	23	Film Session with Calling the Shots
03-Dec	24	Setting up a group
10-Dec	25	Shortlisting artists
17-Dec	26	Interviewing artists
	Break	
07-Jan	27	Management meeting-prep and think about event
14-Jan	28	Art output Session 1

SPAN: a hands-on history project - Evaluation Report

21-Jan	29	Calling the Shots: Film Session 2 and 11.30-12 Evaluation feedback
28-Jan	30	Art output session 2 (decide where!)
		<i>Finalising and publicising final outputs</i>
04-Feb	31	Focus Group Planning and event planning
11-Feb	32	Artist then Filming at UoB after lunch
	Break	
	Week	<i>Focus</i>
25-Feb	33	Event planning and mug design feedback
03-Mar	34	Filming
10-Mar	35	event planning – Leaflet design and text.
09-April	36	Mug and plate making (Online)
16-April	37	Film – Rough cut (Online)
23-pril	38	next steps... and evaluation of outputs (Online)
	Break	
19-May	39	Event Planning
26-May	40	Event presentation planning
2-June	41	Presentation planning and evaluation session with external evaluator
9-June	42	Feedback on film for final edits
16-June	43	Presentation- planning
23-June	44	Mugs, Survey and presentation update
30-June	47	Leaflet-final design and presentation planning
7-July	46	Event preparation
14-July	47	SPAN: a hands-on history project online event
21-July	48	Event debrief