

CASE STUDY: “Better and more creative together!” How CAVEAT toolkit use is helping Friends Altogether in Rother (FAiR) to evidence and improve their service user experience.



In this case study, we hear from Friends Altogether in Rother (FAiR) about their experience of using the Community And Voluntary Organisation EvaluAtion Toolkit (CAVEAT) toolkit to obtain better quality data to aid service evaluation and improvement, and how this has led to more creative and inclusive thinking about, and in consultation with, service users.

Introduction

FAiR was one of four community groups in East Sussex to agree to trial the free CAVEAT toolkit. Use of the toolkit encourages Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations (VCSEs) to collect and share feedback on what works and what could be better, therefore, helping to shape activities and support that boost wellbeing, reduce loneliness, and create a sense of community. Such improvements benefit both the people using their services and their incredible volunteers who provide them, without whom many VCSEs would be unable to offer this essential provision.

By participating in this project to implement and evaluate the impact of the CAVEAT toolkit in the region, FAiR is helping us to understand how CAVEAT can work in practice and make a difference to VCSEs in their increasingly challenging and pressured operating environments.

What does your organisation do and who do you support?

FAiR is an inclusive and accessible community charity for the over 65s based in Rye, East Sussex. We work to reduce social isolation and inequality by ensuring that people living in rural communities across the Rother district have equitable access to advice, information, and opportunities for meaningful social connection, thereby supporting individual wellbeing and community resilience. In short, we aim to address loneliness and isolation by encouraging friendship, fellowship and fun.

**How did you hear about the CAVEAT toolkit and why did you become involved in the CAVEAT-i project?**

When I joined FAiR, a lot of background work had already been done, and we were aware of the requirements of both our community and our funding streams. But I decided that I wanted to redevelop and redesign some of what we were doing and think more about the sort of data we needed, how we could collect quantitative and qualitative data, and how we could do this without it being just about ticking boxes. So, when the Community Resilience Programme Manager at East Sussex County Council suggested that we have a look at CAVEAT to assist us to do this, I was open to the opportunity.

Tell us about the way you used the toolkit. Which parts were most relevant?

For us, it's been about using the toolkit to meet our specific needs. So, I haven't actually stuck to the CAVEAT proforma, it's been more of a pick and mix. For example, I did go into the CAVEAT Knowledge Base, i.e. the information behind the wheel. I read the relevant parts and think this was the brainchild for thinking further about being more inclusive around and supportive of our volunteers.

How did you find using it?

The CAVEAT toolkit is very visually inclusive. It's quite easy to work through the diagrams, to think about what each one means to your organisation and then to click on and move through something of interest in more detail. So, in that way, it's very simple to use and yet I also found it to be very comprehensive.

Has using CAVEAT led to any changes?

The main thing that CAVEAT has done for us is to help me with creative thinking. So, thinking about attendance data collection, for instance, what would it help us to know about our attendees so that we can help them more? This more creative way of analysing what we do and for whom has already resulted in the creation of new tools to better assess the needs of our users and communities. I've got a list here of what I've developed from this creative thinking prompt.

Examples include a theory of change, more detailed attendance data collection, e.g. to assess different geographical and other needs, a provision map to help make our informative social events even more inclusive, and a paper wall survey on which people can tick what they are interested in, e.g. recreational activities and topics for potential speakers.



Beyond these practical outputs, using the CAVEAT toolkit also sparked me into looking at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) research data around social isolation, and thinking about the government's position on this.

What difference has this made to your organisation and service users?

There are two parts to this. Firstly, the range of documents and pro-formas that I've developed, which have been inspired by using the toolkit, are enabling us to better evidence what we do. We have got a lot more visuals now - like the provision map and other resources - where we are visually demonstrating the connection and impact of the services and support that we offer.

More widely, I think it's also fair to say that using CAVEAT has expanded our thinking around our service user experience because what it did was to make us think more about the needs of individual service users and then to reflect on services that we can bring in to support them. For example, if people are concerned about strokes and heart attacks, we can invite first responders to come in and talk about these topics to allay their fears.

So, in the context of doing with, rather than to, them, using the toolkit is helping us to identify and implement ways to further improve service user experience and outcomes. This increased consultation with our users, together with more and better observations of them, is a big change that's resulted from our CAVEAT use and is making a real difference.

Any other impact or learnings from using CAVEAT?

Two other important things have come from using the toolkit. Firstly, although we were already committed to it, I think this process has made us think about and further develop a more altruistic view of inclusion, e.g. in terms of the events we run in our communities.

Equally significant is how our CAVEAT work has inspired us to consider how we can make the best of our volunteers and their abilities. By this, I mean celebrating all our volunteers actually do for us, for the community. So, it's about managing that whole volunteer relationship as well. I hadn't really thought about that until I started looking at the CAVEAT indicators.

Will you continue to use the toolkit?

CAVEAT is a bit like a book for me. When I'm trying to work something out, I will dip into it and pull an idea through - and I see no reason why I won't dip in and out of it going forward. So, at different stages of our development, I'll go back into CAVEAT and make sure that I'm picking up all of those skills and prompts to ensure we are continuing to create and build upon a good model.



So, for instance, we are starting two new venues and this is the time that I will go back in and have a look at CAVEAT and think about how we need to and can use the headings in the toolkit to make sure that we are being very inclusive in what we are doing.

Any advice for other organisations considering using CAVEAT?

If I was in a larger organisation, in particular, the CAVEAT toolkit is something that I would definitely put into place to encourage more relevant, detailed and/or better-quality data collection, and therefore help us to champion and demonstrate the impact of service provision and other operational areas.

Jan Crook, Community Coordinator at FAiR, said:

“CAVEAT has helped us to develop a good model of working and we have used it for and reference, insights and inspiration, i.e. as a source of creative thinking. This has enabled us to come up with new ideas and initiatives to better evaluate the services we provide and other aspects of how we operate.”

Dr Julie MacInnes, ARC KSS Research Capacity Building and CAVEAT-i Project Lead, said:

“The CAVEAT-i project has shown that when VCSEs have the commitment and capacity to use CAVEAT, the toolkit can help them to evaluate and explore the impact of their services. This is the case for FAiR where staff have understood and engaged with the toolkit at both strategic and operational levels, and its application has already resulted in the development of a range of organisation-specific evaluation tools, as well as a shift to more creative and inclusive thinking around the service user and volunteer experience.

“We look forward to hearing about how the organisation will continue to use CAVEAT in the future and to learn from their real-world experience of CAVEAT use.”