



Alive Group Work Peer Support Pilot

January 2016 - December 2016



BRISTOL
AGEING
BETTER



LOTTERY FUNDED

Alive - Group Work Peer Support Pilot

2

January 2016 – December 2016 Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) is a partnership of organisations working to reduce social isolation and loneliness among older people and help them to live fulfilling lives. In Autumn 2015, BAB began to commission sixteen pilot projects as part of the Group Work Peer Support Service. These pilots tested different methods of group work and peer support in tackling loneliness and isolation.

Group work and peer support use peers to help people focus on their assets, abilities and potential routes to recovery and general wellbeing. It mobilises the insights and empathy of people who share similar problems or experiences to support their peers, in this case regarding loneliness and social isolation.

This report provides an overview of the pilot project delivered by Alive, including their successes, challenges and learning. In line with BAB's 'test and learn' approach, this report will highlight key points of learning and advice which may be useful for other projects within Bristol Ageing Better or the other thirteen Ageing Better areas funded by the Big Lottery Fund through the Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better Programme.

Project overview

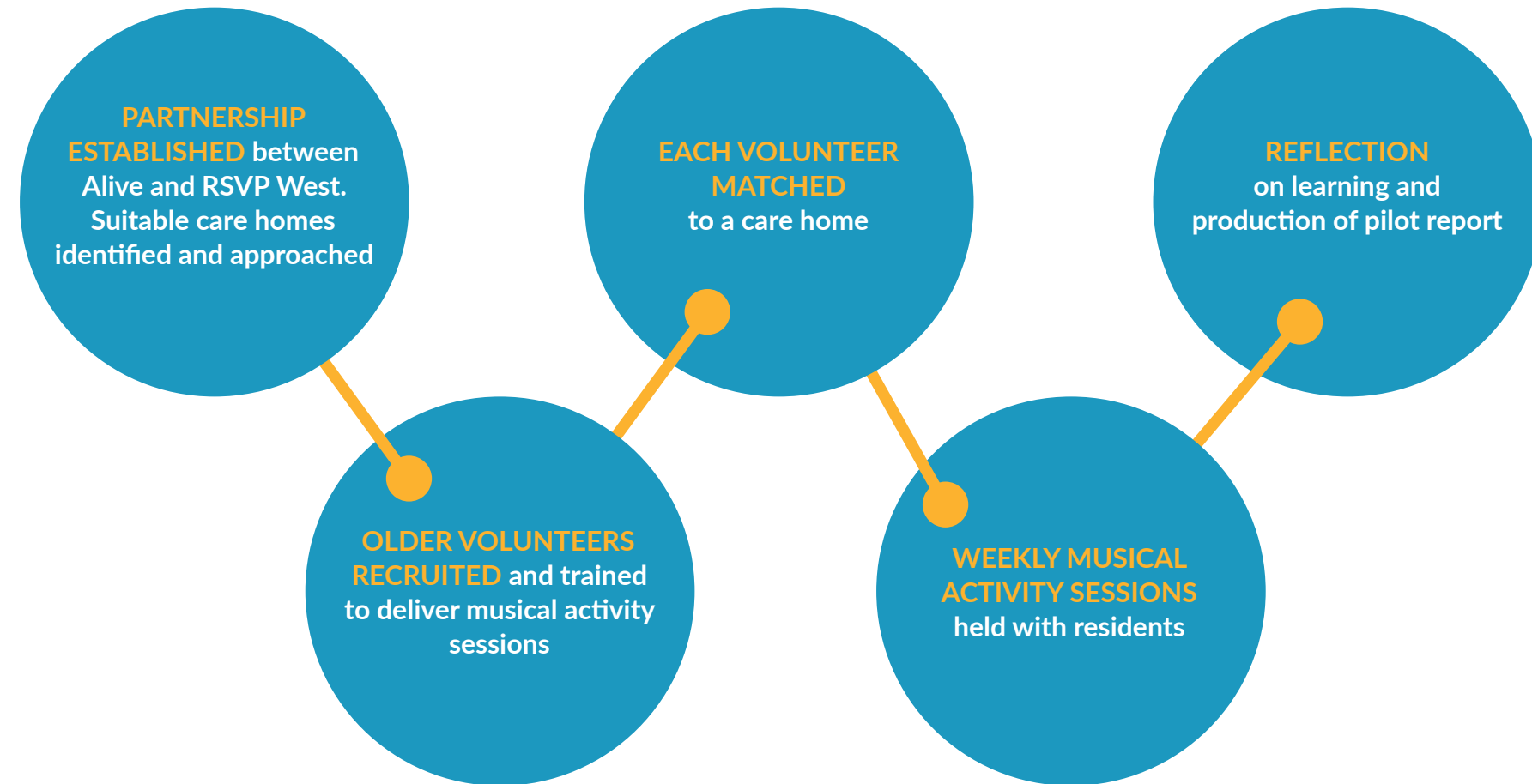
Alive partnered with RSVP West (Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme, part of the national charity Volunteering Matters) to recruit and train 6 older volunteers to deliver weekly group support sessions within care homes. Each volunteer was matched to a care home to deliver music-based activity workshops. The volunteers were encouraged to personalise their group activity according to the interests and abilities of the care home residents as well as their own skillset.

In total, 125 sessions were delivered across 6 care homes. 100 older people participated in the activity sessions. 9 older volunteers were involved in the delivery or development of this pilot project.

3



Project process



Project successes

Quality of volunteers:

- **Engagement:** Although it took longer than anticipated to recruit enough volunteers, those who were recruited were highly skilled, motivated and engaged. It was a success for Alive to work with RSVP West to recruit these volunteers.
- **Worthwhile training:** The training delivered to volunteers increased their confidence in their role.
- **Matching process:** Volunteers were paired with a care home which was convenient for them (for example close to their home) in order to minimise the volunteer drop-out rate, which worked well.

Flexibility around interests:

- **Interests of residents:** Volunteers got to know what the residents liked over time and shaped the activities around this. Sometimes this involved trying out different music and props to learn their interests.

Impact on volunteers

- **Continuation:** All volunteers were over the age of 50 and the majority planned to continue volunteering within their matched care home after the pilot project finished.
- **Anecdotal impact:** The volunteers reported gaining confidence, knowledge and skills in delivering meaningful activities with older people. As such, they all took a lead in the delivery of their activity sessions.



In some care homes it was more difficult to coproduce the activity sessions with residents.

Key challenges and what would be done differently in the future

Coproduction:

- In some care homes it was a challenge to coproduce the activity sessions with residents, particularly when the care home did not already have an established system for engaging with these individuals.

Support from family:

- On some occasions, relatives visited during the musical activity sessions and prevented their relative from participating, for example by taking them away from the session or by talking while the activities were taking place.

Volunteer recruitment:

- It was anticipated that volunteer recruitment would take approximately 2 months because Alive were looking for volunteers with a very specific set of skills and interests. However it took longer than anticipated (approximately 3 months) which ultimately affected the number of activities which could be offered to participants.

Case study: Jeff

Jeff is in his eighties, quiet, dignified and shy on first meeting. He walks using a zimmer frame. Through the project, the volunteer discovered that Jeff absolutely loves music, especially Mozart, and is deeply moved by it.

When the volunteer first arrives to start the activity, Jeff sits looking down and doesn't appear to engage or be actively looking to connect with the people around him. Sometimes, like everyone else, he is deep asleep when the session starts, but when he wakes, he joins in with animation and the change is remarkable. He is alert and full of joy, engaging happily in all the activities, singing energetically, waving or conducting to the music with glee and joy. When the group sing something like 'The White Cliffs of Dover' or 'Some Enchanted Evening', he has to take off his glasses to wipe his eyes, and the music of Mozart seems to transport him to another time or place in his life.

Jeff has a wicked sense of humour and looks to the volunteer for sharing a joke and having a laugh throughout. His fellow residents sometimes look surprised at his animation and the way he 'lets his hair down', especially one week when he made up funny extra verses to the song that they had been singing.

The value of the sessions for Jeff is the chance to make and enjoy music freely, to be able to express himself without embarrassment, to be a bit uninhibited without being undignified and most importantly of all perhaps, to connect with other people, be heard, contribute and socialise.

Case study: Barbara

Barbara is a resident who attends the weekly activities keenly. She smiles a lot and is a friendly and welcoming person. Her advanced dementia means that she is unable to undertake conversation, but physically she is very able. The effect of the music and activities on her is extremely moving. She loves to sing and has recall of many of the words to songs. The RSVP West volunteer leading the activities thinks that Barbara may have always sung; she visibly gets huge pleasure out of hitting the high notes and connecting with other people through singing and music.

The RSVP West volunteer says “At the end of ‘The Skye Boat song’ [a traditional Scottish folk song by The Corries] where there is a chance to go up or down, Barbara will choose to go right up and we do that together, while I point to the ceiling, genuinely delighted and she shares that thrill with great animation. The music reaches her in a powerful way and moves her. Once in the ‘listening’ slot, we had the slow movement of a Mozart piano concerto and she was so excited that she got up and danced. It seemed very clear to me that this was a piece she knew and meant a lot to her.”

In another activity session, Barbara “was so excited that she stood up and raised her arms in the air, with a huge smile. So I took one of her raised hands and we both waved our other arm to the music. The first track was ‘For unto us a boy is born’, very tuneful and rhythmical...and she was singing it! Mostly in her head, but with the right notes coming out at the right moments, mostly the high ones, so we sang it together! I was so thrilled I said ‘such exciting music!’ And she said ‘citing music.’” which is the first time that Barbara communicated verbally with the volunteer.

Case study: Sarah (volunteer)

After Sarah had completed her Alive training and observed some of the Alive activity sessions in care homes, she was paired with a care home in her locality.

After the set-up meeting with the manager, Sarah decided to visit the care home in her free time, she wanted to really get to know people before starting her activities there, what they liked and disliked and what they might want from the activities that she was going to offer. Sarah arrived to find that she had come at the time when they have their weekly choir group meeting, she joined in and got to know residents through this.

About half the people attending the activity sessions are living with dementia. In response, Sarah has put together an appropriate framework for the activity sessions based on her Alive! training, the content of which is tailored to the individuals in her group so that there is something for everyone to enjoy. She provides opportunities for the group to sing together, chat together, listen to music in a relaxing environment and take part in more physical activity with a variety of props that provide sensory stimulation.

She focuses on the strengths of each individual; for some of the participants with more limited mobility, they are enjoying expressing themselves physically through hand jive, chair dance and talking for example. For some people who can no longer communicate verbally, dancing, singing and sometimes even just eye contact (whilst listening to a beautiful piece of music) is enabling people to feel more connected to the people around them.



It is valuable to have a written agreement with each care home outlining responsibilities and expectations.

Learning, recommendations and advice for similar projects

Working in partnership with other organisations:

- It is important to choose care homes that are fully committed to the project and who have residents with support needs at a level that the volunteers are able to cope with (for example dementia that is not too advanced for volunteers who have not been trained in this).
- When choosing care homes to work with, this should be based on up-to-date knowledge as previously gained knowledge may no longer be applicable (for example a care home may have recently changed management). It is worth double-checking whether that particular care home will be supportive of the project and has a supportive environment for the volunteer as this is essential to the success of the project.
- A written agreement with each care home would be valuable in outlining responsibilities and setting expectations, particularly around ensuring the residents are ready for the session as far as possible. This helps the activity sessions to run smoothly but also ensures the volunteers feel supported by the care home.
- However sometimes these written agreements were not kept to despite further meetings with management to resolve any difficulties.



It can work well to target volunteer recruitment according to the main activities the volunteers will be undertaking.

Volunteer recruitment and support:

- Working closely with an organisation who has experience and expertise in recruiting volunteers (for example RSVP West) is valuable. However, even with this support, recruitment can still take a long time when volunteers need to have specific skills and interests. Other projects should allow longer than expected for this recruitment (approximately three months).
- It can work well to target volunteer recruitment according to the main activities the volunteers will be undertaking. For example, if the activities are music based it works well to advertise the volunteering opportunities to community choirs and theatre groups.
- Pairing volunteers with care homes close to where they live may help to reduce volunteer drop-out rates. However this can sometimes be challenging if the care homes in that locality are not suitable.
- Training for volunteers should emphasise the need for flexibility and to always expect the unexpected.
- Volunteer training should also cover broad skills (for example engaging with care home residents) but also specific knowledge which will be needed within the activity programme (for example around any technology that will be used).
- Supporting volunteers can take more staff time than anticipated. Ongoing volunteer support (and associated administrative processes) should be factored into budgets and programme designs from the beginning.



Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) is a partnership working to reduce social isolation and loneliness among older people and help them live fulfilling lives.

Bristol Ageing Better
Canningford House
38 Victoria St.
Bristol BS1 6BY

Email: bab@ageukbristol.org.uk
Telephone: 0117 928 1539
Website: <http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk>

