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# Growing Support Group Work Peer Support Pilot 1

January 2016 - June 2016

## Growing Support - Group Work Peer Support Pilot

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**January 2016 – June 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 Growing Support, 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

This pilot project involved using Tangible Memories, an iPad app, to capture the outdoor-focused life stories of people with dementia living in care homes, including their gardening interests, gardening skills and memories. The aim was to enable residents to make stronger connections with both their peers and the care home staff through participating in the project and having the end result of their completed life story.

It involved recruiting and training older peer volunteers to work one-to-one with the care home residents. The app, Tangible Memories, was developed by the University of Bristol - <http://tangible-memories.com/>. The app contained a series of pages on which photos, text or audio can be entered in order to create a multi-media 'book'.

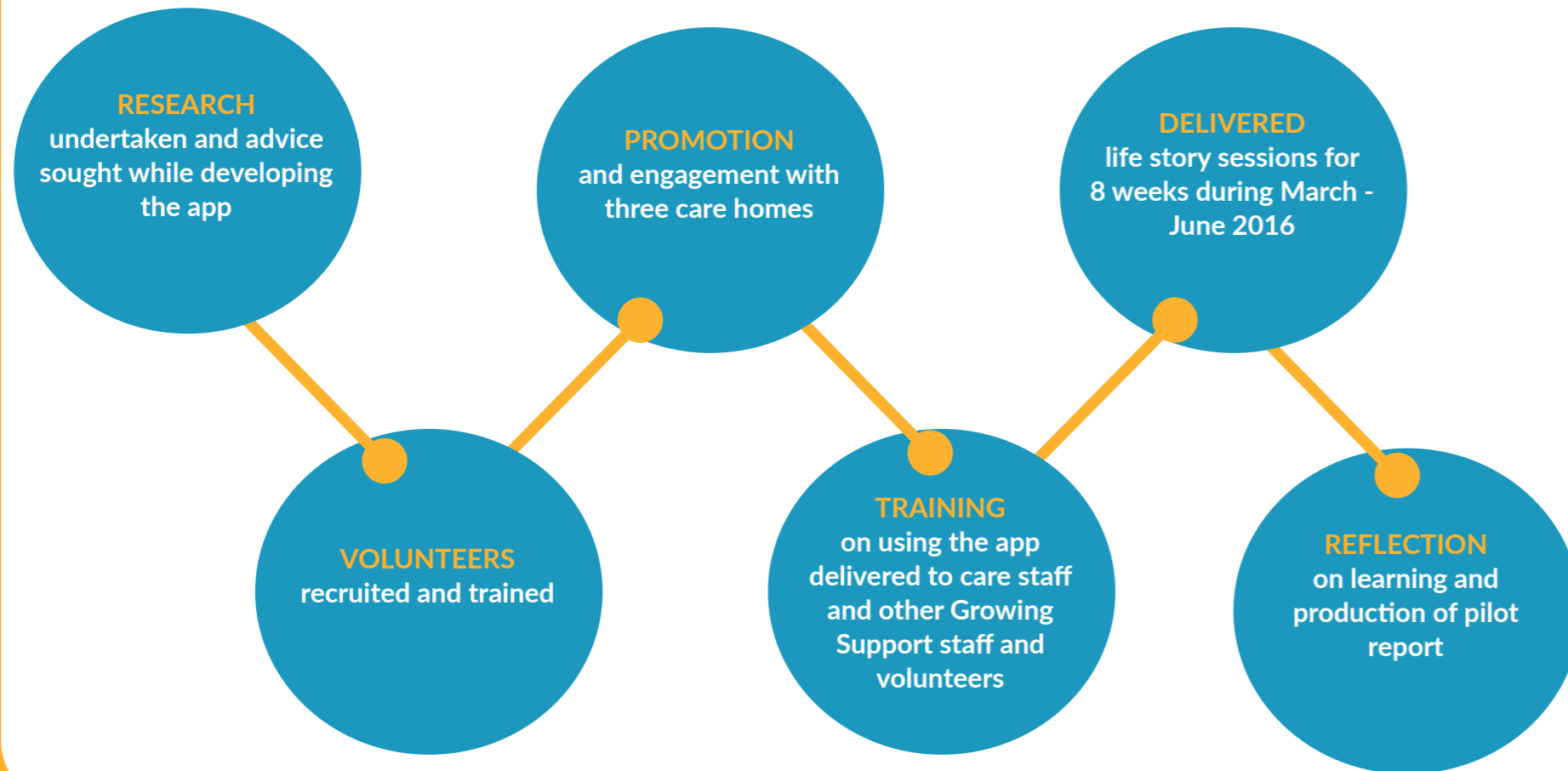
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The project initially planned to deliver this pilot project in the same room and at the same time as an existing Growing Support gardening activity group. The aim was for individuals to spend 30 minutes working one-to-one with a volunteer and then join the gardening group, using the information gathered during the life story project to help them to integrate into the gardening group. This occurred with 6 individuals, however due to a lack of volunteers Growing Support adapted their approach and instead collected life stories through groups run by the project facilitator.

In total, 22 older care home residents across 3 care homes engaged with this pilot project. 6 recorded their life stories one-to-one with a volunteer, while a further 16 recorded these within a group work setting.



## Project process



## Project successes

### Impact on reducing loneliness and isolation:

- A team of Community Researchers from Bristol Ageing Better conducted an evaluation of this pilot project. They asked interviewees (a combination of care home staff and Growing Support staff) to rate the project in terms of its success in reducing isolation and loneliness in residents on a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 being the most successful and 1 the least successful.
- Interviewees were asked at the beginning of the interview and again at the end. Scores ranged from 2 to 4 at the start of the interview, and raised to between 3 and 4 at the conclusion of the interviews.
- However the evaluation team were unable to speak to the residents or family members.

### Development of the Tangible Memories app:

- The app was developed after researching best practice in delivering life story work and seeking advice from life story practitioners.
- Once developed, the tool was tested with life story practitioners, Growing Support staff, care staff and volunteers to get their input and feedback.
- This app continues to exist after the pilot project and can be used in other settings in the future.

## Project successes (continued)

### Using the Tangible Memories app:

- The app helped some residents to share their life stories by encouraging them to talk and open up about past experiences and memories. It was particularly helpful for residents who usually found it difficult to engage or had cognitive impairments as the visual stimuli acted as a trigger for reminiscence.
- The sessions were originally designed to be one-to-one between a resident and a volunteer, but it was adapted for use in a group setting which increased the number of residents who could participate in sharing their life stories.
- Care home staff believed that the one-to-one delivery model enabled participants to feel that they were the individual focus and not just a 'number' within a group, which the staff believed to be beneficial. However the group work delivery model was also beneficial as it improved the social contact between residents.
- Prior to this pilot project, only one of the care homes involved in this project had used life stories previously and this was only on a limited basis. Instead, group work within these care homes tended to focus on keeping active and engaged rather than developing relationships.

### Training to use the Tangible Memories app:

- Volunteers, Growing Support staff and care home staff (12 individuals in total) received training in how to use the app. This was important for the volunteers to know exactly how to use the app with residents, but also gave them the opportunity to learn new skills for example communication skills when engaging with care home residents with a short-term memory loss.
- All participants on the training felt their knowledge and skills to deliver life stories using ipads had increased as a result of the training.



The visual stimuli of the app was particularly beneficial for residents who usually found it difficult to engage or had cognitive impairments.

## Case study: Julia (a volunteer)

Julia Norman, 65, a Growing Support volunteer, took part in the pilot project as a peer volunteer. Julia took part in the training delivered by Alive!, delivered 1:1 life story work sessions with care home residents at Growing Support gardening groups and supported group based life story work led by a Growing Support Facilitator.

### Q: How did you find the training?

A: 'I enjoyed meeting other volunteers and sharing experiences. I learnt a little bit how to use an iPad, as I had never used one before, although I hadn't really mastered it enough for the project. Without using it regularly you don't get confident with technology I suppose.'

### Q: How did care home residents respond to the life story project?

A: 'I think it was an opportunity for them to think about their life and share experiences. And maybe recall things that they hadn't thought about for some time.'

### Q: What do you think you learnt from the project?

A: 'I think that anything that is going to stimulate people's memory is very positive. I felt a bit hampered by the technology but it was an opportunity to talk to people 1:1 which was very rewarding.'

### Q: How could the project be improved?

'Perhaps the project could be simplified in future with less reliance on technology. I found this more enjoyable when we changed to a different simpler approach'

## Key challenges and what would be done differently in the future

### Recruitment of participants:



It was difficult to recruit new peer support volunteers over the age of 65.

- Participants were mostly recruited from Growing Support's existing gardening group which ran alongside the life story project.
- Preliminary work was carried out with the Care Homes to explain the rationale of the project and to encourage them to identify the most appropriate people, particularly those who were isolated, who were capable of understanding the process and who were able to communicate with the facilitators.
- The facilitators also proactively sought out people who appeared to sit on the sidelines, and after being shown the life story app, some were successfully encouraged to attend.

### Technological difficulties:

- The app unfortunately only worked on one iPad at a time, which limited the capacity of the pilot project.
- There were also occasional difficulties with accessing the WiFi at some care homes. WiFi was not needed to use the app but was required to access Google

Earth for photos of the resident's former home and garden which acted as a visual reminiscence prompt.

- In order to complete the life story tool, some volunteers changed from using an iPad to using paper to record the life story.

### Volunteer recruitment:

- This pilot project originally aimed to recruit at least 2 volunteers who were over the age of 65. These volunteers were going to focus solely on the iPad part of the project.
- Growing Support consulted with the Marmalade Trust and RSVP West about the best ways to reach older volunteers, however unfortunately this was not as successful as they had hoped.
- As a result, Growing Support used some of their existing volunteers from the gardening group occurring at the same time, however this left the project stretched and the facilitator needed to be more hands-on than initially anticipated.

### Time and space:

- Running the iPad sessions at the same time as the regular gardening group generated a number of problems, particularly related to the lack of volunteers. When volunteers from the gardening group helped out on this life stories project, it left the gardening group stretched.
- Similarly, having the gardening group run in the same room at the same time was distracting for some participants, for example some were initially reluctant to leave the gardening group to do the life stories work.

### Limitations of the Tangible Memories app:

- The project planned to transfer the life stories created on the iPads to the care homes so that the carers could also use the information to support the resident and it could be shared with family members. However, it turned out that the app could only work on one iPad at a time and the information could not be printed, only transferred one page at a time via email, which minimised the impact of the project. In the future this would need to be modified in order to have more impact.

### Partnership with care homes:

- During the course of the pilot project, some misunderstandings and miscommunication occurred between Growing Support and the care homes involved in the project, for example regarding family member involvement, residents not being ready to take part, and the lack of availability of care home staff to provide support during the sessions.
- The use of a written specification between the provider and care home would help to reduce the risk of misunderstandings and differing expectations.



Running the gardening group at the same time had some benefits but also tended to be a distraction from the life stories project.

## Learning, recommendations and advice for similar projects

### Delivery model:

- Growing Support trialled life story development in group settings as well as on a one-to-one basis, and found that both formats can be very successful.
- Barriers to engaging residents in group work and encouraging peer support are a) motivating residents to take part and b) identifying interests when residents have difficulty with verbal communication. It is important for the care home to be engaged with the project and to help motivate residents to participate, help identify their interests and help adapt activities to meet the individual needs of the participants.

### Technology:

- Technology can get in the way of successful life story work, as well as add to it. Having some pre-prepared photos or images and/or doing some of the inputting onto the iPad after talking through the life story tool may allow conversations to flow better.
- This pilot project enabled Growing Support to test the use of iPads and reflect on other ways



Technology can aid successful life story work but can sometimes also hinder it. Back-up resources should also be prepared in case of technological difficulties.

these could be used in the future, for example making a virtual 'scrap book' of a gardening group's achievements.

### Skills and confidence:

- Volunteers may initially lack the confidence to work in a one-to-one environment with care home residents, particularly if they have not had experience of this before. It is important to ensure they are given adequate support in order to build their confidence and for any necessary training (including technology) to be built into project costs.
- It is important for life story work to be completed by staff / volunteers with the relevant skills, knowledge and confidence to make it a success.

### Combination with other activities:

- It is difficult for a facilitator to run an activity session at the same time as supporting a volunteer to run a 1:1 life story session. Life stories may work better if completed as their own piece of work in the future.

### Time considerations:

- Undertaking a one-to-one life story can take longer than initially anticipated.
- It is difficult for a facilitator to run an activity session at the same time as supporting a volunteer to run a 1:1 life story session. Life stories may work better if completed as their own piece of work in the future.

### Family involvement:

- There was little family involvement in this pilot project, which care home staff and Growing Support staff saw as a missed opportunity. In the future, it would be beneficial to find ways to improve family engagement in the life story creation work.

## Case study: Ms D

Ms D, 67, a resident living at Robinson House Care Home completed the outdoor life story tool with support from Julia, Growing Support's volunteer.

Ms D brought along an object which represented the outdoors to her and talked about her early memories of the outdoors and what it means to her. Using the iPad she found a picture on Google Maps of the house she used to live in and talked about the garden she grew up in.



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

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