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Bristol Ageing Better

Group Work Peer Pilot Projects

Key Learning

**Learning
Digest**

Group Work Peer Support Pilot Projects: Key Learning

December 2015 – August 2017

When we were planning the activities of Bristol Ageing Better to tackle loneliness and isolation in people over 50, feedback from older people and partners was that there should be increased opportunities for people to meet, socialise and feel secure doing it. This idea would address the isolation element and, over time, these opportunities for social contact could also reduce people's feelings of loneliness.

There was a lot of interest from BAB partners to develop projects that provided social contact and while the proposals were many and varied, the overarching purpose was to bring people together around a common interest and to build people's confidence and sense of wellbeing through these. With so many fantastic ideas it was hard to decide which we would fund and so, in the spirit of Test and Learn, we commissioned 16 pilots.

Over the course of 20 months we collected a fantastic amount of learning and these pilots had a significant impact on the programme. These were one of the first projects funded through Bristol Ageing and as we prepare for our fifth and final year, it is great to see the impact and legacy that these projects have had.

Adam Rees, Bristol Ageing Better Programme Director

Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) is a partnership of individuals and organisations working together to reduce isolation and loneliness among older people in Bristol. It is one of fourteen Ageing Better areas that have been funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better Programme.

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, with the aim of informing future larger scale commissioning.

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.



Three volunteer Alcohol Support Champions from the group work peer support pilot project run by Bristol Drugs Project

This report provides an overview of the key learning to emerge from these pilot projects. The sixteen funded projects were:

R N I B

See differently



Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB): Partnered with Guide Dogs, Action on Hearing Loss and Sense to deliver peer-support taster sessions on 'Living with Sensory Loss'. These taster sessions then generated referrals for a more specific peer support session within each organisation.

Alive: Partnered with RSVP West to recruit and train older volunteers to deliver weekly group support sessions within care homes. These volunteers delivered music-based activity workshops.

Bristol Drugs Project: Recruited volunteer Alcohol Support Champions aged 50+. These volunteers delivered peer-led Alcohol Brief Interventions to raise awareness of alcohol use within services and help services to respond appropriately to those in need of support.

Carers Support Centre: Developed and delivered peer support courses for older carers in 3 areas of Bristol. The content of these courses was developed in conjunction with older carers.

Cruse Bereavement Care: Delivered a peer support friendship group for those affected by bereavement, which included social and leisure activities with group members encouraged to take the lead.

Developing Health & Independence: Delivered a photography project focusing on isolation in later life as a result of substance misuse.

Growing Support Pilot 1: Used the iPad app 'Tangible Memories' to capture the outdoor-focused life stories of people with dementia living in care homes. The aim was to enable care home residents to make stronger connections with both their peers and the care home staff.

Growing Support Pilot 2: Partnered with the Knowle West Health Association to support older people with dementia to access community gardening activities.

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Bristol & Avon Chinese Women's Group (BACWG): Delivered 24 cookery sessions led by older volunteers and open to all BME communities. The aim was to learn about different cultures and expand cooking skills.

Happy City: Adapted their '5 ways to wellbeing' training to focus specifically on positive ageing. Volunteer 'Wellbeing Champions' who were already active and trusted within their communities were trained to pass this knowledge on to other older people within the community.

The Harbour: Aimed to provide counselling to 6 older couples affected by dementia, based on the 'Living Together with Dementia' model developed by the Tavistock Centre for Couples Relationships.

The Reader: Following a number of consultative taster sessions, a weekly shared reading group for older people was established at Blaise Weston Court Dementia Day Care Centre.

All Aboard Watersports: Peer-support within the context of water-based activities. A volunteer peer mentor was also recruited to help co-design the project.

Life Cycle UK: Created a peer-led cycling group in South Bristol. Volunteers and participants worked together to plan local cycle rides, with the aim of improving cycling confidence and encouraging an active lifestyle.

NCBI Bristol & Bristol Black Carers: Three peer-support workshops were delivered to those aged 50+, focusing on previous experiences of combatting loneliness and/or isolation.

University of Bath: Regular peer-support sessions aiming to increase the physical and social activity of older people who were starting to have difficulties with the activities of daily living.

Group Work Peer Support Pilot Projects: Key Learning



Key Learning

Finding participants

- When deciding on the specific activities of your project, carry out extensive research of the local landscape in order to avoid duplication. When there is close duplication it makes it harder to find participants and deliver something valuable.
- Do not underestimate the staff time it takes to carry out development work. There is no single strategy to find participants that will work on its own, rather it is a combination of different things. For example it is not usually sufficient to rely on mailings and social media alone.
- It can sometimes take a few months of delivering the project before momentum picks up and participant numbers increase. This longer 'lead in' time can be difficult for short projects but can be factored into longer-term projects.

Strategies might involve...

- Building one-to-one relationships with other organisations to increase your profile in different geographical areas. Embedding the project into other services which already exist and providing them with referral guidance can help to increase the number of referrals.
- Putting up flyers/posters in different locations, such as park notice boards.
- If the project has a drop-in style, then it can work well to find new participants through those who are already involved. For example, asking them to bring a neighbour. If they use social media, you could ask them to post photos of the project or to share your page amongst their network, which can help to attract other older people in their network to participate.
- If the project regularly uses the same venue, it might work for them to signpost older people to your project so that they are made aware of your project.
- Training and supporting older people as Community Advocates to help spread the word about the project within the local community.

- Many peer support projects are likely to attract more female participants than male. In order to address this imbalance, a more targeted form of project promotion could be undertaken.
- It may help to offer a 'buddy' system where volunteers can accompany new participants to the group for the first time. This worked well in one pilot project as a form of support for those who felt nervous turning up on their own.

There is no single strategy of finding participants that will work on its own



There are many ways in which older people were involved in the design of these peer support pilot projects



Coproduction and involving older people in decisions

There are many ways in which older people can be involved in the design, development and delivery of an activity session. Examples include...

- At the start of each session, participants can decide how they want to be involved and what specific activities they want to contribute to.
- Helping with marketing, for example contributing to designing posters and other marketing materials.
- A project advisory group made up of older adults who provide input and feedback on specific aspects of the project.
- Holding regular feedback meetings with participants and volunteers to decide how to further progress the project.

Encouraging older participants and volunteers to take on additional responsibilities, such as being involved in project decisions, can help them feel a sense of ownership and inclusion in the project.

Project delivery

- Having two members of staff involved in a peer support session can add value to the content, however this is also an intensive time allocation which may not always be needed for the entire project. It might be useful to plan on using two members of staff, but then reassess whether this is needed once the project has begun and you are aware of participant numbers and individual needs.
- It is important to have a strong facilitator who can make participants feel at ease and willing to open up, particularly around sensitive subjects. To do this, a balance between course structure and flexibility is needed. The skills of the facilitator in being able to respond to a range of needs can be well met in a small group.
- It can work well to design a programme which has a core foundation but can then be flexibly adapted according to individual interests and support needs. This includes practical needs as well as the different learning styles of people taking part, enabling participants to shape the group instead of it simply being a workshop led by a facilitator.
- Sometimes it can work well for activities to be drop-in as it means there is no pressure for participants to attend every session, which is appealing for some people. However sometimes a drop-in format may not work as it does not encourage regular attendance and therefore affects the relationships participants are able to build with each other.



Having more than one member of staff or volunteers on hand can add value to the content of a group work peer support session.

Paying attention to the seating arrangements can help improve accessibility and inclusion



Accessibility and inclusion

- It is valuable to offer different levels of involvement so that each participant can decide how they want to be involved depending on how they feel. This can particularly help if participants have low levels of confidence, and may enable the project to reach those who otherwise would not have participated.
- A circle seating arrangement for group sessions can help to improve accessibility for those with hearing loss and encourage more equal power dynamics.
- If a project involves a shared meal, it is best for this to be eaten at a table if possible rather than on laps, in order to be as inclusive as possible for those with disabilities and different levels of mobility.

Transport

- Transport was a common challenge for many of the pilot projects, particularly if participants are not car drivers and the venue is not well-served by public transport.
- If possible, it can be valuable to provide free transport for those who need it in order to ensure they can still participate.
- Dial-a-Ride can be used as a transport option, however sometimes they will not be able to accommodate the request. One way to overcome this challenge is to recruit a 'standby' volunteer driver who can provide transport for participants who are unable to be picked up by Dial-a-Ride.
- When arranging transport, consider the timings of this as a carefully planned peer support activity can be disrupted when individuals arrive late.



Transport was a common challenge among participants in these pilot projects

Volunteers

The role of volunteers:

- Many of the peer support pilot projects involved older volunteers, in addition to staff and participants. Older volunteers provide an additional level of peer support compared to a project being solely led by staff.
- It can be valuable to have a small group of experienced, committed volunteers. This allows for continuity and stability within the project. Volunteers get to know the story and background of each participant, meaning they can be alert to anything which they (and the group) need to be sensitive to. Regular contact with the same volunteers also means that participants can get to know them, which helps in creating a welcoming atmosphere.
- It is beneficial to have more than one volunteer assisting with project activity sessions, as one-to-one activity can be more rewarding for participants by allowing their full involvement and promoting social contact.

Recruiting volunteers:

- Some pilots found it challenging to recruit older volunteers with the relevant background or life experience, as some people may lack confidence about learning something new or may have become used to being relatively inactive.
- Allow longer than expected for volunteer recruitment, particularly if the role requires specific skills and interests, as a peer support volunteer role is not always a traditional volunteering role.
- Working closely with an organisation who has experience and expertise in recruiting volunteers (for example RSVP West) is valuable and can help this process.
- 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.
- If possible, finding volunteers who live close to where the volunteering opportunity will take place may help to reduce volunteer drop-out rates. However this is sometimes not possible.

Training volunteers:

- It can be valuable for the training given to volunteers to emphasise the need for flexibility and to always expect the unexpected.
- Volunteer training should cover broad skills (for example engaging with care home residents) but also specific knowledge which will be needed within the volunteering role (for example around any technology that will be used).
- It can also be useful to regularly ask volunteers about their training needs in order to provide them with the best support and increase their confidence within their role.

Supporting volunteers:

- Volunteers may initially lack the confidence to work in a one-to-one setting with an older person, particularly if they have not had experience of this before or the individual has high support needs.
- 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.
- It is important to recognise the impact and benefits of volunteering for the volunteers themselves. It can work well to ensure volunteers feel part of a cohesive group, for example by sharing a weekly email or text update.

Enabling communication between participants can play a key role in a project becoming sustainable



Sustainability

- The nature of the pilot projects meant they were not required to focus on sustainability as part of their funding. However one pilot project set up a Facebook and Whatsapp group for participants to encourage them to share information, support each other and ask questions of each other.
- Training volunteers to lead and facilitate peer support sessions can help the project be more sustainable as well as ensuring older people are at the heart of the activity.

Completing the CMF (Common Measurement Framework) evaluation questionnaires:

- Allow time at the beginning and end of the project for these evaluation questionnaires to be completed (at least 30 minutes). Additional staff support while these are being completed would be useful as, depending on the individual, these may take a long time to complete and one-to-one assistance may be needed. These time considerations should be factored in advance when planning how your project will complete them.
- It is also important to plan how the 6-month follow up forms will be completed (e.g. whether they will be posted to participants, whether a phone call is needed first to explain this, whether a face-to-face session will be organised to complete these etc.)
- Facilitators should feel confident explaining the purpose of the CMFs to participants and answering any questions about them. The facilitator plays an important role in participants being in a positive mindset about completing the CMFs. For example, some of the questions are very personal and it is important for facilitators to warn participants about this in advance and to be able to explain why such personal questions are being asked.



Time to complete these evaluation questionnaires should be factored into the project from the outset.



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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>**