




**BRISTOL
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The Reader Group Work Peer Support Pilot

June 2016 - June 2017

The Reader - Group Work Peer Support Pilot

2

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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 The Reader, including their successes and challenges. 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 from The Reader provided a weekly shared reading group for older people in Bristol.

A period of taster sessions were conducted during September – November 2016 and, in addition to raising awareness of the project, The Reader used these to consult with older people about factors such where the shared reading group within Bristol should be located.

Following this period of consultative taster sessions, The Reader were faced with a number of decisions about possible locations and frequencies for the shared reading group. The Reader decided that the Blaise Weston Court Dementia Day Care Centre would be the best location to start the shared reading group, and that this would take place on a weekly basis.

This decision was made taking a number of factors into account including:

- The popularity of the taster session in this area
- That the group could be open to residents and non-residents
- The proactive attitude of the day care centre staff in both promoting the group and attending themselves
- The speed which the weekly group could be established at this venue
- The neighbourhood had one of the higher risks of loneliness and isolation within Bristol

This shared reading group began in December 2016, and took place on a weekly basis for a 1.5 hour session per week until June 2017.

In total, The Reader delivered 10 taster sessions and 25 weekly reading group sessions, creating 197 reading experiences for 57 individual participants.

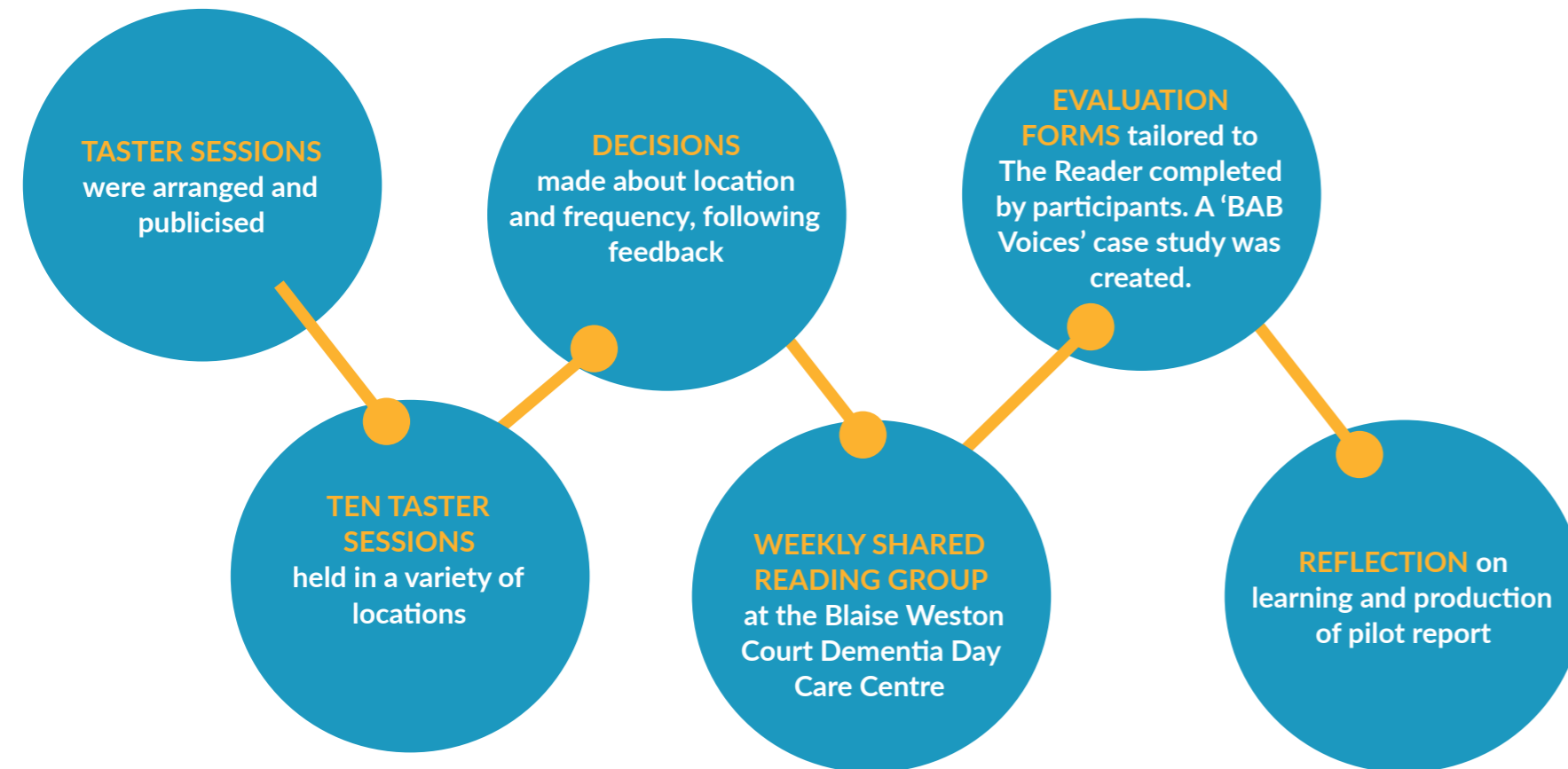
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3

Project process



Outcomes for participants

BAB's usual outcomes measurement tools (the CMF – Common Measurement Framework) could not be used with participants in this project due to them having a diagnosis of dementia. The Reader used their own evaluation forms instead as these had been designed to be completed by individuals with dementia.

A 'BAB Voices' case study was also created, which includes a short video of the project. This is available on the BAB website here: <http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/case-studies/bab-voices-the-reader/>

Case study:

J has engaged with Shared Reading in a surprising way. J normally sits in the corner of the room away from the main circle of people. She likes the quiet and finds louder group members overpowering. Often when I ask her how she is, she replies "not so good today". She likes to gaze out of the window at the view of the Severn and notice changes in the seasons and colours.

It would be easy to say that J didn't take part in the group, however, there have been breakthrough moments where her engagement with the literature and the people in the room have been poignant and lucid. After reading Storm on the Island by Seamus Heaney, J said "it's very sobering that line...'strange it is a huge nothing we fear'...growing older can be like that but it needn't be'.

"It's very relaxing being read to. You can let it wash over you...you don't have to worry about what to say next... reading stories together- it's the oldest thing we have, yet better still" (J, Group Member)



Each participant decided their own level of involvement.

Project successes

Participant engagement:

- **Engagement:** All participants engaged with the shared reading. Even quiet individuals showed a keen interest in the literature and the discussions.
- **Extended impact:** Some of the participants took reading material home with them to read alone or with relatives, which extended the impact of the shared reading group.

Different levels of participation:

- **Different levels of involvement:** Each participant decided their own level of involvement depending how they felt. For some, this involved commenting on what the group had read, while for others it involved listening or engaging through actions.
- **Group support:** The facilitator started reading out the poem or story, and then asked the participants whether anyone wanted to read aloud to the group. Some wished to do so, and the rest of the group were very supportive. This group support meant that quieter participants who found reading aloud difficult or scary were supported to do so if they wanted to give it a try. The group also sometimes read out loud all together which created a great sense of community and meant people could read aloud without having to do so on their own.

Project successes (continued)

Flexibility and coproduction:

- **Participant decisions:** Participants decided on the format of the shared reading sessions, including what literature they read and what they wanted to discuss. An example of this is that they chose to sing at the end of one of the group sessions.
- **Structure and flexibility:** A key factor in this coproduction was the need for the shared reading sessions to be both structured and flexible. The group leader prepared the reading material in advance but took a variety of options so that participants could choose what they wanted to read during the session. This meant that participants shaped the group instead of it simply being a workshop led by a facilitator.
- **Specific suggestions:** Participants suggested stories and poems to read each week. Some also asked for a session to be shaped around a specific theme.
- **Power dynamics:** All members of the group supported each other, which meant that the traditional power dynamic between staff and participants was reduced. Staff were not 'in the know', which provided a health change from the usual roles of carer and participant.



The shared reading sessions were coproduced with participants.

Key challenges and what would be done differently in the future

Publicity difficulties:

- The Reader used a wide variety of methods to publicise the project, including:
 - Within the local area of each taster session
 - The venue it was being held in (including their websites and social media channels)
 - Articles in the local press (Horfield & Lockleaze Voice, The Pigeon, Ujima Radion Babbers show and BBC Radio Bristol)
 - During events within the city or run by other organisations (Celebrating Age Festival, Lockleaze Volunteering Fair, LinkAge Wellbeing Day and Health City Week Mingle)
 - Through other organisations (Alzheimers' Society, Contact the Elderly, Age UK, Bristol Older People's Forum, Age Action Alliance, LinkAge, the Dementia Wellbeing Service, Community Access Support, Second Step, U3A, RSVP, Connect Lockleaze, North Bristol Advice Centre, Bristol Libraries and Hanover Care Homes)
 - Through Community Development workers promoting it within their communities
- However running 10 taster sessions in 10 weeks was difficult, as it didn't allow enough time to effectively publicise each one, resulting in some taster sessions having very low attendance. If taster sessions were undertaken in the future it may be useful to allow more time for publicity in the build up to these sessions, which may mean not running as many within such a short time period.
- The Reader received feedback on their publicity materials and, in the future, they would make the flyers and posters as age-friendly as possible. This may include bigger fonts and colour combinations to help enable easier reading.

Reading content:

- Longer stories did not work well in the group, and it was harder to keep everyone engaged when these were read. This was noticed early on in the delivery of the project, which meant that shorter stories could be chosen for future sessions.

Learning, recommendations and advice for similar projects

Consultation with older people:

- Rather than consulting older people through taster sessions, it might work well to try a different format for this consultation process. This might be able to happen through networking events, for example.

Finding participants:

- It would be valuable to have a signposting or referral pathway with the venue and also with local organisations so that more isolated members of the community can be made aware of the group.
- Training and supporting older people as Community Advocates would help projects to spread the word and also help the project to be embedded in the local community.

Continuity and sustainability:

- This shared reading group was staff led, which worked with this specific group of people due to many having diagnoses of dementia, however in the future projects could train older people to be Reader Leader volunteers. This would ensure older people were at the heart of the activity and also enable the project to be more sustainable.



Training older people to be Reader Leader volunteers could work well in the future.

Notes

10





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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