

fit as a fiddle: opening up lives

Initial findings from the London fit as a fiddle programme



Background

Since 2008, Age UK London has been delivering the fit as a fiddle programme across London, supporting people in later life to get and stay healthy, maintain independence, and improve their quality of life.

fit as a fiddle is a nationwide programme, funded by the Big Lottery for five years, and supporting people aged 50 and over with physical activity, healthy eating, and mental wellbeing. fit as a fiddle is being delivered in each of the nine English regions, offering a diverse range of activities and services tailored to the differing needs of local populations. There is also a national project developing resources and training appropriate to different settings.

In London we adopted a community development approach, working with small community groups and in day centres and sheltered housing, to engage those older residents who may not be reached by mainstream health promotion initiatives. Our projects encompassed three distinct strands: Healthy Eating, Tackling Obesity, and Community Health Engagement. To date we have run 19 projects delivered by Age UK and Age Concern organisations in 16 boroughs, reaching almost 3000 older people.

“It definitely helped me get on my feet. It gave me something to aim for, after a year of sitting around feeling sorry for myself, I couldn’t do it any more. I enjoy volunteering, getting to know people and keeping active.” (Participant)



Our approach

Age UKs in London have strong and active links with their local communities, including Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups. We distributed funding to Age Concerns and Age UKs who were able to evidence a clear need for fit as a fiddle in their borough and demonstrate strong links with the relevant target populations. Each delivery organisation

Small changes make a big difference

Our projects supported people to make small, sustainable changes to their lifestyles that could be maintained over time, helping them to feel fitter, happier, and more in control. For different people this might mean being able to cut down on medication, rediscovering their love of cooking, or making new friends in their local neighbourhood. We used a range of tools to help people increase confidence and sustain motivation: food and activity diaries, one-to-one mentoring, peer group support, and above all, fun.

Initial evidence from focus groups, and testimonials from participants, shows that this approach really works and that increases in activity levels have been sustained by individuals, and healthy living messages embedded within communities.

“I haven’t been to my doctors since I’ve been here. [Before] I would have gone 5 or 6 times a year I would have thought.” (Participant)

Inclusion

From men living alone, to Chinese, Tamil and Irish elders, to stroke sufferers and people with dementia, we have worked (and are still working) with a wide range of disadvantaged groups. XX% of our participants are from BME communities; but for us inclusion means much more than this – it means reaching out to those groups and individuals who are truly isolated, and devising innovative ways to engage them. Our two newest projects are working with groups including: Bangladeshi men, older men living with HIV, the Orthodox Jewish community, and silver surfers. However some of the most successful outcomes have also been seen in mixed groups where participants from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds have shared and learnt together.

“It’s been great for cultural cohesion – eating is such a sociable thing. Put that plate in front of them in BHS and they wouldn’t touch it, but at our events they’re all tucking in.” (Project manager, Healthy Eating project)

Sustainability

We have worked closely with volunteers or champions from the community groups themselves to help sustain activities when a project’s funding comes to an end. Many of our earliest fit as a fiddle groups continue to flourish: the Buddies at Charlton Athletic, Silver Rainbow in Croydon and the Nordic Walkers in Kingston, to name a few. Project officers supported the volunteers with finding free or cheap venues, and accessing training such as Food Hygiene or Walk Leader training. Some groups chose to introduce client contributions, others applied for small grants, to continue funding a fitness instructor for example.

“I’ve seen groups sustained, which was a real surprise and not something I see with any other groups I organise.” (Partner organisation, Kingston-upon-Thames)

Support and capacity building

In addition, Age UK London helps develop best practice in Healthy Ageing and Wellbeing work for organisations across London, by holding free seminars sharing learning from the fit as a fiddle programme, feeding into regional policy development, and looking for new funding opportunities for Age UKs and our partners in the capital.

“A lot of food for thought for my own project. Very useful to have the folder with key nutritional issues linked to older people.”

“Listening to the impact of previous projects I felt really proud to be part of fit as a fiddle” (Seminar delegates)

Healthy Eating: Age UK Croydon

Age UK Croydon ran two fit as a fiddle projects between 2008-2010. The first project was delivered in partnership with ten small community groups in the borough, over a year. The groups ranged from lunch clubs and sheltered housing to an allotment group, a local Mind group and a group of older gay men. The activities were tailored to the groups' interests and to the types of facilities available: in some venues they ran cook and eat sessions, in others they interspersed info sessions on diet and nutrition with healthy meals out in local restaurants.

Volunteers recruited from the community groups gradually took on the responsibility of organising and leading the sessions, in many cases ensuring their longer-term sustainability.

In year two, Age UK Croydon decided to focus the project on residents in sheltered accommodation, using communal eating as a means of combatting loneliness and isolation.

"I realised how isolated people [living in sheltered housing] can be. Social isolation and poor diet are so interlinked" (Project officer).

"We saw that older people do want to make changes, but they don't want to live on lettuce" (Project manager).

Again they worked with the groups throughout the year, slowly building up trust and confidence. The fun atmosphere and free lunches drew people in for the first few sessions, then more educational elements were introduced. Gradually volunteers emerged from the groups, who were encouraged to take on a lead role in organising the sessions.

"I now have more energy, I cook from scratch, have lots of vegetables, I garden and walk more, and it's given me a new lease of life" (Participant)

"I now shop more wisely and understand food better" (Participant who suffers from diabetes)

The biggest impact of the project was in increasing wellbeing and reducing isolation. Several new groups were formed as a direct result of fit as a fiddle: for instance Silver Rainbow, a lunch club for older LGBT people in the borough, who three years on, still meet up twice a month for a healthy lunch, and whose membership has swelled from 3 to over 20.

"The more members we can include the better, it's about social inclusion" (Participant, Silver Rainbow)



Tackling Obesity: Age Concern Kingston*

The aim of Age Concern Kingston's fit as fiddle project was to tackle obesity through physical activity and promoting a healthy lifestyle. The programme comprised of ten 6-week courses delivered across the borough over the course of a year. These courses lasted 2 hours each week and were divided between an hour of physical exercise, promoting flexibility, strength, balance, coordination and muscle tone, and a healthy lifestyle workshop which focused on healthy eating, menu planning, sharing recipes, and a weekly weigh-in. Waist and BMI measurements were recorded at the start and end of each 6-week course.

The project surpassed its target of engaging 80 older people, achieving more than double this with 166 participants. This was in part due to the activities, which aimed to be both fun and involve moderately intensive activity to support weight loss and fitness. Activities included: Nordic Walking, Keep Fit, Bollywood Dancing, Line Dancing and Aquacise.

Impacts on older people

- 73% of participants lost between 1-5 kilograms in weight, 25% losing 3kg or more
- 63% reduced their waist size by between 1-5 centimetres
- 55% reduced their Body Mass Index by 1-3 points
- By the end of the project, 94% considered that they ate a healthy balanced diet, with a 25% increase in the numbers eating fish twice a week and 15% increase in whole grains
- The number of participants taking moderate exercise 3-5 times per week had risen from 34% to 86%, while the number who 'never exercised' had fallen from 18% to 0

"There's a difference, not only have I started this [keep fit classes] which was the very first time I'd done any exercise. But I also started walking again which I used to love, and I do 3 hours a week, an hour every other day. And that is only from [fit as a fiddle]. It's amazing, I don't get so breathless, I can now walk again." (Participant)

"I can play tennis and football with my grandchildren and I'm not getting breathless like I used to." (Participant)

Participants also reported that they had improved muscle tone, posture, balance and flexibility. Some reported being able to take baths again due to increased upper arm strength, while others cited increased mobility and coordination. A large proportion of the focus group reported a reduction in the number of falls they had experienced.

"I feel much more confident that I'm not going to fall. It's really tremendous what it's done for our balance." (Participant)

"I found within the first 6 weeks, my doctor was saying 'What are you doing? There's a difference'... I couldn't get my arms up to do my hair, but I can now" (Participant)

*Study conducted by Ecorys Research Consultants

Community Health Engagement: Age UK Newham

In Newham, Tower Hamlets and Hackney, a consortium led by Age UK Newham has been pioneering an innovative fit as a fiddle project based on the idea of Activity Buddies.

An isolated older person will be paired with a 'Buddy' who shares things in common with them in terms of age, interests and culture. It can be difficult even going out for a walk to the local shop if you have restricted mobility, and to attend a new class or activity utterly nerve-wracking. The Buddy is there with them every step of the way, supporting them to do more of the things they want to do, whether it's a walk in the park, a cookery or yoga session, or an organised trip to the theatre.

One Italian gentleman was so isolated he couldn't walk to the end of the street; his sole contact was a neighbour dropping by occasionally. After joining fit as a fiddle, he revealed that he would really like to visit a traditional Sicilian food store, which reignited his love of food. Before long he was running the men's cookery group, teaching other men how to make healthy Italian food.



"I can mix, but I don't mix. All my regular mates are gone. I'm more alone now than I've ever been in my life. So I thought I'd better do something about it" (Participant)

'Mentees' meet together for a coffee every month, getting to know each other and proffering ideas for trips and events to be planned over the coming months.

Regular activities, all volunteer-led, include a range of cookery sessions for different target groups, as well as beginners' IT. Participants are also linked into other activities going on at Age UK Newham: Nordic Walking has been very popular, and four of the volunteer Buddies have now trained up to become Walk Leaders. Other groups of participants have taken swimming lessons, or had 'riotous fun' on the Nintendo Wii.

"Its taken me in a different direction, I used to just cook steak and kidney pie and things like that, but now I'll try all sorts. I look forward to it." (Participant)

"I noticed that I can go up the steps with more of a spring, because the Nordic Walking exercises the whole body." (Participant)

"I would have been sitting at home doing nothing. The head teacher at a local primary school, now she knows I volunteer, has asked me to form a school chess club." (Buddy)

What's unique about fit as a fiddle?

It's tailored to each community – their age, cultural background and interests

"I went to my Doctor's surgery and everywhere I could and there was nothing for senior citizens, nothing at all." (Participant)

"I went to another class, but eventually it got so embarrassing... they had 20 minutes doing exercises on the floor, but I was finding this more and more difficult due to my arthritis. I found that I was having to crawl to the radiator to pull myself up. It was really embarrassing because there were lots of young mums there, leaping about all over the place." (Participant)

It embeds healthy living activities within friendship networks and social groups

"It was very motivational [because there was] very gentle peer group pressure." (Participant)

"Since coming to [fit as a fiddle] and meeting each other, it has opened our lives out. Now we have a good social life, and a reliable network of people. We are very multi cultural and all have something different to share. It's now become a permanent fixture and we look forward to Wednesdays every week, because we have such a laugh." (Participant)



There's a dedicated staff member to run the project

"The key thing that makes it a lot more concentrated and successful is that you have a dedicated coordinator, who is just running this programme." (Partner organisation)

"The dedicated project worker was crucial... Engaging and delivering as well as strategically planning. There was a consistent face, a key person who can inspire confidence by engaging people with activities that they actually wanted to do. People in hard to reach areas have a lot of barriers so the consistent messages are really important. Also local community venues were identified, which is really important." (Partner organisation)

It uses volunteers from within the group as a key tool in developing trust, maximising resources and ensuring sustainability

"Access [to groups like the New Wine Church] was through the volunteers we recruited. They gave us access to their communities that we definitely wouldn't have had otherwise. New Wine was literally volunteer-led." (Project officer)

"[The volunteers] were amazing, it was like having a little army of people in. They're older people who had skills that aren't being used." (Project officer)

Our projects

Since the start of the programme in 2008 we have run projects in the following London boroughs:

Bexley, Brent, Bromley, Camden, Croydon, Greenwich, Hackney, Harrow, Hounslow, Kingston, Lambeth, Lewisham, Newham, Redbridge, Southwark, Tower Hamlets

To find out more about the fit as a fiddle programme and Age UK London's other wellbeing work, please contact:

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