



Health for All Connections: working with younger older people

Time to Shine end of project report
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Leeds
Older
People's
Forum

Time to
Shine

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Summary

The Connections project at [Health for All \(HFA\)](#) offered enjoyable and creative activities to involve older people. They had a particular interest in engaging older men, and people from Eastern European and African backgrounds living in Leeds. They hoped to use the learning from their experiences with Chinese and Indian communities to enable them to do this.

Connections worked hard to engage people from these communities with limited success. This report will look at the methods they used and how well they worked.

The work was centred around a skills hub based in South Leeds, with satellite venues across parts of the city with the greatest densities of residents from those groups. Initial plans included courses in skills like woodwork and photography, wellbeing sessions like mindfulness, and walking. The initial proposal was to encourage course participants to use the skills they had gained to keep the groups going independently. This in fact happened rarely, mostly because people were not able to gain sufficient skills or confidence in a six week block to enable them to carry an activity forward themselves.



However the hub and spoke model, and an increasing number of co-produced ideas for courses enabled people to remain engaged, and a number did become volunteers and continued to support the project.

One of the strengths of the Connections project was their readiness to move quickly to respond to people's interests and requests; this strength really came to the fore during the Covid pandemic.

The work they did included a lot of younger older people. This report should be read alongside the Time to Shine report [Working with Younger Older People](#).

“She loved to talk about the old times ... It soon became evident that she had a wealth of knowledge on Leeds civic history and we had a really good discussion ... we asked if she would like to be part of our ‘When I was Young’ group which we were initiating soon. Although hesitant at first we said we would really like her to come along as she could answer questions that nobody else would have the answers to. Wow! What a success the group was with Eileen practically leading it. You could visibly see her confidence grow over the weeks”

Health for All Connections in numbers

- 944 people took part in Connections between 2018 and 2022, with 749 older people participating regularly
- Demographic data was collected for 876 people:
 - » 80% were of White British heritage
 - » 14% were of Black African / Caribbean / Black UK heritage
 - » 3% were of Irish / Irish Traveller / Gypsy / Other White heritage
 - » 2% were of Eastern European heritage
 - » 1% were of Asian / Asian UK heritage
 - » 45% identified as male
- Connections was supported by 50 older volunteers (aged 50+) and 14 younger volunteers (aged 49 and under). Together they gave 476 hours of their time to support the project
- 11 case studies and test and learn case studies were written to share the project's learning and experiences.

Ethos

Health for All was successful during the first two years of Time to Shine, running both the [BME Seniors network](#) and [Lychee Red Chinese seniors](#). They planned to use the same model, recruiting community connectors with appropriate cultural and language skills and knowledge who would come into contact with isolated older people. The venues selected were familiar to people and groups were planned to meet cultural and language needs and be comfortable and welcoming.

They wanted to reach up to 300 people each year through 15-20 different weekly activities which would each run for a short amount of time. Group members could then be supported to take the group forward independently.

How did HFA Connections run?

The Connections project started with a range of activities they knew were popular from other work they had done, including marquetry, woodwork, photography, and IT. During the length of the project they tried other activities as they were able to consult with participants and potential participants. These involved outdoor activities like walking and gardening, and wellbeing classes including reiki, tai chi and mindfulness. The choice and development of activities was co-produced as soon as possible.



How did they try to engage with the Eastern European and African communities

The project set out to repeat their success with other minority ethnic communities, by approaching community members through trusted organisations and individuals.

Despite working very hard this element of the project was not successful.

“We have spent many hours meeting community leaders, posting flyers in relevant places, using social media, visiting libraries, community centres, places and areas of residence. We have done many hours of leg work and door knocking where we know the Africans & Eastern Europeans live and socialise. We have been to relevant churches, and have had many meetings with priests and pastors. We have gone way beyond our time and resources for these target groups and still we are finding it hard to reach them.”

Connections staff member

They approached older people in Eastern European communities through churches, and produced information in the three key languages. They made contact with members of the community through local shops but were told that many people in that age group were unavailable. People in their 50s were working, had returned to Europe following the Brexit vote, or were living in the UK specifically to support family members with children.

Feedback from the black African communities was similar, with an insistence from churches and pastors that their older members were either working or provided for by the community itself. The project workers persisted in trying to make connections recognising that there may have been gatekeeping in some of these comments.

The one success was through a Gambian community organisation which also included Senegalese and Guinean people. A group of women was very interested in a sewing class but had trouble accessing the venue. HFA was able to access additional funding to provide sewing machines, and ran the course in a venue that suited the group. The sewing group was successful and was followed by intergenerational work including a party. HFA started to break down some barriers and meet with a number of older people who expressed that they did not have many friends or social outlets. The project was about to explore what might be appropriate times and activities for people to meet when lockdown began.



The physical and psychological accessibility of groups

Connections worked hard to make courses welcoming and accessible for members and volunteers. The tutor was able to make the photography course accessible for someone with a visual impairment. When the project recruited a volunteer to work on cooking based activities who used a wheelchair, the woodwork team was able to adapt part of the kitchen to make it accessible.

Staff saw that some people were signing up for activities but then not arriving. People were finding the idea of attending a group for the first time daunting, so staff created an induction process that meant they could forge a connection to an individual. It was easier for them to join if they felt they knew someone before attending for the first time.

Post-lockdown Connections ran a drop-in cafe. This proved to be an invaluable space where people could come and get to know staff and others, and make tentative first enquiries about joining specific activities.



“Our community café is well attended and provides a social anchor for those who come. We are lucky to be able to use this time to make those who come aware of any new groups we are setting up and to get feedback on any groups they might already be attending.”

Connections staff member

Understanding Facebook as a tool

As a community organisation Health for All had an active Facebook page and the Connections project hoped to be able to make use of it to connect with older beneficiaries and to keep them connected. Initially it didn't seem to work, despite trying to connect with older people's social groups. They eventually made a breakthrough after talking to some older people's groups - and looked to subjects that interested older people, for example local historical societies and memories pages proved helpful. Once things got started they also found adult children of older people referring family members to the project.

Facebook became a useful tool as groups and activities were initiated after lockdown as staff were able to poll interests and times for groups with members and start new groups with better numbers, which helped them to become sustainable more quickly.

Project adaptations following lockdowns and pandemic responses

Like many other projects Connections was quick to go online after the initial period of uncertainty. They had already been running digital activities and were able to obtain funding for tablets and data and to support people to get online. They ran social groups, quizzes and found wellbeing courses to be well received. The initial success of these courses and the realisation they did not need to engage people from their normal geographical area meant they then partnered with others to reach more older people.

As the project continued into Covid recovery the groups they continued face-to-face were all focussed on aspects of the wellbeing work they had done. There were groups for getting outside and watching things grow and outdoor groups for gentle exercise to support good mental health.

Our allotment group offered people new skills, and a sense of purpose, as the food they grew was used in the community cafe to create nourishing healthy meals.

They also ran singing, craft and woodwork groups all of which offered a great sense of achievement. People continued to learn to do Reiki, and Tai Chi. Singing and walking were both very popular and enabled close connections and the opportunity for people to talk.



“On observation it’s clear to see how having something tactile to do really supports opening up with each other and a sense of comfort-ability in the group.”

Connections staff member

Online courses continued to offer mindfulness which were enjoyed by even the oldest beneficiaries, although they found the ideas unfamiliar at the start.

An interesting observation was the relatively low take-up of gentle exercise classes with which Connections aimed to increase strength and mobility. It seems people preferred - as with social isolation - a class that interested them first and foremost, and participants actually increased balance and strength by getting to the class.

Legacy

There is no direct continuation of the Connections project although HFA will continue to seek funding for one as they recognise the value of social connection for older people. However, a number of groups and activities (at present, the community cafe, singing, walking) will continue with other funding or in a self-organised way.

“Our groups have become a weekly anchor and there is natural referral to other activities happening nearby. We have loved to see how from joining one group our beneficiaries are then becoming part of a wider community and attending [more groups over time]”

Connections staff member

HFA has developed many new partnerships which will enhance their work with older people. Examples include FareShare Yorkshire, the Middletones (a local band), Linking Leeds, a local mindfulness practitioner, and Leeds Dads.

Learning

Like other projects working with younger older people, [Don't Call Me Old](#) and the [Great Outdoors Project](#), they underestimated the effects of ageism and intersectionality on participants. If people were available to join activities then they generally lacked the confidence to take a group on independently. The Connections project had estimated that people would be able to take a group on independently after 6 weeks but this proved not to be the case. People were able to become volunteers and help to run activities but only after a longer period of involvement, engaging in more than one activity.

In real life as well as online it's generally the hook that interests people, not a physical or mental health outcome.



And Finally

“One of the biggest things we have noticed and appreciated is the butterfly effect when it comes to removing isolation. It only seems to take one step out of vulnerability for more opportunities to arise for people. We have realised the importance of supporting people to take that first step and how fears can be unique; the support they need to join a group is also different.”


Connections staff member



Contact us

To find out more about Health for All go to www.healthforall.org.uk

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