AGE BETTER IN SHEFFIELD

Smart Phone Smart Friends

An Innovation Fund Project delivered by
Lai Yin Association

Introduction

Age Better in Sheffield is a partnership of organisations working to reduce loneliness and social isolation amongst people over 50 and to help them to live fulfilling lives. It is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and is one of 14 Ageing Better pilot areas across England working to explore what works in reducing loneliness and isolation. Age Better in Sheffield services are commissioned to focus on four target wards (Burngreave, Woodhouse, Firth Park and Beauchief and Greenhill) with a high percentage of the older population at risk of loneliness and isolation, as well as a number of hotspot areas across the city where there are particularly high numbers of people in groups at higher risk of loneliness and isolation (carers, people experiencing poor physical or mental health, people experiencing financial hardship and people from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds).

In 2017, eight pilot projects were commissioned through an Innovation Fund to explore new ideas for tackling loneliness and isolation. After an initial seed funding round in which organisations were supported to refine their proposals through co-design and design thinking tools with potential participants, five projects were commissioned to deliver their service over a year.

This report provides an overview of the Smart Phones Smart Friends project including the outcomes achieved and the lessons learned.

The Project

Context

Lai Yin Association is a charity which aims to promote and improve the welfare, education, health and well-being of Chinese and other BME women and their families. Lai Yin Association recognises that loneliness and isolation is an issue for Chinese elders for a number of reasons:

- Many older people in the Chinese community, particularly those who have recently migrated from China to look after grandchildren, are at risk of becoming severely isolated due to limited English skills and a lack of local connections outside the immediate family.
- Those who have worked in the catering industry, particularly men, may not have established a strong social network because of their long and unsocial working hours and are at risk of suffering from social isolation after retirement.
- Many older Chinese people have close relatives who still live in China or who have migrated to other countries and maintaining contact with them can be challenging.
- Older people may lack the confidence or experience to benefit fully from smartphone technology and feedback form local focus groups pointed to a lack of "older person friendly" training conducted in Chinese that could address this.

Smart Phones Smart Friends sought to address social isolation within the Chinese community by using smart phones for improved socialising and maintaining contact with family and friends.

Methodology

This report has been compiled following a learning and reflection workshop with the delivery partner Lai Yin Association, and draws on individual case studies and data from the CMF and Bespoke questionnaires.

Who we worked with

Project activities were designed primarily for Cantonese speakers as many of the participants were older Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong, but activities and materials were also produced in Mandarin and English.

The initial proposal had been to work with 68 participants but in fact only 38 were recruited to the project. Various factors contributed to this including the fact that that none of the target wards were heavily populated by Chinese people. This made it more difficult to recruit participants and ultimately only 3% came from ward areas while 54% came from hotspot areas. Lai Yin Association did do outreach in Woodhouse, Firth Park, Lowedges, Greenhill and Beauchief but there was insufficient time to build connections in these areas. The project relied on recruiting participants from within Lai Yin and 37% came from Sharrow. The Confucius Institute and the Chinese Community Centre were also involved in recruitment.

One smart phone training course did run in English at the Firth Park library and was attended by three participants from the Pakistani community. .

Participants

54%	Hotspot	
37%	Other	
0%	Burngreave	
0%	Firth Park	
3%	Woodhouse	
6%	Beauchief & Greenhill	

Volunteers

60%	Hotspot
40%	Other
0%	Burngreave
0%	Firth Park
0%	Woodhouse
0%	Beauchief & Greenhill

35
total participants

10
total volunteers
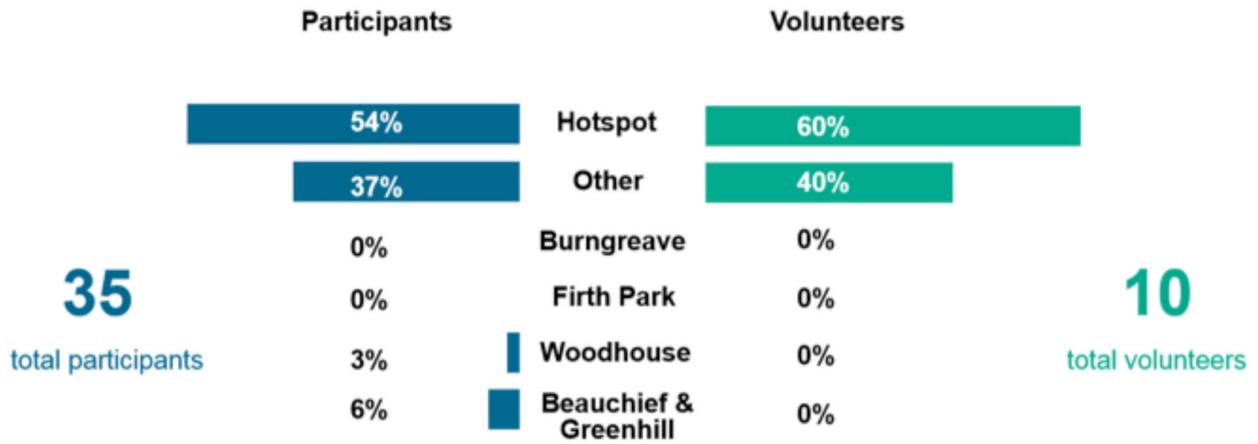
20% of the project's participants were male

80% of the project's participants were female

10% of the project's volunteers were male

90% of the project's volunteers were female

Smart Phones Smart Friends / Sheffield city 50+ population

Smart Phones Smart Friends	Age	Sheffield city 50+ population
11%	50 - 59	36%
51%	60 - 69	28%
29%	70 - 79	22%
9%	80 and over	14%

Smart Phones Smart Friends		Sheffield city 50+ population
0%	White British	93%
100%	BAME	7%
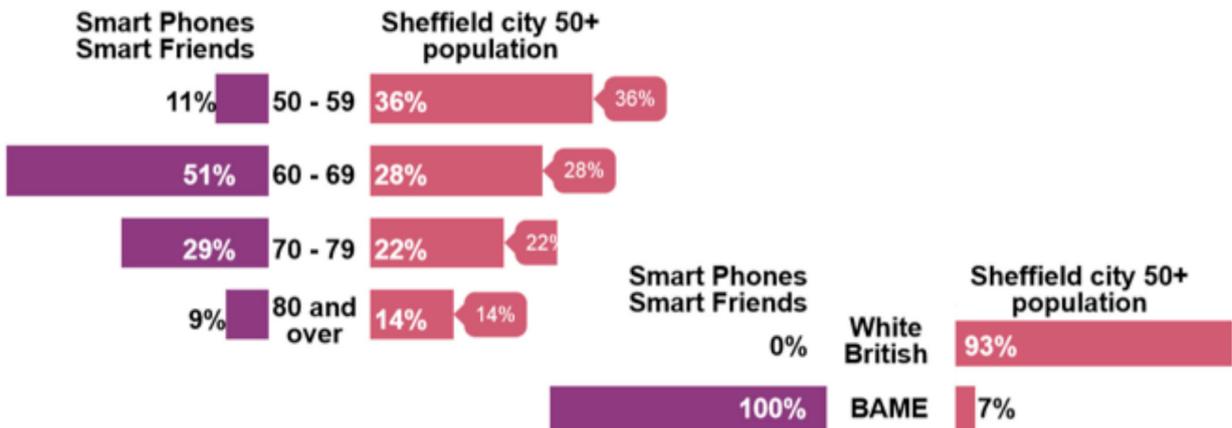
42% of Sheffield's 50+ population have a long term health condition or disability

11% of Smart Phones Smart Friends participants have a long term health condition or disability

0% of Smart Phones Smart Friends have a long term health condition or disability

Seed funding stage

During the seed funding stage of the project three taster sessions were offered. The Sheffield Chinese Community Centre (SCCC) and Confucius Institute got involved and core volunteers were recruited from within Lai Yin as well as external student volunteers. 48 people attended these sessions; they were divided into small groups with a designated lead volunteer and one to three helpers

The next stage was to offer one off beginner workshops which were aimed at those who had little or no experience of using smartphones. Group size varied from 8 to 15 people. This was useful as it provided an opportunity for Lai Yin to assess participants' current skills levels as well as giving the participants an insight into what to expect from the workshop programme.

Two workshops were held to train volunteers and this also contributed towards the co-design of the smart phone training. Older volunteers were less confident with smart phone technology and probably would have benefited from further training. In effect the workshops helped to train not only the participants but also the older volunteers.

Key learning points

A seed funding stage provides an opportunity to try something innovative and promotes the model of test and learn as there is time to try new approaches, evaluate, re-design and retest.

Having volunteers involved at this stage allowed for their input in co-designing the course content. Lai Yin was able to acquire a wealth of ideas from volunteers and participants from these taster sessions which were then fed into the design of the workshops. Volunteers were able to say which smart phone features would be most useful for beginners to engage with.

Initial engagement and recruitment

The project initially tried engaging participants by going out to schools. However, parents did not fit the criteria for the target age group, while grandparents often felt no need to learn smart phone skills as their children could do this for them. Those who attended the taster sessions prior to beginning the workshops were recruited through the Sheffield Chinese Community Centre with the Confucius Institute also becoming involved. Core volunteers were recruited through Lai Yin and student volunteers who could speak Cantonese or Mandarin as well as English, were recruited through the University of Sheffield.

Key learning points

Engaging older Chinese people form the target ward areas was very challenging due to the low numbers of Chinese people in these areas. The project was most successful where there was a well-established Chinese community and where Lai Yin had an existing relationship with that community. Outreach to target ward areas where Lai Yin had no previous history proved to be difficult as the project time scales did not allow for building new relationships

- Word of mouth was very important for recruitment particularly when it comes from trusted members of the community. The Chinese Community do not tend to respond well to publicity posters or other unsolicited information.

- Recruiting men to the project was difficult and only 20% of participants were male. The men who did engage were generally the husbands of female participants although one man self-referred from the Mandarin School.

- The involvement of Chinese students as volunteers was positive allowing participants an opportunity to build inter-generational relationships and it was also a way of older people reconnecting with their home country. Student volunteers clearly brought with them a confidence and familiarity with smart phone technology.

- Older people being recruited to the project were often reluctant to say if they felt socially isolated or lonely and there was very low reporting of mental wellbeing at the start of the project. This is more likely to be due to cultural issues and taboos rather than the absence of social isolation in the Chinese community. Older Chinese people surrounded by family do not identify as isolated but in fact have difficulty socialising with friends due to declining health, limited transport and poor social networks. They may not "feel" socially isolated but in fact can be at risk of social isolation if there is an unexpected change in family circumstances. Social isolation and loneliness among older Chinese people can be exacerbated by limited English skills as well as limited transport access or mental health issues that can make it difficult to build meaningful social networks.

"My social network mainly depends on family circle. Because of the differences in terms of social values, background, common interests, growing experience educational environment, social status, it is not easy for us to understand each other and make friends with westerners. Even sometimes, I feel kind of isolated from other Chinese (HK) immigrants."

Mrs Chen aged over 70

Project Delivery

Training was delivered through a series of four workshops lasting one and a half hours each, and attended by 6 to 8 people. The workshops were designed to help participants acquire basic digital knowledge and the skills to use a range of smart phone apps: WhatsApp, WeChat, Google Translate, Google Search, Google Maps and YouTube. After the final workshop participants had an opportunity to use their newly acquired digital skills to plan and participate in a group social activity. The final session of the project was a focus group where participants were asked to complete a questionnaire followed by lunch.

In addition to the group sessions, three participants were supported through 1:1 home visits during the project. These were very flexible with each person receiving two visits where the training was tailored to their specific needs.

Key learning points

Design of a digital skills training project has to take into account language and literacy when preparing learning materials and recruiting volunteers. Many of the participants were early immigrants with limited English skills and deteriorating Chinese literacy skills. Cantonese is the main language used within Lai Yin but many of the students who applied to volunteer spoke only Mandarin and English. The project successfully recruited 2 students who spoke Cantonese, Mandarin and English. For the session that was delivered in Firth Park the materials were translated into English even though the first language of the participants was Urdu.

Every phone is different and although eight phones were purchased for the project with the idea that these would be used by participants in the workshop sessions people wanted to learn using their own phones. There were some issues related to the difference between Apple interface and Android. It was important to teach people to recognise the basic icons and features of their phone and to repeat this frequently.

 Apps were chosen following coproduction with volunteers and participants during the seed funding stage and the project focused on apps that support social interaction and the 5 Ways to Wellbeing.

Including YouTube in the workshop content was very valuable because it provided the opportunity for participants to watch news and other programmes in their own language. It also provided access to Cantonese music, films, recipes and health advice. This had the added value of prompting conversations among participants, encouraging them to reminisce and promoting peer support.

Voice messaging is a very important skill to teach as it is often more accessible for older people than text.

Typing in Chinese is complicated by the existence of different keyboard styles for the variety of Chinese writing styles that exist: Mainland China's pinyin, Hong Kong traditional Chinese, Taiwan, Singapore etc. Also older people living in the UK for many years may have forgotten how to write Chinese characters. It can be a very time consuming task.

"Yes, it is very difficult for me to learn. The language of my smart phone cannot show in Chinese, which is my main stumbling block to start to learn to utilise my smartphone"
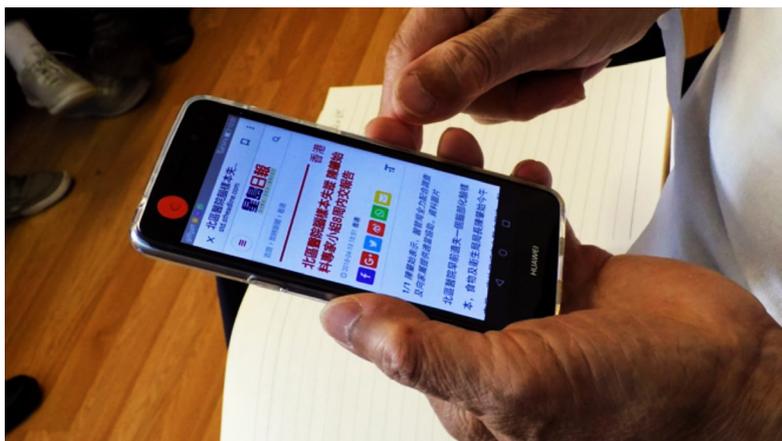
Mrs Zhang

Alongside learning to use apps it was important to include content on digital etiquette/culture in the workshops. For example, highlighting the reasons why someone might not reply to a message straight away: limited data, no Wi-Fi available, busy with other tasks. It was important to give reassurance that not responding immediately does not signify you are being rude and not receiving a fast response does not mean that the other person is ignoring you. It was also important to address issues of digital security such as not disclosing personal or confidential data e.g. bank account details.

"During the courses in Lai Yi, I felt guilty that I couldn't absorb what the teacher taught me and I always made a great deal of notes after I was back home."

Retaining the workshop information can be difficult and practical sessions which allow people to test out their learning are essential for consolidation of skills. Due to a decline in cognitive capacity some of the participants did find that acquiring new skills was a challenge but they did master different degrees of digital skills through repeated and practical learning. There were individual learners who showed great determination to master new skills and became confident enough to help other participants.

"I know I will have to spend ten times the time and energy of peers to learn smart phone knowledge but I was determined and felt confident I could learn. This is mainly because I believe smart phone can help me a lot."

Participant with many family members and friends in China

One to one sessions allowed the project to deliver customised training where necessary. For example, in the case of one participant with mobility issues she was able to benefit from being introduced to Chinese aerobics on You Tube and Messenger apps. Volunteers talked to these participants to find out their needs so that relevant training could be offered. The amount of support on offer and the duration could have been more clearly defined at the beginning of the project and communicated better to participants.

Social activities were a good way of allowing participants to practise using their smart phone skills. After the fourth workshop each group was given a small budget to hold a social event for the penultimate session. Participants were encouraged to use their new skills to set up a WhatsApp group and organise a social outing to a place where they could then practice connecting to the WiFi. They took photos of the activity and then shared them on WhatsApp. Activities included: lunch at a carvery, garden centre visits and afternoon tea.

"After the group activity where I had lunch and took some pictures together with other group members, I shared some photos with my daughter through WeChat. She was so happy with me and told me it's a great opportunity for us to communicate and share our life on line."

Participant whose daughter is living in China

Exit and progression and Legacy

People have been encouraged to stay in touch with new friends via WhatsApp and WeChat. Lai Yin set up WhatsApp and WeChat members groups. Originally the WhatsApp group was used to distribute the newsletter and to share videos and other information, but members were struggling with the number of notifications appearing on their phones and not knowing how to mute them. A new WhatsApp newsletter "read only" group was set up as a result of this. There are still 19 members listed on the original WhatsApp group but only 3 or 4 are active. They also set up a monthly support group "Morning Coffee" to bring participants together and generate ideas for future activities. Those who took part in this project were asked and encouraged to volunteer in Ageing Friendly Sheffield and the coffee morning room at Sharrow Community Forum, which was booked for a 12 month period, is now used for the Ageing Friendly project.

Outcomes

The project brought people together who previously didn't know each other and some are still meeting up and using WhatsApp. New skills have been acquired and some people are using these on a regular basis to stay in touch with family and friends. It also encouraged face to face interactions with one of the groups independently organising a social outing among themselves.

Participants reported a positive impact on their relationships. The ability to share information and regular updates had become a normal habit and the smart phone was an important channel for communication and maintaining relationships

"I feel much happier than before. Using smart phone benefits me quite a lot. I am able to frequently share photos and information with children, friends and relatives."

Participant who has a daughter in Australia and a son in London

Age Friendly training materials have been produced in 2 languages which are clear and simple to follow and include illustrations for those who don't like to read a lot of text.

There is now a greater awareness of social isolation among participants. They understand better the impact it can have on their health as well as the factors that may lead to isolation. Participants were encouraged to be self-aware and to take notice of any signs that those around them were becoming socially isolated.

Student volunteers

Connections now exist between Lai Yin and Good Things Foundation and with other Innovation Fund partners

Recommendations

More promotion in the early stages with the possibility to visit different community groups to see how they operate so that sessions can be designed with cultural preferences and differences in mind. For example, Chinese people are not attracted to sessions presented as "drop in for a chat". This is perceived as a waste of time and a threat to privacy, whereas a workshop, connotates "learning" which is seen as valuable.

More one to one support would benefit older participants being introduced to smart phone technology for the first time and would complement the group work. The ideal group size is a maximum of eight participants with support from four volunteers.

Be clear about the level of people's smart phone skills. Differentiate between people with different skills levels and design and deliver more tailored training. Be prepared to go back over sessions as content can easily be forgotten. Everyone goes at their own pace so take this into account when looking at resourcing. Be realistic in the expectations you have.

Home support is necessary for those who are unable to get out and are clearly at risk of becoming socially isolated. This is more expensive and resource intensive but smart phone technology can be a lifeline for older people who have limited mobility enabling them to build and maintain social networks.

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