



Wellbeing Activities to Reduce Loneliness and Isolation

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Overview of Ageless Thanet and the Wellbeing Activities

Ageless Thanet is a National Lottery Community Fund project, part of the Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better programme. In 2015 we were awarded £3 million to reduce loneliness and social isolation in the 50+ community in Thanet.

Our Wellbeing Activities are led by our delivery partner, Your Leisure. These free activities usually run between 6-10 weeks in various community venues. The participants complete a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the activity to find out how they have benefitted from taking part.



From when our activities started in July 2015, to date (October 2020) Ageless Thanet has delivered the following:

302
activities

80
different types of
activities

4756
people have taken
part in an activity

This report will showcase the impact we have had from running our activities, as well as sharing with you our key learning on what it takes to run successful group activities. It is important to note that whilst we moved a lot of our activities online in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the learning from this report was taken prior to the first lockdown in March 2020.

Co-Production

Co-production is about designing and delivering services with people of lived experience in equal partnership, "doing with", rather than "doing for or to". It has always been a very important aspect to the Ageless Thanet project, as we believe that this approach helps to build relationships and trust, as well as having a wider impact.

To do this we held focus groups made up of local people over the age of 50, to find out exactly what sort of activities they would like us to offer, when, and where. This helped us to establish what barriers older people face when trying to access activities, so we could then try to reduce them and encourage those that were lonely and isolated to come along and join in.

These barriers included:

- Ensuring that venues were on a bus route
- Activities didn't finish after dark and didn't start too early so bus passes could be used
- Venues were 'known' and trusted places
- Confidence - people were concerned about going somewhere new on their own

Whilst every effort was made to remove these barriers, it wasn't always possible. We worked with our participants to overcome these barriers. For example, we offered to pay for a taxi to and from the activity for those who could not attend otherwise.

It was important to us that we challenged the perceptions of ageing through the types of activities we offered. While there is definitely a place for what might be considered stereotypical older person activities, such as knitting and bingo, we wanted to offer a variety that may not be expected. It's important to us that older people feel empowered and don't feel confined to ageist attitudes, so that they can live life to the full. Through our co-production approach we were confident that the activities we organised were the ones our community wanted, so they were a great success.

We have organised some unusual but wonderful activities, such as burlesque dancing, boxing, belly dancing, beach volleyball and computer coding.



Challenges and solutions

Finding lonely and isolated older people

It can be difficult to reach lonely and isolated people and even once you have managed that, it can still be a challenge to encourage them to engage with your activity or service.

Because we were evaluating what reduced loneliness and isolation, it was really important that people with those feelings attended our activities. In order to be inclusive, we initially advertised the activities as 'free'. However this attracted lots of people who weren't lonely or isolated. We also didn't want to advertise them as specifically just for lonely people, as we felt this could put off people who would benefit from taking part.

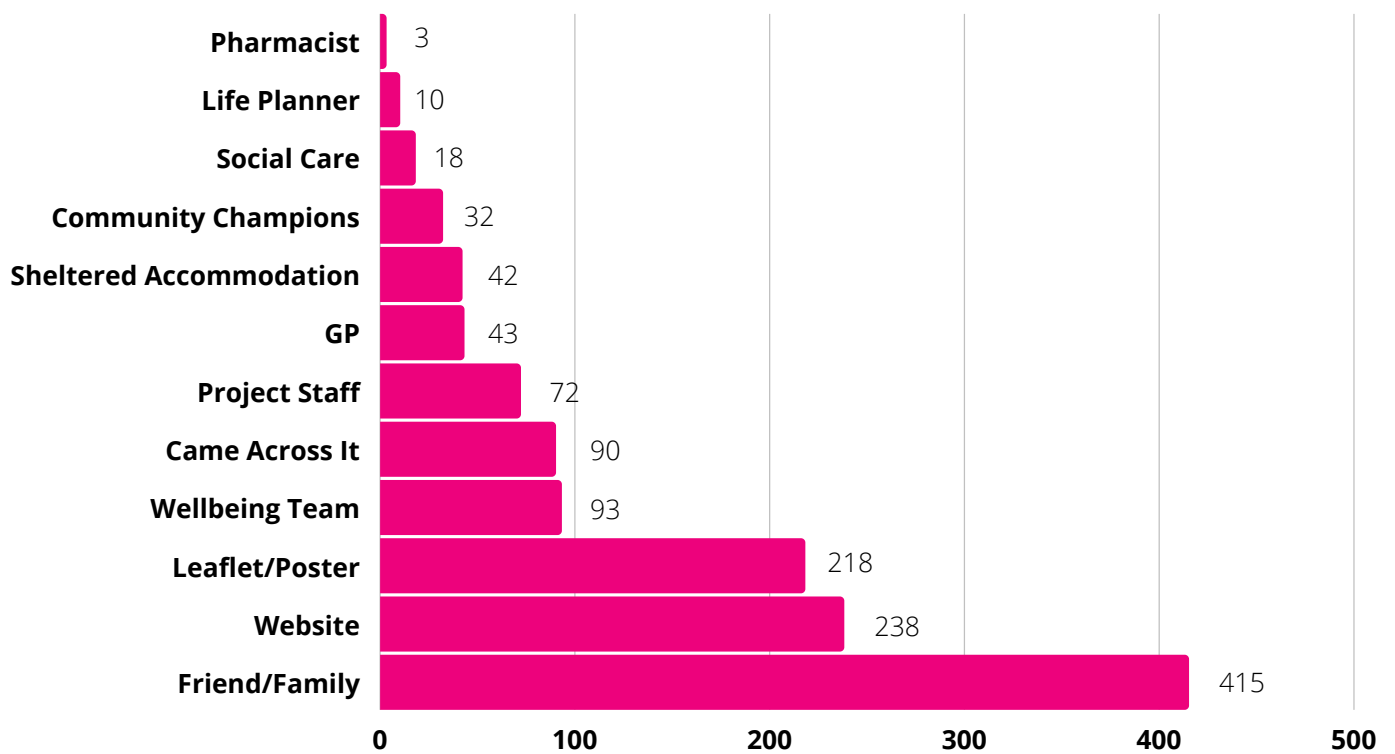
In response to this high demand we developed a script for the activity coordinators to read when taking bookings. The script highlighted that the project is a study aimed at people who consider themselves lonely or isolated, and that we hoped the results would make a difference to other people like them in the future. This worked well for us, and we found that many people would say they would rather give their place to someone who would benefit more.

Our main methods of reaching lonely people were: putting up flyers and leaflets in strategic places such as GP surgeries and supermarkets, social media, websites, newsletters and spreading the word through our volunteers. We also engaged with key individuals who worked with older people such as wardens of sheltered accommodation.

As well as using our own methods of identifying lonely and isolated people, we also worked with other organisations who work with our target audience such as Changing Minds (a mental health charity), and Parkinson's Association to put on activities for their clients.



How did participants find out about the activities?



In addition to the data collected via the evaluation questionnaires, Your Leisure also collected data on how individuals became aware of the activities. Whilst this followed a similar pattern of results, it also highlighted the importance of social media (Facebook), which represented the most common method of finding out about the activities (this isn't an option in the evaluation questionnaire). It was noted by the wellbeing staff that Facebook posts also reached the target audience indirectly via friends and family sharing the post with an individual who would then go on to take part in an activity.

Geographic restrictions

At the beginning of the project, our Wellbeing Activities were limited to residents of only two wards in Thanet; Margate Central and Ramsgate Eastcliffe. These wards were initially chosen due to high levels of deprivation. We quickly realised that this geographic limitation proved challenging for referrers who worked across multiple wards, and did not know which ward their clients lived in. As a result we expanded our activities to cover the whole of Margate and Ramsgate.



Whilst this facilitated easier referrals for other organisations, there was still a lot of negativity from local residents who lived in other areas of Thanet who wanted to take part in our activities. Despite there being other aspects to the project that older residents Thanet-wide could get involved in, people started to feel discriminated against because of where they lived. Thanks to the test and learn ethos from the National Lottery Community Fund, we were able to expand our activities across the whole of Thanet in 2017.

Evaluation and Completing questionnaires

As our insights fed into the national Ageing Better learning, It was really important that we gained information about our activities.

Social Enterprise Kent now has a wealth of impact data which can be used to support future funding applications.

For the data collected from the questionnaires to be academically validated we needed to get a relatively large number of people to complete both the baseline questionnaire at the beginning and the follow-up questionnaire at the end of the activity. At times it proved quite difficult to get the number of questionnaires returned to meet our targets, however we persevered and have a good data set.

CHSS
University of Kent

Centre for Health Services Studies

If funding allows it is highly beneficial to work with an evaluation partner to ensure that your data is academically validated.

For the first 5 years of the project we commissioned Centre for Health Service Studies, one of the research units of the University of Kent's School of Social Policy.

Top tips for completing questionnaires

1

In the first instance, make it clear to the participants that filling in a questionnaire is expected.

2

Encourage the baseline questionnaires to be filled out prior to starting the activity and the follow up is completed before the last session. This ensures time isn't taken out of the first and last sessions to fill them in.

3

Ensure that delivery partners/facilitators are fully on board with what you're trying to achieve. We have trialled a payment by results method, which meant the more completed questionnaires that were returned, the more the facilitator would be paid. We saw positive results from this method.

4

Record who is given a questionnaire at the beginning of the activity and follow-up with phone calls after the activity if you have not received their second questionnaire.

Top tips for running group activities

- 1** Engage with your target audience to find out what activities they would like to do, where, and when.
- 2** Find a facilitator, someone who understands the people you are working with.
- 3** Be clear and informative with your promotion so people know what to expect.
- 4** Be flexible with your plans to find out what works and what doesn't work. The test and learn ethos that we have used has enabled us to change aspects of the project to ensure maximum impact.
- 5** Offer a warm welcome to help people feel at ease.



For more information on our top tips for running group activities, you can watch our video. Click the image above, or go to <https://youtu.be/CzQio9Z-v7Y>.

Sustainability beyond funding

A key focus for the programme was making the project sustainable beyond the end of funding.

Social Enterprise Kent and Your Leisure have a lot of experience of implementing commercial strategies to maximise social impact. This enabled us to think more creatively about how we can best ensure the sustainability of Ageless Thanet. Using our social enterprise approach we decided to implement a charging model for our Wellbeing Activities to ensure that as many people as possible would be able to continue enjoying them once funding came to an end.

We researched the going rate for various classes as we didn't wish to undercut local businesses. In addition to this research we consulted with local older people who had been attending our activities to find out if they were prepared to pay to attend, and how much. We were delighted that so many people fed back that they had been enjoying our activities so much that they were happy to pay.

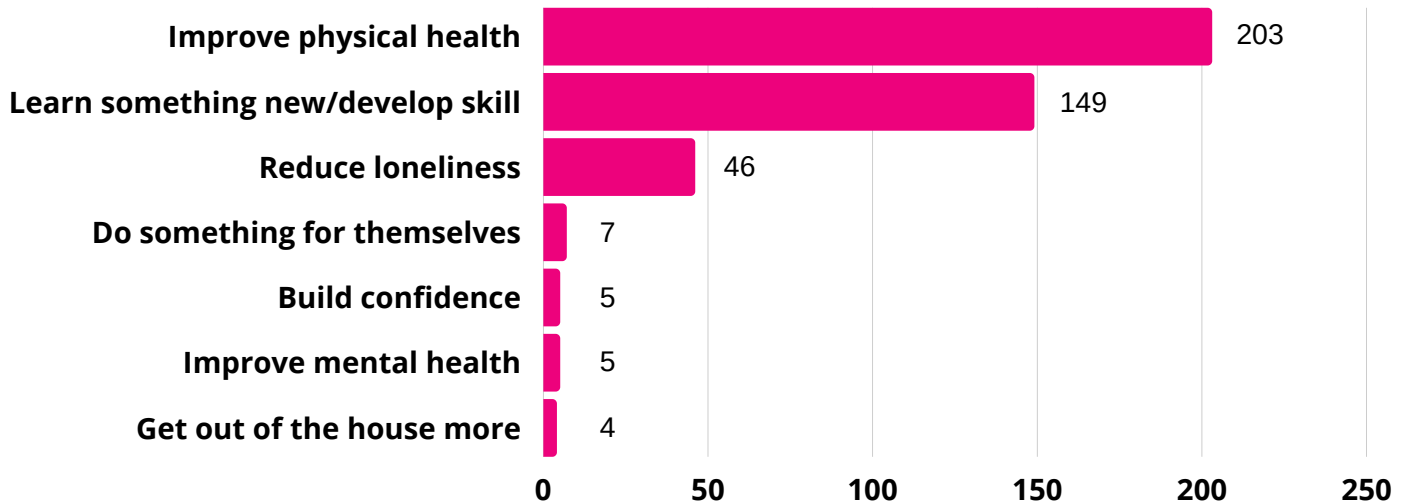
The cost for physical activities such as ballet worked out at approximately £4 per week, whereas activities that required resources such as art would be slightly more expensive. Despite the transition from free activities to charging for them, we were thrilled at the response and uptake from members of the 50+ community.



Outcomes

Why did individuals participate in a wellbeing activity?

Despite this being a project aimed at lonely older people, only 46 individuals stated reducing those feelings as their primary reason for taking part. However, this could reflect a reticence to admit this as a need. Interestingly many individuals remarked to staff that they hadn't realised how lonely they felt until they took part and started socialising.



Between July 2015 and November 2019 2087 individuals attended a wellbeing activity. Of this group, 1423 completed a baseline questionnaire, representing an overall response rate of 68.2%. Follow-up questionnaires were completed by 875 participants at a 61.5% return rate. The data below is based on the 875 participants who completed both questionnaires.



34%

reported a decrease in their feelings of loneliness



48%

said their mental health and wellbeing improved



53%

said their quality of life improved

"It has brought me a lot of peace, I used to be in my own space, in my own time but the world is too busy which caused me stress and brought me down. I feel like I'm becoming myself and living in the present."

Wellbeing Participant



THANET NEWCOMER CHANGES LIFE WITH ART

PATSY



Patsy moved to Thanet from London to be closer to family but, in doing so, moved away from her friends, which she found quite daunting and isolating. Having been in Thanet for 1.5 years, she said: "I felt there was a barrier that needed breaking down for me to keep my sanity."

Searching the local papers for things to do, Patsy found Ageless Thanet's 50+ Festival. She went, saw what was on offer and joined an art course. Through this, she has become an established artist and has been commissioned and sold a lot of her work. Patsy has also rediscovered her talent for singing jazz and blues through her involvement in Ageless Thanet.

WHAT DOES PATSY SAY?

"If I hadn't discovered Ageless Thanet my loneliness would have progressed. Thanks to Ageless Thanet all of that has changed! In my opinion, Ageless Thanet has broken down barriers and doors have been opened up offering opportunities for all over 50s to pursue."

Patsy made great friends with some of the other ladies who joined the art activity. They have continued to stay in touch with each other once the course finished, and have even been on days out together. Two years on from joining the art activity, Patsy and two friends she met on the course held their very own joint art exhibition.



"I HAVE REGAINED CONFIDENCE IN MYSELF"

HEATHER



"I was referred to Ageless Thanet by a lady at Slimming World and my library as I was lonely, isolated and I felt that I had a lack of purpose and confidence due to having difficulties with my mental and physical health. My depression was out of control; my confidence and ability to cope with life was approaching zero. Without Think Action and Ageless Thanet I could only have got worse.

The team at the Ageless Thanet Feelgood Factory were welcoming, reassuring and encouraging while being totally non-judgemental. Natasha and Debbie gave constant support, access and information."

HOW HAS AGELESS THANET HELPED YOU?

"The Feelgood Factory acted immediately and helped me begin an eight-week Indoor Bowls course and also provided the transport which allowed me to attend regularly."



WHAT HAS AGELESS THANET MEANT FOR YOU?

"I now have a group of people who I am interacting with and developing friendships. I have new interests and have also resurrected old ones. I am regaining confidence in myself and able to structure my days so that I can recognise my achievements, I have control of my life again."



We are delighted to have been given the opportunity to offer wellbeing activities as part of the Ageless Thanet project. The activities have made a huge difference to local older residents, who have grown in confidence, had the opportunity to try a new hobby, improve their wellbeing, and most importantly make new friends and feel less lonely.

Find out more...



If you would like to find out more about the other aspects to the Ageless Thanet project, please get in touch -

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SEK Social Enterprise Kent

Social Enterprise Kent, the lead organisation of the Ageless Thanet project, is a Community Interest Company (CIC), registered with, and regulated by, the CIC Regulator. We have been in operation for over 35 years, with the overarching vision of "Improving Lives, Supporting Communities".

Our key aims:

To provide support for people, particularly in areas of deprivation or for those most disadvantaged, to gain skills and employment

To support the creation, organisation and management of social enterprises and small enterprises; and to develop a way of making this sustainable

To support in the regeneration of deprived areas in Kent, by creating jobs and skills

If you would like to find out more about SEK, we would love to hear from you -

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