

## Reducing the loneliness of vulnerable groups: A Case study of the Small Funds project

### Summary

The Small Funds project, run by Leeds Community Foundation, is part of the Time to Shine programme (TTS), which aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst older people in Leeds. TTS is supported by The Big Lottery funded Ageing Better programme, which operates in 14 areas across England. The Small Funds project operates until 2021 (a total of six years) and offers two funding rounds per year. A maximum of £10,000 can be applied for, and project duration is expected to be for one year. Each funding round supports a different theme, such as working with a specific subgroup (e.g. men) or a particular issue (e.g. transport), with priorities linked to expanding the diversity and reach of TTS.

As well as working to reduce social isolation and loneliness in a range of local contexts, the project contributes to a wider understanding of *what works* by enabling local organisations to use the funds to test or develop an idea that can be implemented and sustained after the funding ends.

### Background

Research shows that some subgroups of older people are less likely to engage in activities aimed at the general older population. For example, men have been identified as increasingly vulnerable to loneliness due to bereavement, retirement and ill health, yet are less likely to seek help than women. Carers and people living with dementia experience higher levels of loneliness than the general population, due to issues relating to their caring role and health status respectively. This case study considers how the Small Funds project can achieve the main outcome of TTS, that of **reducing social isolation and loneliness among older people across Leeds**, with groups who are less likely to engage.

The Small Funds project offers a useful opportunity to explore this as it works with groups and organisations who are underrepresented in TTS as a whole. This study focuses on the first two rounds of funding, which supported three target groups: carers, people living with dementia, and men. The activities offered range from advice and physical activity, to healthy eating sessions, befriending services, practical skills and gardening. What is most important is the extent to which funded projects have successfully engaged with specified target groups and can contribute to future learning.

The case study will also explore early contributions to the legacy of Small Funds, though this information will be captured more fully at a later date.

### Methods

The methods employed for this case study include:

- Review of documents including: 28 case studies provided to the programme team, monitoring returns, and promotional material.
- Review of eight interim and five final reports provided by Small Funds projects
- Two focus groups:
  - Farnley Friendly Face, a befriending project aimed at older people with cognitive impairment, five attendees (including: the project worker, two befrienders, and two participants) (carried out May 2017)
  - Men's Breakfast Club, a group based project aimed at older men, 10 attendees, including the project worker, and nine participants (carried out November 2017)
- A joint face to face interview with both the grants officer and the grants manager of Leeds Community Foundation (carried out June 2017)

The projects assessed for this case study are summarised in Table 1 (for more information please see <https://timetoshineleeds.org/projects/small-funds>.) Note that this report does not discuss Happy Panda, as no fieldwork was carried out, and to date, no reports have been submitted.

**Table 1: Projects funded under the Small Funds project**

Target group	Name of project	Delivery Partner	Brief description
Carers	Carers Project	Association for blind Asians	Developed and delivered weekly sessions to help carers learn their own rights and entitlements, understand how to best support their visually impaired dependents and get to know other carers with similar concerns. The sessions offered a mixture of information, relaxation activities, and social time. The funds covered the costs of the sessions, including a Carers Support Worker to recruit participants and deliver the course.
	Calling Carers	Carers Leeds	The project matched volunteers to support older carers, over the phone and face-to-face. A dedicated staff member supported the network of volunteers. If the volunteer becomes aware that home life is becoming difficult, they can alert other staff who will contact the household to support them.
Dementia and cognitive impairment	Farnley Friendly Faces	Neighbourhood Action Farnley	Aimed at people who have become isolated because of dementia or memory loss and can no longer leave their homes independently. A dedicated worker supports and mentors existing volunteers whilst also recruiting new ones who can be matched with individuals in a befriending scheme. The volunteers offer company and conversation to the older people, tailoring the service to fit their needs.
	Walk and Talk	Horsforth LAH	Developed woodland and park walks for older people with dementia and their carers. The scheme offers qualified training in being a Dementia-Friendly walk leader, delivered by Dementia Adventure. Horsforth have found that quieter settings where there is a focused activity can create an environment where people feel more comfortable discussing their needs and experiences, so these walks serve as an entry point for other support.
Men	Men's breakfast club	Zest Health for Life	Men meet as a group once a week for a hot breakfast and to take part in games, listen to music, or just read books and chat. A development worker helps to facilitate the group as well as signpost to other activities and support.
	Your warehouse project	St Luke's	Older men help out as volunteers in a charity shop run by St Luke's making a contribution to the community while meeting new people.
	Walking for Health	Association for blind Asians	When men experience sight loss, they have a tendency to withdraw themselves, often leading to depression and isolation. A Men's Health Coordinator organises monthly walks as well as providing training on the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and providing information about other services available to BME men.
	That Friday feeling goes gardening		This project brings men together in the LS10 and LS11 postcodes so that they can work and grow together, including turning an unused plot of land into a thriving garden and help to tidy up local residents' gardens that have fallen into neglect, men could also come along to simply meet others.
	Happy panda		Brings together older Chinese men who have worked in the catering industry to cook together and singing in English, which has been shown as a good language improvement technique.

## Key Findings

### *Groups less likely to engage may prefer informal arrangements*

For some projects, adopting an informal approach was a useful way of ensuring engagement was sustained, through ensuring people did not feel unduly pressured, especially those with particular health conditions. For example, Walk and Talk, aimed at people with cognitive impairment, allowed people to join the walk at various points in the journey:

*The informal atmosphere and neutral setting seems to encourage [participants] to open up in a way we do not often see at our more structured activities such as lunch clubs.*

That Friday Feeling goes Gardening project identified that some older men appreciated the social aspect of the project, but did not wish to garden, so they enabled people to attend and pursue other interests if they wish; they also added to *the offer* through arranging daytrips, providing free (volunteer led) training around building confidence, and supported participants to set up a woodwork group. The Your Warehouse project allowed men to volunteer informally at times to suit them, rather than more formal arrangements that entailed them logging volunteer hours (as originally intended). In this vein, informally asking for help, or asking men to do *a favour*, was a particularly effective way of engaging men, rather than stating an activity was explicitly about reducing isolation or loneliness.

### *Success is linked to offering a flexible and supportive environment*

As has been found more widely across TTS (Wigfield and Alden 2017), there is not necessarily a right or wrong activity. Your Warehouse found men did not respond well to a group setting, preferring more informal contact with staff, whereas for the Breakfast Club, men responded well to a group setting. Walk and Talk for people with cognitive impairment believed the key to the project's success was ensuring a routine was established, yet the Carer's Project needed to offer flexibility due to caring commitments. Walk and Talk found that people were happy to walk outside in colder weather, yet male participants of Walking for Health (targeted toward men with sight loss) preferred to be indoors.

What is perhaps more important, and explored below, is how people are enabled to develop meaningful relationships, and the role of staff in supporting this. For example, staff working on the Walking for Health project initially visited men in their own homes, feeling they would be more at ease in this environment. The project also provided walking sessions in indoor venues during cold weather.

For the Breakfast Club, the worker texted men with reminders, and a free cooked breakfast also appealed to participants, especially those who struggled to get to morning activities due to ill health. Alongside this focus group participants said that what was on offer was less important than having *company*, meeting *likeminded people*, *getting out of the house*, and *not just sitting indoors*:

*It gets me out, I get limited exercise at home (Participant, the Breakfast Club)*

*If I hadn't come here today I would be in bed (Participant, the Breakfast Club)*

Though the Carer's Project focused on training, the delivery partner referred to how carer's valued meeting and socialising with others, and that it gave some a break from their caring duties:

*I feel really good coming to the sessions as I get to meet new people*

## **What has worked well**

Beneficiaries provided a range of positive responses when asked about the projects they have been involved in. The Association for Blind Elders were able to work more directly with carers, which they had not done previously. Some, such as Farnley Friendly Faces, felt the funding had contributed not only to helping them engage with socially isolated people in their area, but also raised the organisation's profile. Walk and Talk is contributing toward Horsforth becoming recognised as a dementia friendly community. Some of the key successes to date are considered below.

### *Having the opportunity to test ideas can lead to longer term change*

One of the strengths of Small Funds is it supports a number of smaller projects to test ideas. Some projects have adopted changes to their services as a result. For example, the Carer's Project is hoping to use existing and newly recruited volunteers to continue providing the training developed. Your Warehouse has reported that men over 50 are now playing a more visible role as volunteers in the local area, which in turn offers a positive representation for other older men in the locality.

Some projects have secured additional funding to 'upscale' due to demonstrating initial success. This includes Walk and Talk (cognitive impairment) and the Breakfast Club (men). The project worker of the Breakfast Club viewed the initial project as a pilot, which gave them the opportunity to build evidence.

Other projects are seeking further funding to continue, such as Farnley Friendly Faces, who are promoting their befriending service through the Co-op community fund to raise money to pay volunteer expenses. That Friday Feeling goes Gardening (aimed at men), is creating a social enterprise selling flowers and planters to help resource the continuation of the project (such as transport costs).

There are also examples of projects sharing resources more widely, so that others can follow the model. Walk and Talk, run by Horsforth Live at Home, have shared training developed through the funding with eight other Live at Home schemes. They are also developing an online resource providing information about suitable walks.

While these initial examples are no doubt positive, it is, of course, early days, and as staff put it, Small Funds will gather information on its legacy as time goes on:

*We are learning as we go along...the luxury of 12 rounds is relationship developing...setting things up to continue...we want to see projects go on to do something else*

### ***Meeting likeminded people can reduce loneliness through encouraging meaningful relationships***

One of the benefits of a project aimed at specific subgroups is the ability for people to share experiences with likeminded people, as a participant of the Carers Project put it:

*Just by coming to the group, sitting with others [who] are also carers, having a chat, felt so much better and a relief ... I feel more confident as my role as a carer, I feel that I'm not alone*

Walk and talk referred to participants coming to terms with their memory loss through sharing experiences, with two members becoming good friends after meeting on the walk, looking out for each other outside of the activity. As one project worker says:

*They feel they belong with their Friday walking friends and look forward to spending time together... Often [beneficiary] can't remember things she's done in the week but always remembers her Fridays.*

As with Walking for Health, Walk and Talk found that the social aspect of the activity offered, such as stopping in a café for tea, was particularly valued by participants.

As with other TTS projects, the Farnley Friendly Faces befriending project facilitate friendships to develop between the befriender and befriended:

*Our relationship has blossomed and I see my volunteer as a loving and caring friend*

This may have been helped through the matching process, where the befriender and befriended have things in common: *We have shared interests through our jobs*

To help support men to pursue their interests, some projects allowed them to choose what they would like to do. For example, the That Friday goes Gardening project allowed men to also get involved in woodwork. At the Breakfast Club, men can read, play games, talk about their previous jobs, or just observe. What worked was the shared comradeship, and being able to share experiences.

Overall, participants across the projects appreciated socialising with likeminded people, though with men, findings were more mixed. During a focus group for the Breakfast Club, some said they preferred a male only setting, with one feeling that an activity dominated by women can be too *overpowering*; others preferred more of a mix, and also wanted to socialise with either younger people and/or women.

The findings suggest that offering targeted projects is a useful way of giving people the confidence to try something by offering a safe, comfortable space, but perhaps can also act as a springboard to get people socialising in different settings, which, of course, will contribute to sustainability at the individual level.

### ***Successful engagement can lead to reduced isolation by increasing confidence and independence***

Farnley Friendly Faces, while a one to one befriending project, encouraged beneficiaries to socialise more; for one participant, this initial contact gave him the confidence he needed to do so:

*I am talking and mixing with people more...it has built up my confidence, I used to be nervous but I have completely changed...I wouldn't have been able to speak up at something like this [the focus group] before, but now I will*

Another beneficiary planned to use the opportunity to build confidence and get outside more in the future:

*My long-term goal is get build up my confidence and eventually get out more, either to a café or social activities. I'm like a social butterfly, I enjoy meeting new people and making friends.*

The delivery partner who ran Walk and Talk referred to a participant who, as a result of participation, felt more confident in managing without a carer (which had the added benefit of her carer having a break). Other members joined a general scheme walking group due to increased confidence. Yet another said that she can now go for a walk on her own since she knows the park.

Male participants of the Walking for Health project reported a positive impact on physical health and blood pressure levels; with one saying the project had encouraged him to focus more on his physical fitness:

*I have...joined the gym recently due to the workshops we had, it made me realise how important exercise really is.*

These examples show how projects can help people to become more independent, and get involved in activities outside of the project.

### *Enabling people to utilise their skills instils a sense of purpose*

Some projects found that allowing participants to use their skills helped to increase self-esteem and gave them a sense of purpose. A male participant of that Friday goes Gardening felt enabled to return to his *lifelong* interest in gardening, which he had stopped doing as his friend had passed away, and he had no-one else to enjoy his hobby with:

*Suddenly I have new friends with common interests, have somewhere to go, and am doing things again. It's literally changed my life around.*

Other men involved in the Friday goes Gardening project were encouraged to develop new activities based on what they would like to do, and from this created a woodwork group. Many participants have also improved their own gardens, as well as working on other gardens in their local community.

## **Barriers and Challenges**

### *Complexities around engaging people with particular needs*

There is no right answer as to how to raise awareness and encourage particular groups to get involved, this may be *trial and error* and depend on the target group, local area etc. For example, Farnley Friendly Faces found that a leaflet drop was an effective way of reaching volunteers but that word of mouth worked better for identifying the most isolated. This view was shared by the Breakfast Club and Your Warehouse Project (both aimed at men). Outreach was also effective, with Your Warehouse visiting places where men go, such as men's clubs or betting shops.

Some projects, at least initially, struggled to engage their target group, for example the Carers Project needed to rethink the 12-week duration of the training offered as carers struggled to commit to this. Some carers could not speak English, so needed the training to be interpreted. As staff were bilingual, this could be accommodated.

The importance of promoting and raising awareness is not just limited to the funded projects, but also Small Funds itself, where staff felt that some smaller, grassroots organisations were not applying for funding. This was felt to be due to a lack of awareness, but also the monitoring and research requirements of the programme: *Some may have the need, but not the capacity for something new.* Whilst the need to collect evaluation data cannot be helped, there may be ways to ease these, and this is considered later.

### *Importance of framing the activity to avoid negative connotations*

A Farnley Friendly Faces focus group participant referred to the importance of reciprocity, another talked about pride, and how it is important for the befriending experience to feel like: *friendliness, not charity*. Your Warehouse referred to the importance of male participants feeling that they are helping out, and in fact, the men reacted quite negatively when they viewed the Common Measurement Framework<sup>1</sup> for the first time, as this highlighted the real purpose of them being asked to volunteer (i.e. to help reduce loneliness).

## **Learning and recommendations**

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the survey which contains specifics data that will be collected by partnerships to inform the overall programme level evaluation.



Based on the findings of this case study, funding projects to target subgroups such as men, carers, or those with cognitive impairment offers an effective way of *reaching out*, by providing tailored support and facilitating the meeting of likeminded people. In the main, participants had additional needs relating to their health, gender, or carer status. What worked well is that delivery partners were able to use ongoing learning to provide an activity that their particular target group wanted, for example offering informality, flexibility and additional support where needed.

### *Ensure there is room for adaptability*

Both of the walking projects adapted their projects to include walks in more local, familiar locations, following feedback from participants. Walk and Talk also organised outside walks in colder weather as people were happy to wrap up (with support being offered, such as bringing along spare gloves in case someone forgot to bring theirs along). The Carers Project reduced the duration of training, carers could also bring along the person they cared for, and while this will not always be appropriate, some took advantage of this. For example it enabled one man to attend the training with the person he cared for.

### *Factor in resources to give extra support*

A focus group participant for the Breakfast Club suggested that funders should be involved in helping to promote projects to target groups, feeling that Delivery Partners were often not sufficiently supported to do this, particularly at the beginning. A representative of Leeds Community Foundation said that due to some delivery partners taking longer than expected to promote projects, this had led to long lead in times. This, of course, impacts on the time available to run the activity. Due to these observations, it was felt it may be worth extending the project duration to 18 months.

With regard to securing ongoing engagement, the Breakfast Club and Carer's Project found that keeping in regular contact helped, and also offered a useful way of *keeping an eye* on someone (though this inevitably involved extra resources). The gardening project keeps in touch with men who do not currently engage, and explores how they might meet their interests in the future.

### *Ensure learning is shared to inform other projects*

We suggest that the TTS team develop some kind of resource to ensure learning from Small Fund resourced projects are shared, helping others to understand what works or how to run projects aimed at specific subgroups. For example, organisations working with people who have cognitive impairment can access the website being developed through the Walk and Talk project and adapt the content to their own settings. As some projects are in the process of upscaling or continuing funded projects, it makes sense to look at ways to track progress across time. A representative of Leeds Community Foundation also suggested that the achievements of the projects should be highlighted on the website, as this in turn can help projects to seek further funding.

Though evaluation is an important way of collecting information that can be shared, as resources are limited, it would be beneficial to think about ways of reducing evaluation related pressures, so organisations can focus more on gathering learning that can be shared. For example, TTS has now removed the need for most to provide CMF's. It may also be worth asking for a brief update, rather than an interim report. Also, Leeds Community Foundation pointed out that some groups have greater capacity to write reports, for others the concept is new to them and so more onerous to fill in.

## **References**

Wigfield, A and Alden, S. 2017 Evaluation of Time to Shine: Year 2: Interim Findings <https://timetoshineleeds.org/projects/local-evaluation>.

Also check out the Time to Shine programme website on: <https://www.timetoshineleeds.org>.