



CARA: connecting older Irish people in Leeds

Time to Shine end of project report
2017



LEEDS IRISH
HEALTH & HOMES



COMMUNITY
FUND

Summary

The CARA project, managed by Leeds Irish Health and Homes, aimed to connect isolated and lonely older Irish people both culturally and socially through creating friendship links and projects to enable them to take part fully in the community. In addition, friendship opportunities would be created for Irish people to support each other in order to overcome loneliness.

CARA in numbers

- 57 older Irish people directly supported of whom 27 were men.
- 32 befriending matches were developed and
- 496 home visits were made to older people
- 212 older people attended one off events over
- 1000 volunteer hours supported the project
- 19 activities were organised





What happened and what needed to change?

The project made positive progress towards achieving Time to Shine outcomes including reaching some very isolated older Irish people. The complex nature of many of the older people the project has worked with, who required more intensive one to one support than anticipated, coupled with the difficulty in recruiting enough reliable and skilled volunteers to support older people with complex needs, meant CARA did not reach as many individuals as first anticipated.

What difference did it make to older people?

Of those people who completed the evaluation, one third reported an increase in social contact through involvement in community activities or groups, and 80% reported an improvement in overall wellbeing.

“It breaks up the day, breaks the monotony, gives me something to look forward to, and you’re welcome anytime”



Learning

CARA reached some older Irish people for whom a referral to their Irish Community Support Service (ICSS) was more appropriate – a team that can help with benefits and housing needs. A dual referral to both CARA and ICSS ensured that a complex range of needs were addressed. CARA created a monitoring spreadsheet to record volunteer hours which was rolled out through all projects within LIHH. CARA participants are now added to a LIHH client database so that staff are aware if a CARA client calls.

Legacy

The CARA Cinema Club has forged relationships with some of the local Neighbourhood Networks which also encourages older Irish people to engage with them.

'An experience of Growing Older where you didn't Grow Up' is a compilation of stories that explore emigration, lifestyle and disconnection and how they have resulted in social isolation for older Irish people; it demonstrates much increased knowledge on the causes and impact on this marginalised community. The CARA Coordinator created a mapping exercise using the birthplaces of the CARA Participants. Some of the volunteer relationships will be sustained through the work of the volunteer coordinator based within LIHH.

Sustainable Partnerships

Neighbourhood Networks engaged with CARA through the Cards Club and Cinema Club. Burmantofts Senior Action liked the CARA Cinema Club so much they started their own! A Local business supplied Fish and Chips for Lunchtime Cinema sessions in South Leeds at a reduced rate, offering free fish and chips for one event as part of their charitable work



Case Study

M was starting to come to terms with the loss of her husband and wanted a place to fit in. She was used to going out as a couple and she and her late husband had lots of friends who were couples and found it hard to fit in now. She missed being part of a team and having worked with older people she felt she had something to offer.

H had been a long-term carer and as a result felt very disconnected from the life of work and socialising. She was exhausted from bereavement and loss. They both needed to start connecting again and make new friends.

They met through CARA and clicked, having shared similar ups and downs. Both describe themselves as 'much happier now'.

“You need to have friends to talk to, someone outside your family, you are a different person with your friends than with family. Family have their own problems, you need someone for you, CARA can do that...We are part of the committee and we enjoy that. We are having new experiences all the time; I've lived here years but I'm finding out about stuff only now! We are taking on the challenges of trying new things...Go For It! - I'm trying to persuade one of my other friends to get involved...I can honestly say I've enjoyed volunteering and heartily recommend it to anyone wanting to find themselves again...There is always someone to talk to; you make friends.”

Older Irish: Extracts from an experience of Growing Older where you didn't Grow Up - as told to CARA

'In the summer of 2017, conversations were had with older Irish residents of Leeds who have had long term contact with LIHH. The rationale was to understand how to engage and maintain contact with older Irish people, men in particular. All the people spoken to came to Leeds because of the greater availability of work in this country. For some the family situation meant that staying locally was not possible and the economic situation meant living independently in Ireland was unfeasible. Some lied about their age in order to increase the ease and possibility of finding work; it is not unusual within these stories to hear of people being 14, 15 and 16 years of age and travelling alone to find employment in the absence of any alternative being available to them. One gentleman arrived aged 16 in Leeds 60 years ago speaking only Irish Gaelic.

This early self-reliance creates a very strong narrative of independence and self-motivation; often fuelled by a pride and a stubbornness making engagement with the older people who have faced a start defined by the ability to 'go it alone' a difficult challenge requiring an understanding of that starting point. Arriving as they did, often young, often alone sometimes not having English as a first language, there was a requirement and an urge to gravitate towards other Irish people and those areas and meeting places where Irish People could be found. In Leeds this was the LS9, Harehills, Burmantofts and Seacroft area initially.

As the older people speak about life after coming to Leeds the refrain is often of the shared destinations and places that people went to worship and to socialise. There was a commonality of venue; 'everybody went there'. Spouses were met at the St Francis' Dances, or the Shamrock; friends met up at the 'Nash' (Irish National Club on Briggate). The Nash was the precursor to today's Irish Centre; there was a half crown levy on the door in the 1950's that went towards the cost of founding the new centre.

It is very clear that the disappearance of many of these venues from Leeds has meant a feeling of dislocation from the process of socialising. The familiarity of the music and the clientele meant an instant connection and a feeling of being in the right place. It was often mentioned by the older people that the staff from LIHH were either known to them directly or were from families known to them; this instant shorthand, trust or connection cannot be underestimated. The fact that often staff members are part of and from the community has meant that the people we work with do not feel 'done to' they feel 'part of'.

The effect of anti-Irish racism on the experience of these older people cannot be underestimated; whilst this element of the everyday lives of the older Irish people was rarely openly referenced during the discussions it is a clear undercurrent; the political situation during the mainland campaign of the IRA in the 70's was a source of many isolating incidents; one older person was most insistent about not mentioning the troubles whilst referencing them quite consistently in his conversation.

Continued overleaf

It is the same gentleman that also uses contrast between the course of his life and that of his own brother living in London, drinking and semi-destitute “giving up”. He speaks of coming from a small village “with 90 pubs- drinking is a way of life”. It was LIHH that made it possible for this man to travel to London to attend his brother’s funeral working in partnership with Camden Irish Centre. Thus emerges the issue of the fraught and complex relationship between some members of the Irish community (especially the men) and alcohol; the lifestyle of itinerant work, moving a lot, staying in ‘digs’, living in pubs and being paid in cash has meant that in later life the health inequalities for Irish people are demonstrable, certainly in terms of alcohol related problems but also across the board.

This means that the feelings of loss and distance can be all encompassing; add to this the further blows of bereavement and physical ill health we have a recipe for a very specific social isolation for those ‘growing old where they did not grow up’ which requires a specific knowledge and understanding of these issues.

The CARA project has shown us that we can reach some of the most socially isolated older people in Leeds; in fact, CARA was the only project that hit the target for reaching older men. The evidence collected above shows that it is our knowledge of the community and the fact we are embedded within it has enabled us to reach out and engage with a group that is notoriously hard to persuade to become involved. CARA realised early on that social isolation is seldom the only issue affecting an older person and that layers of ill health and economic factors add to and complicate that. LIHH is in a position to address those other issues with its staff team of support workers and housing team.

Resources

[Extending the Hand of Friendship’: Exploring loneliness among the older Irish community in Leeds through an exploration of the Cara Project](#)

To find out more about Leeds Irish Health and Homes go to <https://www.lihh.org>

To find out more about Time to Shine go to <https://www.timetoshineleeds.org>

Find these reports and other resources on the Leeds Older People’s Forum website www.opforum.org.uk/resources



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