



SELF: supporting older people's mental health

**Time to Shine end of project report
May 2021**



Summary

Leeds Mind wanted to address an unmet need for befriending and emotional support in the south and east of Leeds. This became the South and East Leeds Friends (SELF) Project. Their experience as social prescribers meant their team knew there were older and socially isolated people whose mental health support needs made it hard for them to engage in community activities without individual support. They needed more long term support than social prescribing services usually offered.

The team at Leeds Mind planned to use their experience with volunteer befrienders, and a peer support based model, to recruit volunteer befrienders from project beneficiaries, as well as the wider community. They also aimed to use Asset-based community development (ABCD) techniques to support project beneficiaries to create an ecosystem of community-based activities which might become independent groups during the lifetime of the project.

Once established SELF was able to offer significant support to older people, with some individually inspiring stories. However, the plans for peer support volunteers and self-sustaining community groups proved challenging to implement as many of the beneficiaries had more complex problems than had been anticipated.

SELF came into its own during the Covid-19 pandemic. The staff moved swiftly to take referrals from across the whole of Leeds, and recruited and trained volunteers to join their befriending team. Staff adapted to manage volunteers online which enabled both staff and volunteers to offer support to members through individual phone calls throughout.

SELF in numbers

- 175 individual people have taken part in SELF since 2018, with 88 people participating or volunteering regularly during this period
- Demographic data was collected for 151 people:
 - » 90% were of White British heritage
 - » 3.5% were of Mixed heritage
 - » 3.5% were of Irish / Irish Traveller / Gypsy / Other White heritage
 - » 1.5% were of Black African / Caribbean / Black UK heritage
 - » 1.5% were of Other Ethnic heritage
- Gender data was collected for 170 people taking part in SELF, of whom 67% identified as female
- Over 50% of participants were aged 65 or under
- SELF has been supported by 3 student interns, 27 younger volunteers (aged 49 and under) and 3 older volunteers (aged 50+) since 2018, with the majority being trained as volunteer befrienders
- Volunteers have given over 1,100 hours of their time to SELF



Activities

Group activities have been organised since 2018, alongside one-to-one befriending and support. Over 40 activities took place, including social meetings in community spaces, and visits to local cultural centres like: Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds Market, Leeds City Museum, Jamyang Buddhist Centre, Picture House Carvery, Christmas dinner at St Vincent's and a visit to the Royal Armouries. These had to cease during the pandemic.

What difference did it make for older people

People aged 50-65 were regularly referred to SELF by other professionals. It was not easy to refer people in this age bracket to other activities as they were less interested in joining groups in general, and not at all interested in joining local Neighbourhood Networks. Completed questionnaires show people's wellbeing was improved.

“I can talk to people about how I feel instead of bottling it up”

Through one-to-one befriending, volunteers supported a number of service users to gain the confidence needed to access life-changing support for a range of issues, including: eating disorders, hoarding, severe self-neglect, escaping a controlling relationship, dealing with suicidal thoughts and seeking counselling for childhood abuse.

“When I first started talking to my befriender, I was in a bad place but I feel a little better now”

“I am mesmerised by how good the befriending service was”



Learning

SELF recruited more participants with complex needs than they had anticipated in the initial planning phase. This meant that more staff support was needed for those individuals because it was not appropriate to refer them to volunteers in the first instance.

It was also hard to synchronise volunteer and participant recruitment. Recruiting participants as volunteers was more of a challenge than anticipated despite Mind's experience with peer support. Some people found it hard to acknowledge that they would be better suited to receive support, rather than volunteering to provide support to others.

A number of successful social activities were offered through the project. The most successful in helping people to reach their goals was the group based at The Old Fire Station in Gipton, where the venue is a cafe inside a local community project. As a result of becoming familiar with the venue, a number of people subsequently had the confidence to join other activities.

SELF was actively transferring another social group into a community venue when the first lockdown began. This plan had to be shelved but it seemed to be a positive way forward to support members who didn't want to join an older person's group.

Legacy

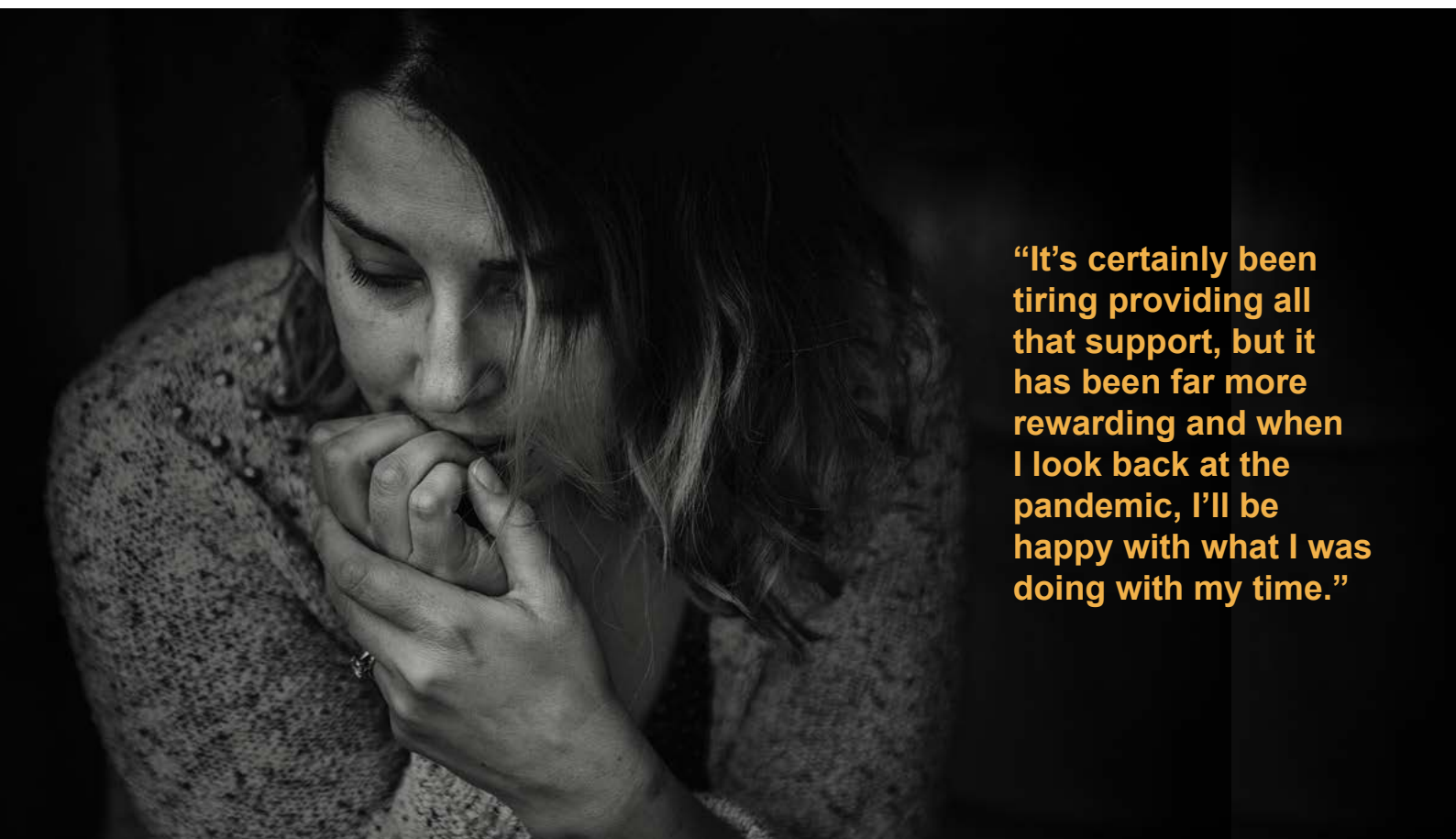
The project recruited a number of younger volunteers, often students, who had an interest in mental health either as a career choice or because of personal lived experience. Leeds Mind's initial training and support of volunteers was key in their ability to foster positive relationships. Much of that learning and experience will continue to benefit the volunteers either in their careers or as they volunteer in future projects. Leeds Mind continues to look for innovative ways to work with people aged 50+ and has secured additional funding for six data-enabled tablets to lend to the most vulnerable and socially isolated participants to help them connect with others.

Covid-19 Response

SELF's response to the Covid-19 crisis was swift and well organised, and the team expanded their service to cover the whole of Leeds. They offered additional support to the befriending volunteers, some of whom now found themselves in challenging circumstances, provided online social groups and access to the Mindful Employer offer, as well as increased supervision.

SELF were able to use the breathing space offered by a sudden lack of referrals (as a result of closure of other services) to recruit and train more volunteers. That meant that, as external services moved online or reopened, SELF were able to take on 23 new referrals in three months and match them all to support.

The team saw more severe mental health problems in participants during lockdown and supported the volunteers in dealing with difficult issues. Originally SELF planned to sign participants off after nine months of support, but during the pandemic this requirement was lifted where necessary, and staff supported some individuals with very complex needs through attendance at multi-agency meetings.



“It’s certainly been tiring providing all that support, but it has been far more rewarding and when I look back at the pandemic, I’ll be happy with what I was doing with my time.”

SELF offered some online group activity after trialling a range of ideas at the request of participants. Video calls proved unpopular but teleconferencing was more successful and it continues to offer a level of group support to those who want it.

The SELF team was really pleased to be able to carry on supporting participants, although it was hard work.



Deborah's Story

"I'm getting better, just getting better"

Deborah has been involved with the SELF project since before the pandemic. She initially started coming because she wanted to improve her mental health after a stroke.

As she improved, Deborah started to go out more. Her first experience of SELF was at an event in Beeston. "It was the first time for me," says Deborah. "It was a party. I was there for two hours. There were different people. A lot of people were depressed." Eventually Deborah started to go to the SELF group regularly. "Before lockdown, we were doing activities every month" she says. "I went to the Royal Armouries - it was lovely."

The group would meet and go on trips out in Leeds and the local area. "I went with Amy to the market," Deborah says. "And Emily, for a coffee." For Deborah it was vital to have the support and friendship of the group. Even when the group went to a location further afield, they always kept in touch with Deborah to check she was ok.

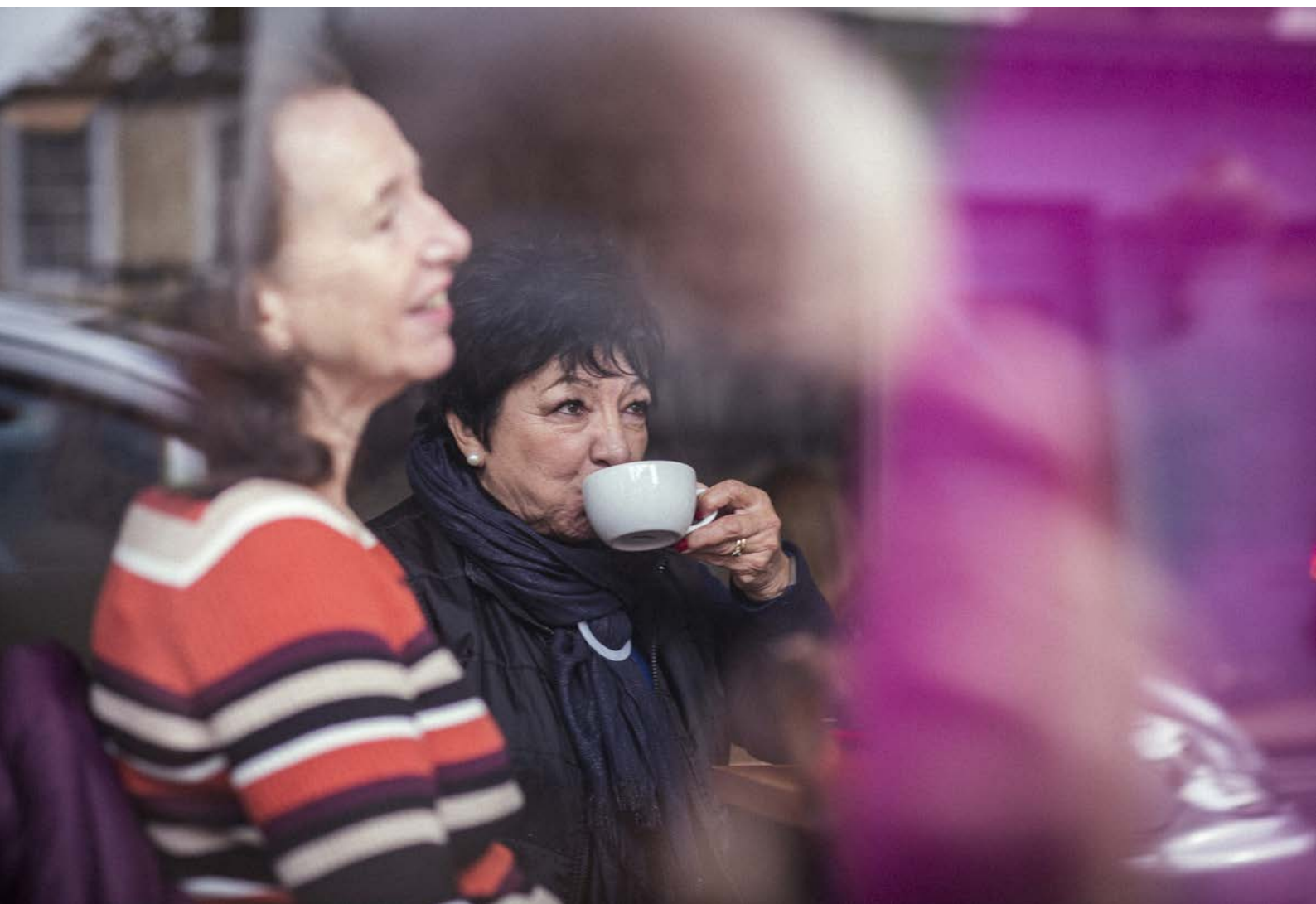
Being part of the SELF group is an integral part of Deborah's recovery. Before March 2020, the group visited a lot of interesting places. Covid restrictions mean the group no longer meet face-to-face to go on trips. "We do Zoom!" says Deborah. "There's only me this week! I never miss it. I go every time." Kabeer and Amy offer Deborah an important service in these isolated times. As well as her stroke recovery, Deborah is currently going through a divorce. She finds the SELF Zoom sessions really helpful. "We just talk," she says. "And they listen. The stroke and the divorce. It's not good. I tell them and they just listen."

Whatever difficulties she comes across, Deborah remains upbeat. With the SELF group behind her, she feels that things can only improve. "I'm getting better, just getting better," she says. "I'm getting there."

Resources

Find out more about Leeds Mind www.leedsmind.org.uk

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



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