



Making a Match: engaging people through their interests

Time to Shine end of project report
August 2021



Summary

Making a Match was a project run in a partnership between two of Leeds's Neighbourhood Network Schemes, [OPAL](#) (Older People's Action in the Locality), and [MAECare](#) (Moor Allerton Elderly Care). Two project workers were employed who would work on the project together but link mainly to one organisation or the other. By working in partnership they hoped to identify a large enough number of socially isolated older people to enable them to create friendships by pairing people with similar interests to undertake activities together. The project partners thought this focus on individual interests would enable them to engage people who were socially isolated but who did not wish to take part in large group activities.

The partnership recognised that some of those people would have lost confidence and would need additional support to help them to re-engage. They hoped nonetheless to provide light touch activities and reach relatively large numbers of people without needing to provide high levels of individual support.

As Making a Match progressed it became clear that many of the socially isolated people the project targeted (not already members of either of the Neighbourhood Network Schemes) had more complex needs than had been supposed, from alcohol misuse to mental health problems. They moved away from the idea of one-to-one matching to working on engaging individuals in small groups. This led to the project workers pulling apart a little as different opportunities for engagement presented themselves in the separate organisations. They were still able to support each other and 'cover' for different group activities as needed.

A number of increasingly successful small activities were getting underway by the first quarter of 2020 when face-to-face activities were closed by lockdown. Ironically, the remaining worker then had to work one-to-one with individuals to offer support, and for some of those people this has helped them to progress.

Making a Match in numbers

- 81 individual people have taken part in Making a Match since 2018, with 74 people participating or volunteering regularly during this period
- Demographic data was collected for 60 people:
 - » 90% were of White British heritage
 - » 4% were of Asian / Asian UK heritage
 - » 2.6% were of Black African / Caribbean / Black UK heritage
 - » 1.3% were of Irish / Irish Traveller / Gypsy / Other White heritage
 - » 0.7% were of Mixed heritage
 - » 0.7% were of Eastern European heritage
 - » 0.7% were of Other Ethnic heritage
- Gender data was collected for 62 people taking part in Making a Match, of whom 55% identified as male
- Making a Match has been supported by 1 younger volunteer (aged 49 and under) and 1 older volunteer (aged 50+) since 2018
- Volunteers have given over 312 hours of their time to Making a Match
- 23 case studies and stories have been written to share the project's learning and experiences



Activities

From 2018 over 200 activities were organised by the Making a Match project.

Initially the project workers thought they might be organising one-to-one meetings between pairs of people with a similar interest but in the end the project engaged socially isolated older people by introducing them to a range of new activities, generally set up as smaller groups. They were then able to build good relationships with members and encourage them to participate as they wanted.

Activities varied from 'Mini-mixers', to 'Meet and eats' in local pubs, small games groups, meetups in community cafes, film clubs and walking groups. The unwritten rule seemed to be to keep an offer running for several weeks rather than trying to run one-off events. New events, activity-based rather than purely social, generally seemed to work to engage new people either recruited through general publicity or through the relationships the project workers forged with people referred to the project locally.

The star performer however turned out to be the Walking Football. (See Legacy section)

What difference did it make for older people?

After a shaky start, persistence and re-working of the project did enable people who were not already involved to join in, and they really enjoyed meeting new people.

An older couple joined the games group at OPAL. The older husband was a carer for his physically disabled wife. She really enjoyed engaging with other group members in a game of Scrabble but was concerned that her husband didn't want to join in with anything. He wanted to be allowed to sit quietly, although the project worker tried to engage him several times. Eventually another group member was able to engage him in table tennis as he needed a partner. He is now very happy to play table tennis which he really enjoys, as long as he can read his paper first.

Legacy

The standout success is Walking Football.

In partnership with Leeds United Football Foundation, six free taster sessions were organised initially, on Wednesday morning and Sunday mornings. A lot of publicity was distributed by hand in the local area and things got started in a low key way.

What then happened to spark real growth was that David got involved. In his own words:



“I have lived in Leeds 17 for over 60 years and I am lucky to live in a small and close community. I spent a forty-year career in financial services during which I enjoyed helping people reach their ambitions and lifestyle aims. Once I retired, I continued to seek out opportunities to continue to help people whilst living a less structured life. I wanted to be able to start enjoy ‘living in the moment’ with friends, family and new people I was yet to meet.

“I was aware there were people like me who wanted to stay active, connected and sociable beyond retirement. I’d always wanted to experience ‘walking football’ and I struck lucky to find there was a new session launching, organised by Moor Allerton Elderly Care (MAECare) with

involvement from Leeds United. As I attended the sessions, I realised this was something I could manage and deliver to give it a longer life span as this was a short-term offer. So that’s what I did.

“What started off as attracting and organising sessions for both men and women over 50 soon became much more as I recognised the need for interaction, chat, banter and inclusion of people I could see were at risk of, or suffering from, isolation.”

David took hold of the group and ran it, switching to offer on-line support and garden support during the pandemic.

“As the pandemic struck, I had to change the way I delivered this support. By using technology and helping older residents to adapt we were still able to provide a much needed lifeline of support and interaction. The walking football evolved to become a home-based activity where I delivered sports kit to resident’s homes and I delivered training through video tutorials and telephone support.

“I always look for new opportunities to reach people in different ways and through the first lockdown I decided to set up a weekly quiz. It was good to see how it soon became a hit as people tuned in three times a week to enter, then to see the answers, and then again to find their place on the leader board. At one point I decided to host the quiz from my shed and this only increased its popularity!”

As things stand now, in July 2021, there are 40+ people attending two groups, a weekend and midweek one, and David is also talking about setting up a women’s group. He’s also secured a small grant from the Football Foundation, and sourced kit with their own logo at low cost.

Learning

Overall the learning is around a mismatch between the project outcomes and outputs. The project was set up under the Time to Shine Connections strand, which was really about light touch approaches. The reality of the people the project encountered was that many of those who were socially isolated had mental health problems and other issues which contributed to their entrenched loneliness. They often needed one-to-one support to help them to re-engage.

The project initially tried to both support those people and run a light touch matching service which caused some tensions. The final result of the compromise is difficult to judge as Covid-19 changed the way everyone was approached.

Covid response

Staff changes resulted in there being only one worker left on Making a Match as Covid-19 took hold. She supported the Community Hub (a local authority initiative to enable community support across all ages) based in her organisation during the pandemic, in addition to maintaining one-to-one support for Making a Match members. She was able to make phone calls, garden visits, one-to-one walks and small group walks, as appropriate during different phases of the pandemic. She was also able to work with [Leeds Mindfulness Coop](#) to provide mindfulness sessions for Making a Match members and others who were able to get online. These were really appreciated.

The project worker commented:

“I realised early on that a lot of one-to-one work needs to be done with people who wanted to join groups. This did not apply to everyone but to a handful of people. You have to really court some people before you can get them to join a group as people who may have been isolated usually have other complex issues that need some one-to-one work first, before joining a group.

The one-to-one support offered to people has been very beneficial to them. I have built up positive relationships with people. I have noticed that there has been growth and positive outcomes for some of my service users.”





A Making a Match story

Making a Match hosted a walking group, suitable for all clients to attend, with walks planned to be at a gentle pace, within grounds of local parks. The walks were well advertised locally and the first walk was well attended by the target group. Two were long-standing members of OPAL, but very rarely attended because of the large group sizes. One was a member with mental health issues (whom the Project Worker worked with previously). There were three new members, none of whom had met each other before.

The Project Worker arrived early to meet and greet and make all clients feel at ease. They walked in pairs and chatted happily along the way around the park.

At the end of the walk, the group agreed to visit the coffee shop in the park, and once again everyone enjoyed talking about the walk over a cuppa. Two male clients asked if the walks could be weekly and if they could be a little more strenuous. The worker explained that the walks needed to be at a level that suited everyone, and then suggested they swapped numbers and perhaps meet up and choose their own walks as well as attending the Making a Match meetings.

The gentleman appeared to be a little hesitant at this suggestion, but after another cuppa numbers were exchanged and the worker left them to it. The Let's Walk Wednesdays proved to be a popular group and continued even into poorer weather.

The same two clients then attended a Let's Set Sail group (a canal boat cruise). Whilst on the canal cruise I noticed the two clients were very friendly and chatty, and they explained to me that they did meet up on a regular basis. They walked together two or three times a week, and called each when they're not out walking.

Without this conversation it would have been difficult to acquire this knowledge! However, this regular meet up proved to be very beneficial to both gents, as they encourage and motivate each other to attend other Making a Match activities and enjoy promoting Making a Match to the general public whilst attending the trips.

Resources

Food for thought: community connections through shared meals

Working with individuals with anxiety (Time to Shine 2019)

Running a supportive and welcoming group Toolkit (Time to Shine 2019)

Warm Welcome checklists (Time to Shine 2021)

To find out more about MAECare go to [MAECare.org.uk](https://www.MAECare.org.uk)

To find out more about OPAL go to opal-project.org.uk

Further learning from Time To Shine

Creating a warm welcome to maintain older people's sense of belonging in the context of Covid-19

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



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