



Reducing social isolation and loneliness for older adults with a learning disability

**Time to Shine Report in partnership with Bee Together
January 2020**



About Time to Shine

Run by Leeds Older People's Forum, Time to Shine aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness of the older population in Leeds.

Our vision is that older people need not experience loneliness and social isolation as an inevitable consequence of ageing and that our project will offer opportunities for fulfilment by breaking down barriers and building strong communities.

Time to Shine is one of fourteen areas which form Ageing Better; an ambitious, large-scale programme funded and developed by The National Lottery Community Fund. Ageing Better aims to improve the lives of people aged 50 and over by reducing social isolation and loneliness.

Introduction

Bee Together is Health for All's Time to Shine project aimed at older people with a learning disability.

The programme began in November 2017. The aim was to find lonely and socially isolated older people with a learning disability. The project interviewed people to build up a picture of the difficulties they experience and the causes of social isolation and loneliness. Bee Together then found what they would ideally like to do.

People were signposted to organisations who could offer them what they needed. The intention has been inclusion into local community groups rather than services specifically for people with learning disabilities.



What is a learning disability and how does it affect your ability to create and sustain relationships?

Quantifying a learning disability can be difficult. The medical definition is “a significantly reduced ability to understand new and complex information which affects someone their whole life.”

But individually there are greatly differing abilities. Someone may not be able to tie their shoelace but can understand a bus timetable. Someone may seem happy in social situations but when they get home are overwhelmed by pent up emotions. Society needs to adapt to differing needs.

Creating a friendship and negotiating the nuances of social norms may be difficult for some people with a learning disability. Reading people’s expressions and listening to where emphasis is placed in speech are all taken for granted in general conversation, but there may be barriers to good communication for some people with learning disabilities. The lack of knowledge within the general population of these barriers can lead to misunderstanding and avoidance of difference.

The only thing we truly have in common is difference

There are ways we can help: getting to know the person, understanding them and gaining their trust.

Time to Shine projects have identified that there are many complexities surrounding social isolation and loneliness. Bee Together has identified additional fundamental barriers to consider.



What has worked

The main aim of Bee Together initially was to identify older people in Leeds with learning disabilities who are lonely and socially isolated and to explore, through conversation, views about social contacts and meaningful relationships. The project aimed to achieve a better understanding of how social isolation manifests in older people with learning disabilities, how prevalent it is and how it can be prevented.

The key learning points from this are that the people interviewed want to make genuine friendships and need to know what is going on in an accessible format.

Successes:-

- The Bee Friends Cafe - offering an afternoon every week where people with and without disabilities from all over the city could meet in a safe space to chat, play games and form friendships. It took time for this to become part of people's routines. Having a key person leading the project with experience of appropriate contacts and established relationships of trust was crucial
- Development of easy read resources - much of the information about services in Leeds is not fully accessible. Bee Together is, through a partnership with community libraries, creating a range of easy read resources which will increase awareness of activities available.
- Engagement in national evaluation - the evaluation questionnaire produced by the National Lottery, to gain people's experience of being lonely and socially isolated, was not accessible for Bee Together participants. The project developed an easy read version of the questionnaire which has been adopted by the funder, which enabled beneficiaries of the project to fully participate in the national evaluation programme.
- Face to face communications - with 88% of the Bee Together participants not having access to the internet, the production of easy read printed materials shared through face to face communication has been the most effective means of engagement
- Developing contacts with key organisations - effective communication within the learning disabled community relies upon reaching the key person within relevant organisations. Bee Together has managed this by extensive networking and relationship building
- Developing partnerships and collaborations - Bee Together has developed links with other organisations across the city to better enable the project's participants to access a wide variety of activities.
- Recognition of the importance of a person-centred approach - the learning disabled community is a very diverse community, like any other, and the key to creating sustainable connection is to truly get to know people and work to support their unique needs and interests.
- Groups that are welcoming - Bee Together has aimed to introduce people to local activities where both disabled and non-disabled are equally welcome. This can often require skilled and sensitive workers within groups who invite all members to contribute equally without assumption.

Barriers to success

The barriers are different for everyone though there are common themes which have led to the key learning from the project.

- **Public perception** of older people with learning disabilities can be a barrier for those trying to access the local community. Those who are more socially isolated usually have milder disabilities. They have a greater understanding of how they are sometimes treated. A lack of knowledge, in the general public, of what a learning disability is can lead to fear, ignorance, exclusion and abuse.
- **Professional perception** - Working across the voluntary sector and NHS has shown that many professionals do not fully understand what a learning disability is. This has led to people being offended as they do not feel that they have a learning disability or do not identify as learning disabled.
- **Protection as a barrier** - For care staff the protection of the people they support is paramount. However, sometimes this protection gets in the way of allowing people to create their own informal connections. Do you pop around to a friend's for a coffee? Are you able to invite a new friend around for a meal? 'Risk assessing' such situations could hinder natural friendships from forming
- **Falling through the net** - In current times diagnosis for people who have a learning disability is usually prompt but for many older people, their disability was not diagnosed. The project has found that there is a group of people who have milder learning disabilities who fall through the net. They are assessed as not in need of support, but may have become isolated due to societal perception.
- **Anxiety and depression** are a major barrier to participation. Many of the really isolated older people feel that they do not fit into learning disabled services because they are "too childish", but they understand they do not fit into 'normal' society. This, along with hate crime and abuse, has led to depression and anxiety. Finding the appropriate help is very difficult and without the firm base of good mental health people are not able to engage in new activities or contemplate speaking to new people.
- **Lack of accessible information** about what activity is available in the community is a barrier. Much information is now online, but 88% of the older people spoken to for this project do not have access to the internet or may not be able to navigate it. The internet is a wonderful resource but we must always be mindful of those who we are excluding. The public and third sector organisations need to be more aware of the differing communication needs of all people, sight impaired, learning disabled, those living with dementia and others.
- **Historically** people with learning disabilities have been hidden away from society. See example of Meanwood Park Hospital - <http://www.meanwoodpark.co.uk/> We need to stop hiding.

What next?

- **January 2020 - Increase number of Bee Together inclusive cafes** from 1 to 6 to promote positive interactions with the aim of changing public perception.
 - **Outcomes**
 - » To promote positive interactions to change public perception
 - » To highlight the value of developing informal friendships that can be sustained outside of learning disabled services
 - » To enable flexibility and choice of people's routines
 - » Develop sustainability for an inclusive cafe model and seek funding stream for continuation beyond October 2020
- **March 2020 - Education about learning disabilities**
 - **Outcomes**
 - » Deliver two half day learning disabilities awareness training sessions to community groups connected with Leeds Older People's Forum
 - » Explore ways of collaborating to develop a training package with Tenfold (www.forumcentral.org.uk) members, that can be delivered annually to community groups beyond the life of the project
 - » Explore the potential to roll out training across community libraries to staff in public services
 - » Promote awareness of access to easy read materials to be used by public services and community groups
- **June 2020 - Falling through the net**
 - **Outcomes**
 - » Consult with people who are at risk of falling through the net to determine their unmet needs and how they wish to have them met
 - » Plan a meeting with third sector organisations to raise awareness of this group to map activities that meet needs
 - » Identify the gap between what is needed and what is available and share with the Learning Disability Partnership Board



Case study / Outcomes

F initially lived in a flat in a shared house with a Housing Support Worker visiting once a week. They suffer from anxiety and have difficulty reading, writing and understanding whether someone is a friend or not. This has left them very vulnerable to abuse, especially around money.

F likes to talk and will talk to anyone, but does not understand when it might be socially important to listen or be quiet, or when someone wants to be in their own space.

F had become socially isolated and lonely and needed a safe place to socialise and hopefully make friends.

F has a love of art and crafts and Bee Together introduced them to a local felting class at Inkwell Creative Arts (run by Leeds Mind). Bee Together staff attended with F for the first few weeks when they were happy to continue on their own.

When asked if they wanted to join in, they said:

“I’m really enjoying myself watching.”

“This is a nice place this.”

“I’m happy like a bumble bee” *(no prompts given!)*

“I’m going to have a dalliance with felt-making”

“I am really happy I met you, you really helped me!”

They attended the class for over a year until it closed due to lack of staff.

In the meantime, due to ‘financial mate crime’ F has recently moved to a new part of the city. They miss the felting class and are struggling with the move and having to start again. It takes time for people to build relationships and trust. This has been a recurring theme that constant support is what people are looking for, stability and friendship. As well as being involved in the decision-making or at least made aware of changes wherever possible before they happen. F is in a more supportive environment but still requires support to adjust and begin making new friends.



Recommendations and references

Below is a list of websites that might be useful.

What is a Learning Disability?

- <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained>

Easy Read information

- <https://www.easyonthei-leeds.nhs.uk/> An online free bank of images.
- <https://www.leeds.gov.uk/leisure/libraries/boardmaker-in-leeds-libraries> Programme containing symbols and grids. Free to access in Leeds Libraries Community Hubs.
- <https://www.through-the-maze.org.uk/> An online easy read information website for accessible services and groups in Leeds. Free to advertise.

What is Mate Crime?

- https://www.westyorkshire.police.uk/sites/default/files/files/misc/west_yorkshire_-_mate_crime_-_high_res.pdf What to look out for, what is not acceptable.
- <https://arcuk.org.uk/> Association for Real Change - a forward thinking National Charity with a dedication to promoting REAL CHANGE in the learning disability sector.

