



Choices: a project for older people living in the diverse population of Chapeltown in Leeds

Time to Shine end of project report
February 2022



Introduction

The Choices project enabled [Feel Good Factor](#) to expand their support for older people. It followed the success of the Walk with Me project by offering a wider range of activities for older people from the diverse communities who live in the Chapeltown area of Leeds. These activities initially included Walk with Me, Modern Living, Cook & Eat and Saturday Socials.

Co-production was key. Older people joined a steering group to help identify the needs of the local community. They decided on the format - timing of activities, choice of food or topics for group work - and staff and volunteers collected weekly feedback and ideas from participants to help shape the service. By working closely with older people in this way Choices empowered older people to make decisions, take the lead on running sessions and also identified those with leadership skills.

Choices in numbers

- 216 people took part in Choices between 2018 and 2021, with 176 older people participating or volunteering regularly
- Demographic data was collected for 165 people
 - » 36% were of Black African / Caribbean / Black UK heritage
 - » 31% were of White British heritage
 - » 26% were of Asian / Asian UK heritage
 - » 3% were of Eastern European heritage
 - » 2% were of Mixed heritage
 - » 1% were of Irish / Irish Traveller / Gypsy / Other White heritage
 - » 1% were of Other Ethnic heritage
- 47% of people who participated regularly identified as male
- Choices was supported by 15 younger volunteers (aged under 49) and 33 older volunteers (aged 50 and older) and they gave over 1,300 hours of their time
- 14 case studies and stories were written to share the project's learning and experiences



Ethos

Choices was very open to partnership-working, for example with [Opera North](#) or [The Performance Ensemble](#), to ensure that the older people they worked with had access to a variety of opportunities. As older people's confidence grew the team encouraged people to take up activities outside Feel Good Factor, pursue interests independently, connect with peers on Zoom or WhatsApp groups and make new friends.

“Good place to meet, love the exercise, conversation, warmth. Happy to be a member of good company” *Choices group member*

Activities

- **Saturday Social Club:** This included exercise classes, quizzes, bingo, crafts, cookery and gardening as their members suggested and organised activities. The group had an annual outing and received discounted tickets to the opera and theatre.

The Saturday Social moved online, then outdoors, and then became flexible as required, but continued to provide older people with a chance to make independent friendships throughout the project.

- **Walk with Me:** This was a development of the earlier project and offered a one-to-one volunteer befriending service based on outdoor walks. It continued to absorb a lot of staff time in recruiting and managing volunteers but it benefited individuals, and the experience of befriending stood the organisation in good stead.

A number of the peer support volunteers were able to support additional older people during lockdowns when they were unable to meet their original befriender face-to-face.

- **Modern Living:** Digital skills training was offered at Feel Good Factor. Later, following partnership working and funding from Leeds City Council's housing team, the training offer expanded with the purchase of additional laptops and finding a new community venue. Skills gained during this project were used initially during lockdowns, and have since helped the Choices project to support older people to engage successfully through both Zoom and WhatsApp.



- **Cook & Eat:** This was initially planned as a class but older members preferred to have a cookery demonstration with an opportunity to share a hot meal at the end of the session. These sessions took place in a sheltered housing complex and proved to be an excellent way to encourage previously isolated residents to mix. To find out more about the effects of shared eating you can [watch this video](#).

The cooking sessions were paused for a while but were able to resume as the digital skills of both members and the organisation increased and they were changed into interactive online cooking sessions, with ingredients either collected or delivered.

- **Physical Activity:** From 2021 some physical activities started to address strength, balance and confidence issues. Gentle Seated Pilates over Zoom helped members who were less mobile and those who were shielding to get some form of exercise at home. The exercise was specifically aimed to help strengthen muscles and improve balance. For those who could get out participants were set a step challenge and encouraged to go out in pairs to complete it. The aim was to encourage a healthy routine, improve mobility and have the opportunity to socialise with a friend sharing the same goal.



What difference did it make for older people?

“It gives me a great sense of community. Feel Good Factor is where I can build relationships and make friends. It has created an invaluable impact on my health and wellbeing. Well organised. A place where we can get together and discuss issues where we are not judged - NO NEGATIVES at Feel Good Factor” *Choices participant*

Choices provided older people with a space to meet new people and catch up with old friends, pulling some people out of depression and isolation. For many, friendships made in the group have transcended Feel Good Factor. Older people are meeting more frequently in the community to catch up, go into town for shopping, watch plays at Opera North, celebrate birthdays and special occasions. They share information on activities within the area and encourage and motivate one another to attend. Through Choices, older people are now engaging in additional activities in the community and involving others from the project.

“Two very lonely people met and became good friends at the Saturday Social group and were then in regular contact. After not hearing from her new friend for a week member A went round and found the house empty. She spoke to neighbours and found her friend had been taken to hospital. After enquiry member A was able to find her friend on one of the wards. The friend, member B, was grateful to find she had a friend who genuinely cared about her welfare.

At the end of her treatment, member A took her friend home to look after her during her period of convalescence. She stayed for a week until her health improved.

This would never have happened if they had not met at the Saturday Social.”

Staff member



Legacy

- Choices has made people more confident within themselves to access other services. Learning about services through guest speakers and feeling informed about how services operate has empowered members to be more active in the community. Participants were involved in helping to shape local services by getting involved in focus groups with Big Leeds Chat, Voluntary Action Leeds and Leeds Health Watch.
- Choices enabled and empowered older people to move out of their comfort zone and meet new people. Members have developed the ability to engage and interact. Older people from the group go out together on a regular basis and are now able to initiate, research, plan and organise these social gatherings and outings on their own. They encourage and motivate one another to attend new activities.
- Members are in regular contact with one another and look out for each other and check in to make sure if all is well and if any support is needed.
- The success of Choices has demonstrated that Feel Good Factor can effectively support socially isolated older people and they hope to continue to do so as resources allow.
- The Choices project has helped Feel Good Factor to set up effective volunteer management and support systems and volunteers will continue to be used throughout the work of the organisation.

Learning

“Older people have been key in promoting this service by introducing the service to other people in similar situations and bringing in new people. The number of people engaging with the project initially was very small. Over the course of 4 years the number of participants engaging on the project has grown immensely”. *Choices staff member*

- Co-production was key to the project from the start and it has paid dividends. It was important to be able to listen to what the group members wanted, and trust that if the right service was offered it would grow.
- Being flexible worked - for example, Caribbean Cookery was able to become a cookery demonstration and shared meal, and then became interactive online cookery.
- The Saturday Social, available when there was nothing else for people to do, showed clearly the need to run activities when people want them, not just when it is convenient to do so.
- The emphasis on forming independent friendships from the start stood the project in good stead throughout.
- Working with volunteers, and empowering participants to help run groups, was very beneficial. Older people developed confidence in their abilities and felt a sense of pride that they were giving something back.
- It was important to develop relationships of trust.
- Peer support from colleagues running similar projects within Time to Shine was invaluable to staff in a small organisation.

“I enjoyed meeting the Time to Shine community on all the different projects. Networking, to share ideas and learning was great. I was able to get to know the other partners on the programme. I felt part of a bigger team.” *Choices staff member*

Project adaptations as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic

As with many projects Choices was able to respond remarkably quickly to the change in circumstances. At the start of the pandemic Feel Good Factor became one of the Community Care Hubs, whereby Leeds City Council worked with third sector organisations across city wards to ensure people received food, prescriptions and other support as they were asked to shield. Choices quickly started to make phone calls to their members to check their needs, and they identified what people wanted the most was more social connection. Using the skills the organisation had gained from Modern Living 1:1 support was provided on how to use Zoom to older people who had digital access and wanted to be a part of the social group.

The Saturday Social group then met on Zoom every week. Members enjoyed word games and quizzes and it became a platform for discussion around current topics such as COVID, vaccines, healthy eating, exercise, and learning about current scams and being aware of these. Over time new members started to attend the Zoom social group, new friendships developed and peer support flourished.

The telephone befriending service probably had the most positive impact during lockdown. It offered a lifeline for those without digital access enabling them to allay COVID-related anxieties and get the support they need whether it was a food parcel, a referral to another service to get batteries for a hearing aid or information on mobile hairdressers.



Case study

'Bus Ride' was a large-scale performance piece made by [The Performance Ensemble](#). It featured older people from Leeds and was based on the belief that the telling and listening to stories are acts of generosity. It was performed by a cast of 93 people. The participants presenting themselves was the central text of the work; their stories, their concerns, their aspirations.

Naseem from Choices became part of the project as a result of a partnership working and here she tells her story of a bus ride (well, a whole day out) to Whitby.

"In September, I took part in a performance at the Queens Hotel Ballroom called 'Bus Ride'. It was the first time I had done anything like that. It was well out of my comfort zone. It was a massive, scary challenge. But I did it. In front of about 200 people - I told my story.

Last year Feel Good Factor took us on a bus trip to Whitby. There were 12 of us. I'd never been before. I'd been to Whitley Bay, when I lived in Newcastle, but this was the first time I had been to Whitby. It was great going in a group – nice people to talk to – great company.

We got off the coach and we were walking around and I remember looking at a statue of two men on a bike. It was grey and quite dirty and just as I reached out to touch it, it moved! I got such a shock. I thought it was a real statue. Then we walked up 198 steps and there was a church at the top.

We walked back down and had fish and chips in a cafe and the owner gave me his card because he had rooms to rent above the shop. It was a lovely idea but if I had stayed overnight how would I have got home? There were boat trips in the harbour and I really wanted to go – but nobody else was bothered and I didn't want to go on my own.

I was shattered when I got home. I could hardly make myself a cup of tea. But then I kept thinking about that boat trip. Why had I not gone on my own? I should have more confidence. I've decided - if I want to do something I'm going to go for it.

Since then I've moved on. I volunteer for Feel Good Factor making home visits. Encouraging and motivating people who feel isolated and alone. Just like I used to feel. I get them to come to social groups. To meet new friends. It makes me happy to see them smile and I think it makes them happy to see me smile."

Contact us

To find out more about Feel Good Factor www.fgfleeds.org

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