



Carers Connections: linking people with a shared experience

Time to Shine end of project report
March 2022



**Carers
Leeds**
Working together to support carers



Summary

Carers Leeds set up the Carers Connections project to offer support to older carers to help them reduce their social isolation.

They worked with

- Carers who could leave their homes but had lost confidence in socialising as a result of their caring role. This included bereaved carers who might have been unable to leave their home whilst caring and who now need to rebuild their social lives.
- Carers with health problems or disabilities themselves who have difficulty in leaving the home.
- Carers who have been unable to set up satisfactory care arrangements that would allow them to leave the person they care for – this often happens to carers of people with dementia.
- Male carers experiencing social isolation who may find it hard to join social groups

They planned to offer 1:1 befriending, either face-to-face or on the telephone, to offer carers support to join local social and activity groups where they might make friends. The team also set up social groups where carers could get together with others in a similar situation for peer support and friendship.

The project was quick to take advantage of the 100% Digital Leeds tablet loan scheme. They started to support people with digital connection early in 2019 as they identified it could be an effective way to help carers to keep in touch with family and friends when they were unable to leave their home. Carers Leeds was able to put these skills to good use when the face to face work was closed down by the pandemic.

Carers Connections in numbers

- 239 people took part in Carers Connections between 2018 and 2022, with 204 older people participating regularly
- Demographic data was collected for 195 people, and of those people
 - » 89% were of White British heritage
 - » 7% were of Asian / Asian UK heritage
 - » 4% were of Black African / Caribbean / Black UK heritage
 - » 32% identified as male
- Carers Connections was supported by 16 older volunteers (aged 50 and older) and 13 younger volunteers (aged under 49) and together they gave 871 hours of their time to support the project
- 22 case studies and test and learn case studies were written to share the project's learning and experiences



Ethos

With over 74,000 unpaid carers in Leeds, Carers Leeds already offered support to carers of all ages in a variety of ways. This project intended to build on the skills they already had, however they wanted to use co-production to help them tailor activities to ensure they worked well for older carers. For example, by listening to the carers who attended the first social meeting, as well as those who were invited who did not attend, they realised that many older people found driving into and parking in central Leeds (where Carers Leeds had their office and meeting rooms) very stressful. People said they would prefer to meet locally and in fact local social groups proved very popular, resulting in people joining social activities for the first time.

As well as using the skills they had within their own organisation they made a point of using Time to Shine learning events and skill shares to make new contacts and try out new ideas. They took on board information about [supportive and welcoming groups](#) to deliberately change the way they welcomed people to carers' socials and used the [Shared Tables toolkit](#) to create social opportunities in various localities. Inclusivity improved as a result and they noticed carers starting to make friends outside meetings.

In the end flexibility and willingness to learn from others and try new things proved to be the key to engaging with people who really needed support but who found it very difficult to engage because of their commitment to their caring role.

Judith and Emma were years apart at 70+ and 30+, but they shared a passion for fashion and both had autistic children. They enjoyed some great window shopping trips in Leeds and even headed across to Manchester. "Emma was a perfect choice for me. We have had many outings...we have many interests in common... Emma and I have become friends..thank you for introducing us to each other"



Activities

One-to-one befriending

Following a successful pilot project Carers Connections was able to offer both telephone and face-to-face befriending. They were able to recruit volunteers from the general population and found that the telephone befriending gave them an opportunity to connect with businesses offering staff time as part of their corporate social responsibility offer. The key to successful befriending partnerships was more about careful matching of interests than age.

The befriending volunteers receive excellent training and support with regular meetings to get to know one another and ensure they feel valued. Since lockdown they have met online and one of the volunteers will organise and chair the befrienders Zoom peer meeting – meaning that this meeting is fully self-sufficient and a safe space for volunteers to share best practice and talk openly about their matches. They are organising their own Zoom meetings for this year and also trialling meetings again in person for the first time since lockdown.

One visually impaired woman needed help learning a new route to get to a Tai Chi class she thought she would enjoy. The worker was able to help her to do that and when she attended the course she met people she had lost touch with whilst she had been caring. As a result she was able to reconnect with her local community independently. Another carer was interested in the digital cafe, but felt anxious about travelling into Leeds and meeting a new group. The worker accompanied her in a taxi on the first occasion, and introduced her to group members. After that she felt sufficiently confident to join a digital course and got to it on her own.



One-to-one support to get people to social activities of their choice

Although setting up carers socials worked well it was also important to be able to connect people to local activities and enable them to pursue previous or new interests. Flexible, person-centred support proved to be the key in all cases.

It was important to have a staff member who was dedicated to providing 1:1 support in helping a carer connect with others with similar interests. The staff member was able to offer support to those carers who had very complex lives with their own health problems as well as their caring role. These carers could receive a higher level of support than could be provided by a volunteer. Often, they could then go on to receive support from a volunteer befriender once their initial high level of need has been addressed.

Peer to peer social activities for carers

Carers Connections, following initial co-production, set up two separate locality-based social meet ups, based on the areas that had the highest number of referrals. They used the learning from another Time to Shine project, [Shared Tables](#), and worked to set up social groups who met for lunch. Initially these were organised and facilitated by a staff member and a trained Connections Social volunteers (a brand new volunteer role which has been developed for this purpose) with the aim of withdrawing staff input and the meet ups being self-led and self-sustaining with minimal staff input. The socials were a mixture of those currently caring, and carers who had been bereaved. Integrating these groups was new for Carers Leeds and it worked well.

The social groups had to change the way they met during the pandemic but people will continue to meet face to face in the future.

The staff members also committed time to making older carers and working older carers feel comfortable in other social activities organised by Carers Leeds, like coach trips out, and regular Saturday social meetings in Leeds City Centre. This worked well to integrate people into a wider group where they received peer support.

The Digital World

The Carers Connections project started at almost the same time as the [100% Digital Leeds](#) initiative, and they were quick to take advantage of the tablet loan scheme as they could see how much it might help carers who were often effectively housebound by their responsibilities long before the pandemic lockdowns.

They worked with individuals to help them gain the digital skills they needed; the staff member helped carers connect to family members via social media and video chat, linking one man to relatives who now lived abroad. Staff also saw that a regular digital social would be a great hook to engage more male carers, a fortnightly meeting on a digital theme thrived. A pilot digital skills course followed, and then another course ensured digital skills were a strong part of their offer, before March 2020.



Project adaptations following lockdowns and pandemic responses

All the work around digital skills training and telephone befriending stood the project in good stead as the first lockdown happened. They were able to move one to one befriending to telephone befriending. Calls moved from fortnightly to weekly as they found more frequent shorter calls were more supportive.

Carers Leeds formed a partnership with Healthwatch, whose younger volunteers suddenly had the time to volunteer in a different way, to ensure prescriptions, food and medicine were delivered to carers who were shielding because of age or medical conditions.

Carers Connections used the funding they would have spent on face to face meetings to deliver or send small gifts to carers to help them feel connected. They made as many garden visits as possible so they could check how people were feeling and offer help with digital devices.

- In the longer term they used their own digital skills, and learned from other Time to Shine projects to set up group formation and social activity online.
- They created private Facebook Groups for the social groups
- They moved training for befrienders online and were able to continue recruiting befrienders
- They trained other Carers Leeds staff in running online groups so carers in other age groups could also receive support.
- Through collaboration and co production they established a range of social activities. They worked with Yorkshire Dance's Dance On to deliver dance based exercise; a local disabled writer delivered An Introduction to Autobiographical Writing workshop for International Day of Disabled People 2020; weekly scrapbook sessions and informal games evenings were run on Zoom.

Scrapbook sessions worked really well, carers were delivered physical items before the projects and could work on things in their own time, or join the group doing the same thing at the same time. People said they felt more enthusiastic about attending the scrapbook Zoom groups because they had something physical to accompany it.

Games evenings were very informal and focussed on fun rather than competition. Some people joined in for the whole session, others dropped in and out whilst they did other activities at home, listening to the group and still feeling part of it.

As people moved back to face to face activities the staff supported anxious carers to join activities in a number of ways, they formed partnerships with organisations, signposted carers to groups, co-facilitated sessions, accompanied carers to sessions and linked carers to these projects that will continue long after the TTS project finishes. These included walking, singing, archery and yarn bombing as well as the simplest of meetups, the chatty cafe.

Legacy

Carers Connections goal has always been for carers to make friends and find other community resources to build their support network rather than encourage a reliance on a particular project or member of staff. They have done a lot of work with individuals to help them join community activities.

There will however always be new carers, so Carers Leeds aim is for connections support, befriending and digital support to be merged together to form one team with the focus of connecting socially isolated carers with their communities both online and face to face. They are seeking funding to make this possible. In the meantime there is a dedicated digital support worker helping people to get online and the befriending support and the volunteer team will stay in place to continue to support isolated carers through one-to-one matches.

Learning

Top tips

- you need to have a very flexible approach to supporting isolated carers, offering choice - each carer has their own preferences and sometimes very narrow windows of opportunity to connect with our support
- people want to connect with others within their own geographical community – they can't afford the travel time to leave the person they care for (even when a taxi was offered people still preferred to meet in their own community).
- people don't want to be in the city alone in the dark, day-time activities are much preferred
- there are working older carers – it can be difficult to connect them with community activities. To be flexible – offer support online in the evenings – and even the occasional weekend session
- carers wanted an option to include the cared for person in the social activities
- activities aimed at men were popular but there weren't enough in local areas
- Hobby based groups are also popular – photography, dance, drama, music, scrapbooking, art and crafts, walking.
- offering to support attendance at the first few sessions is a very useful approach – carers appreciated this help.

Challenges you might meet

- The cared for person not wanting the carer to leave them so the carer has to stay at home
- The cared for people refusing support from anyone except their main primary carer (partner/child/friend) and then preventing them from attending social gatherings due to the cared for person not wanting to go out.
- It can be difficult to engage with carers – for them to speak openly when they are aware that the cared for person is at home or even in the same room. It works better (but is not always possible) if there is an opportunity for them to speak privately.



Case study

Balancing the needs of groups and individuals

Janet was referred to Connections by the Dementia team after the death of her husband and the staff members spoke to the Dementia team who shared an overview of Janet's caring role and how since the bereavement she wanted to fill her time with new hobbies.

After an initial phone call to discuss her interests and how the support could be conducted, Janet talked about her recent bereavement as expected and said she was coping well. She talked about a multitude of different hobbies: writing, poetry, yoga, walking, cooking, reading, spending time with friends and more. Janet was asked if she was interested in Carers Leeds groups or one-to-one support and she expressed a preference for activity or hobby-based groups.

She was invited to the Carers Connections Scrapbook Project.

The first Zoom group was an open space for the participants to meet and discuss their experience and interest in making scrapbooks, writing and crafting. The participants were asked to share one thing that had been positive in their week for example a TV show, book or food. On Janet's turn to speak she began discussing her husband's recent death and how difficult this time is for her. This expression of grief steered people away from the focus of the scrapbook group.

Consequently, we recognised that we needed to adapt the structure of the Zoom group sessions and support given to Janet.

Full PowerPoints were created for the scrapbook sessions including sharing videos, images, allotting time for quiet writing and sharing back. This meant that the whole groups' needs and aims of the group were effectively met.


The one-to-one support offered to Janet was increased and she was provided with more information about bereavement groups. The Connections team also liaised with the Carers Leeds bereavement team to be sure Janet could access specific bereavement support. Janet's interest in writing was encouraged and she submitted work to [Shine magazine](#) and attended other writing workshops to creatively express her feelings.



Contact us

To find out more about Carers Leeds go to <https://www.carersleeds.org.uk/>

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