



Cara Too: being a friend

Time to Shine end of project report

June 2022

Leeds
Older
People's
Forum

Time to
Shine



LEEDS IRISH
HEALTH & HOMES



Summary

[Leeds Irish Health and Homes \(LIHH\)](#) - a Leeds-based organisation that offers culturally sensitive support to the Irish community in Leeds - previously ran a successful Time to Shine project with older Irish people. At the end of their [Cara](#) project they reflected on what they had learned and wanted to test some theories. The Cara Too project was the result; they planned from the start to provide additional support to older people with very entrenched isolation to supplement volunteer befriending. They hoped that support from skilled staff would help individuals to reconnect in person or digitally. At the same time, the project identified the need for some socially isolated older residents of care homes to receive befriending and support.

As the project progressed teething problems around appropriate referrals were ironed out and the project was able to support individuals in their own homes. Success with the work in care homes was more mixed. In some homes things worked really well but communication problems meant it didn't always benefit residents. Over the length of the project Cara Too moved its focus to sheltered accommodation and extra-care housing where there were fewer opportunities for residents to undertake social activities.

People across a range of settings derived benefit from learning to use digital devices and, as with other projects, this learning stood them in good stead as Covid restrictions were put in place.



Cara Too in numbers

343 people took part in Cara Too between 2018 and 2022, with 170 older people participating regularly

Demographic data was collected for 313 people:

- » 73% were of White British heritage
 - » 19% were of Irish / Irish Traveller / Gypsy / Other White heritage
 - » 7% were of Black African / Caribbean / Black UK heritage
 - » 1% were of Asian / Asian UK heritage
- 28% identified as male
 - Cara Too was supported by 36 older volunteers (aged 50 and older) and 26 younger volunteers (aged under 49) and together they gave 834 hours of their time to support the project
 - 32 case studies and test and learn case studies were written to share the project's learning and experiences

Ethos

Earlier work with chronically isolated older people during the Cara project had shown LIHH staff that:

- Chronically isolated people need lots of time invested with them initially to overcome the apathy, fear and lack of confidence that isolation brings before they will willingly engage with services and events. This required skilled and patient intervention.
- There are chronically isolated people in care homes who have no meaningful interaction with anyone inside or outside the home.
- Technology is underutilised in bringing fun events closer to the isolated person.

Cara Too planned for staff to visit initially on a weekly basis. Experienced volunteers provided a second visit in the week when appropriate which would help break up periods of isolation. They understood from previous experience that by establishing people's likes, interests, hopes and dislikes they could build a trusting relationship.

Cara's previous work showed that investment in this relationship could encourage people to take steps towards engagement in community activities. The end goal for Cara Too was thus that entrenched and isolated older people would be supported to the point where they no longer need such intensive support, leading to the receipt of support from a volunteer alone.

Cara Too also planned to trial involvement in activities using digital links to luncheon groups, tea dances, and social activities where they could 'virtually participate' in an activity. Staff hoped that when participants saw what happened during the session and recognised some faces, this might give people the confidence to attend the physical events.

In fact this didn't happen within the early part of the project, probably because it took more work than expected to get people comfortable online. By the end of 2020 the idea had become commonplace and LIHH, like many others, was running hybrid events as a matter of course.



Activities

One-to-one support & befriending

One of Cara Too's support workers made a weekly visit to someone who had been identified as living in entrenched isolation. They spent some time getting to know the individual, their likes and dislikes and worked out what might motivate them to engage with social activities. Often it was as simple as accompanying someone for coffee in a local cafe to accustom them to being out and about, or it could be a more specific motivator, as shown below.

An older lady with dementia talked about her enjoyment of tennis when younger. A Cara Too worker encouraged her to join the table tennis group. She was initially hesitant, fearful she now lacked the stamina for such activity, but the worker persisted, offering frequent reassurance she need not stay if she didn't enjoy it. She did attend the event, was able to stand to play throughout and really enjoyed herself, becoming fiercely competitive as the game went on.

Working in care homes

Pre covid work with residents of care homes did not go to plan, and the work came to an end before the pandemic took hold.

Some residential homes were very glad to work with the Cara Too support workers and residents benefited from prolonged engagement, for instance using digital devices. In other homes the staff on the ground had no interest in engaging with external agencies, either seeing no potential benefit for residents, or feeling they already offered a number of activities through their own care coordinators. This lack of interest was exacerbated by frequent use of agency staff.

In addition there were issues around the element of the project designed to match volunteer befrienders with older residents as safeguarding concerns and internal regulation meaning it was very difficult for volunteers to get involved. Volunteers were not allowed to visit residents in their rooms, and could not provide an effective befriending experience in a common room.

As a result, after repeated efforts to engage, redrawing working agreements and providing a more regular presence, the Cara Too project staff withdrew and moved their support to a number of sheltered housing complexes where residents had very few chances to socialise and there were no activity staff providing activities.





Using digital devices

Cara Too worked with 100% Digital Leeds and used their loan scheme to access tablets for work in care homes. The workers used the motivational hook technique, showing people things they were interested in. This included looking at images of places people used to live, playing games like solitaire, or listening to music. In two care homes staff reported residents were very engaged, frequently referring back to the session. They requested classes and some people planned to buy their own devices.

The use of digital devices didn't work in all care homes, it was dependent on the demographic and current ability of residents, but in a couple it really took off. A Cara Too worker ran regular 'classes' and as a result the project received digital inclusion funding to purchase their own equipment. The project continued to work with 100% Digital Leeds, trialling bluetooth keyboards, Google goggles and virtual reality headsets.

Working in sheltered housing

Cara Too staff developed connections and delivered a wide range of activities in sheltered housing schemes. They started with work in LIHH accommodation, and also worked with Leeds City Council extra care housing schemes. They generally worked with residents to identify ideas and trialled some activity.

The team identified that work was best undertaken in housing situated away from the city centre as residents in the suburbs had fewer local social opportunities. The partnerships with other older people's organisations and council staff in these venues worked well. Individual residents were also matched with volunteer befrienders and supported to go out into the community.. This work was then stopped by the pandemic.

Social activities for younger older people

The support workers identified they did very little work supporting younger older people although they felt there were individuals in their 60s who would benefit from a stronger social circle. Engaging this group took a different approach as many of them were working or caring and unable to engage during the daytime. Potential benefits for people in the lower age range included getting involved with a social activity and group of friends not bound up with the world of work. This means on the point of retirement there would be some social continuity. The workers set up an evening social activity group in a friendly pub with plenty of space, in an area well served by buses. It proved popular in the time it ran pre-pandemic, engaging people still at work, as well as others who lived alone and found evenings to be long without companionship.

Project adaptations following lockdowns and pandemic responses

Cara Too moved swiftly to a different way of working and communicated this clearly to the participants. They cancelled all social events, all physical contact with care homes and sheltered housing schemes and also discontinued one-to-one support visits.

Initially all contact was by telephone and staff worked quickly to ensure that all members had the means to access food, medication and other basics. Where necessary staff delivered supplies until they had supported people to make alternative arrangements with appropriate agencies. Telephone support continued until staff were able to start carrying out socially distanced doorstep visits. The visits were gratefully received and many participants said that Cara Too staff were the only people who actually knocked at their door and spent time with them. Craic packs were also delivered and these are explained in the case study below.

They were then able to start some online group activity using the equipment they had on loan, setting up a weekly social 'coffee morning'. This proved so popular that they ran it twice a week, then instituted Zoom bingo (Zingo) which took place every fortnight.

There was a lot of collaboration between teams within LIHH which meant that Cara Too participants who were able to get online could take part in other activities like painting, arts and crafts and digital skills provided by other LIHH staff and volunteers. By November 2020 there was also demand for a singing group so members sang their way to Christmas and beyond.

Garden and doorstep visits turned into one-to-one walks in local parks, and in 2021 local group walks and picnics in parks were popular. They also started a men's walking group on request and supported all members to return to social activities as things started up again.



Legacy

Cara Too members were signposted to other activities within LIHH or their local communities. The Cara Too project developed many partnerships to better support older people receiving referrals through local medical practices and signposting older people to relevant services. It also enabled LIHH to work with older people from outside the Irish diaspora. It has strengthened partnerships working together to help older people.

“The legacy the project has left behind is knowing that we have helped so many people overcome loneliness and isolation, built friendships through our befriending project and with each other. It has left a legacy of happy memories, friendships in place and the door being left open.”

Cara Too enabled participants to be able to attend activities on their own, delivered by Leeds Irish Health and Homes or other organisations. It saw people’s confidence grow so much that they felt ready to be moved on from support or signposted onto more low-level support, and to help those not ready to move on remain connected with a service. It has seen people connect with their community and given them a sense of purpose.

Learning

“Our learning is about the resilience of our older people and just how taking that time to support a person to connect can make a huge difference to a person’s wellbeing and confidence. We have watched some lovely friendships blossom.”

It would be unrealistic to assume everything a project sets out to do will succeed, not everything did but the Cara Too team were able to turn ‘failures’ into successes using the test and learn approach.

They persisted in their care home work, identified which strands were working and pursued those, offering digital skills to those who were interested and could benefit from them.

Coproduction and flexibility then helped the project to succeed in supported living settings. They were able to persist for long enough to really try an activity, and then analyse why things failed or succeeded, then try again to test the hypothesis.

Although a small team, being part of a larger community organisation enabled them to draw on the support of colleagues. For instance the Cara Too team was able to ask a male worker to support the men’s walking group when the group requested this.

Case Study: Craic Packs

When the pandemic struck in March 2020 many groups and associations within the Leeds Irish community came together to make sure that no one in the community was left alone during what they all imagined was going to be a tough few months until this virus was contained. Under the banner of 'Leeds, Irish and United - we are many groups, but we are one community', LIHH put their shoulder to the wheel as they had done throughout their history.



It started as an initial desire to protect the most vulnerable from isolation and despair, and turned into a project to buoy people through the long hard months of the pandemic. Local Irish associations mobilised volunteers alongside LIHH staff to deliver over 1300 packs of Irish goodies (Craic Packs) providing a 'taste from home'. Packs also contained a community newsletter to let people know what was happening out and about. There were also vital pieces of health information included for many who did not have access to online news. A Christmas present was followed by an Easter egg as the Craic-packs initiative helped bring some seasonal joy.


Local schools were engaged and pupils sent drawings and cards with messages of hope and support that brought many a tear to our eyes. People were delighted and the project was kept going as the delivery often turned into an impromptu welfare visit/check-in where individuals responded to kind words and deeds in person.

"Well, what a surprise I got today when I opened my door. I could not believe it. I have been feeling so low and have not really been out or seen anyone, but when I saw this young man with all these goodies for me, I did not know what to say. I was so touched that you thought of me. I cannot thank you enough. It really lifted me."

Contact us

To find out more about LIHH go to <https://www.lihh.org/>

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