'Extending the Hand of Friendship': Exploring loneliness among the older Irish community in Leeds through an exploration of the Cara Project

Summary

The Cara Project (Cara), was run by Leeds Irish Health & Homes (LIHH) and funded by the Time to Shine (TTS) programme, which aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst older people in Leeds. TTS is supported by The Big Lottery funded Ageing Better programme, which operates in 14 areas across England. Through the use of volunteer befrienders, Cara supported older Irish people to re-engage with their local communities. Alongside befriending support, a range of activities were also offered, generally through working with other organisations, or directly through LIHH. Cara worked with those who are isolated due to complex issues, as well as male members of the Irish community. Based on participants who completed a survey (23 responses), most lived alone (77.3%), over two fifths were men and most identified as having a disability or health condition (82.6%).

Background

Research has identified that the older Irish population are disproportionately affected by poor mental and physical health conditions alongside specific lifestyle choices, such as heavy smoking and drinking. In fact, the Irish in Britain have the highest level of long-term limiting illness found in any of the ethnic groups, alongside higher mortality rates (Irish in Britain 2011). Yet it is reported that the Irish community are often reluctant to seek help, for example visiting a GP (Tilki 2003). This group are also more likely to live alone, being at particular risk of both cultural and social isolation (Irish in Britain 2011).

As Cara is an intervention which specifically targeted older Irish people, this case study is interested in exploring the ways in which the project has reduced the social isolation and loneliness amongst this group in Leeds, which constitutes one of the main anticipated TTS programme outcomes.

Methods

The following methods were used to form the findings of this report:

- Review of documents including: Five case studies provided to the programme team, press releases, monitoring returns, promotional material (including a TV clip, blog posts and newsletter bulletins that feature either the Cara project or Cara participants).
- Analysis of baseline survey data collected in November 2016.
- A focus group involving the project and volunteer coordinator, two volunteers, and a beneficiary.
- Two face-to-face interviews with the Project Coordinator, including an interview carried out at the outset (December 2015), and a follow up interview (February 2017).

Key Findings

Cara participants are both socially isolated and lonely

Cara participants are assessed as being lonelier and more socially isolated than the general TTS population. For example, nearly a quarter (22.7%) spoke to people in their local area only once a month or less, 82% felt that they took part in less social activities than other people of their age, and the same proportion reported lacking companionship. Three fifths felt isolated at least some of the time.

Causes of loneliness and social isolation is multifaceted
Feelings of loneliness were linked to personal experiences (health, finances, substance misuse) and transitions (bereavement), but also had a distinct cultural meaning, based on the Irish heritage of participants and being male. Overall, loneliness was not an all or nothing experience, but could peak at different times, due to personal memories, and may be exacerbated due to anxiety and a lack of confidence.

Two-tier models are necessary when working with people who have complex needs
Participants recognised that it may take some time (and patience on the part of the befriender) before particularly vulnerable older people will feel ready to accept support:

> *It is really difficult to get through to somebody but you have to keep trying... You have to get to know them, and know what will be suitable for them, take it from there; it is a slow process (Volunteer)*

> *It is incremental changes, one of the women would keep her curtains closed, she now opens her curtains, she has since left the house to come and watch a film (Project Coordinator)*

In this vein, a two-tier approach, involving initial one to one support, was viewed as necessary.

What has worked well
To help consider how the loneliness and social isolation of older Irish people can be tackled, it is necessary to understand how this group can be encouraged to get involved in the first place; the main learning around the best way to do this is outlined below:

Factoring in support to encourage participants to take that first step
While offering an activity that appealed, and ensuring it is accessible was viewed as important, participants felt that encouraging reluctant people to engage in the first place needed consideration. The project team referred to the importance of using positive language in promotional marketing to avoid barriers to engagement based on stigma and/or pride (this was viewed as an issue for men in particular):

> *There is a stigma as loneliness is associated with failure, some do not ask for help due to pride; you need to use positive language...we try to promote 'positives' i.e. friendship networks (Project Coordinator)*

Once someone's attention was gained, it was necessary to provide ongoing, one to one, support to allow a trusting relationship to build. The befriender would then encourage the person to take part in activities outside of the home:

> *You have to build up a rapport, and they have to trust you, they have to feel comfortable enough to want to go out with you. [the befriended] was quite happy at home, but you just needed a bit of encouragement, didn't you? [The befriended, who is in attendance, nods] to come out, (Volunteer)*

Participants also referred to adopting a *soft touch* approach, where more reluctant individuals could receive information about forthcoming activities and events, prior to being matched with a befriender.

A practical example of how support could lead to participation was provided in the focus group. One befriender generally visited the person being supported at home, but there had been recent examples of the befriender accompanying the beneficiary to a film screening, and the focus group. Alongside this, during a discussion that asked for ideas around future activities a befriender used a beneficiary's love of gardening as a *hook,* in an attempt to encourage her to look at attending an allotment group.

Supporting development of meaningful relationships

Thinking of how to sustain social engagement, the TTS interim report refers to the importance of making links outside of the TTS projects. Cara participants (both befrienders and the befriended), referred to developing lasting friendships. One way in which this took place was through sharing experiences, such as bereavement:

> *I have met a good friend in [the befriended], what I give, I get back 100 fold. I have … got very friendly with one of the other volunteers; we both lost our husbands around the same time (Volunteer)*

As with other projects supported by TTS, Cara volunteers had a range of vulnerabilities themselves, so assisting them in developing friendships was viewed as contributing to the main programme outcomes.

Factoring in specific cultural needs

As a consequence of loneliness being a multifaceted experience, understanding its nuances for those who have additional issues adds further complexity. However, giving regard to particular cultural and/or complex needs was effective in securing initial engagement. Loneliness was reportedly alleviated to some extent when people took part in activities that reconnected them with their Irish heritage. This included group led activities, such as watching an Irish film but also lone activities, such as listening to an Irish voice on the radio, or reading an Irish newspaper:

> *A lot of older people, again, mostly men, say that listening to the radio is their main activity, they listen to it to hear sport, but they listen to it to hear an Irish voice* (Volunteer)

> *It's that Irish connection, although Leeds is my home, I will always have a soft spot for Ireland... I love Irish music, I go to the Irish centre, it's the connection (Volunteer)*

Focus group participants agreed that the experience of being male, and specifically an older Irish male, is qualitatively distinct to the general older male population. The need for men to find an environment in which they could feel comfortable and safe was viewed as important:

> *Men aren't as forthcoming about their feelings as women…and unless there is a group that you feel comfortable with, cos you have to feel comfortable (Volunteer)*

To support these identified needs, Cara facilitated, a range of activities believed to offer broad appeal to its target population, such as showing Irish films, or holding events in an Irish pub. As men are a particular target group, the project also offered activities considered to be of interest to this group, such as card games.

Ensuring activities offered are varied through working with the wider community

The overall consensus of the focus group participants was the importance of publicising the project through a diverse range of sources:

> *Its visiting places where people go, the pub used to be the main standby for older Irish people…its to get what you have on offer out there (Volunteer)*

Subsequently relationships were built up with, and referrals provided through a number of routes including: GPs, occupational health, Chapeltown Community Health team, home care agencies, parish services, libraries, chemists and established Irish pubs (including distributing beer mats), clubs, societies and groups.

To ensure other organisations are keen to work with Cara, the Project Coordinator acknowledged that it is necessary to facilitate mutual benefits and reciprocal relationships. For

example following the success of a cinema club that was run and supported by Cara, a neighbourhood network submitted a bid to buy equipment to show films on (at the time of writing, four networks had worked with Cara).

Barriers and challenges

Engaging the most vulnerable is resource intensive

The main barriers to running a targeted project such as Cara relate to factors around managing and supporting vulnerable groups. As participants have a range of health and other vulnerabilities, ensuring volunteer befrienders are offered suitable training and support is particularly important:

> *I feel we need volunteers with experience and resilience…We have some older people with cognitive impairment, it can be challenging for volunteers (Project Coordinator)*

In fact, the beneficiary involved in the focus group suggested she may not have attended without the support of her befriender. Whilst in this example a longer-term friendship had developed, this encourages reflection more broadly around offering this type of service to particularly vulnerable people. This, of course, has resource implications, particularly when thinking about the sustainability of a project which has a one to one element.

Those with complex needs may not be ready for social engagement

Beneficiaries often had complex needs, including social and emotional need(s) which needed to be addressed alongside loneliness and social isolation. In fact, at times, the project had to initially refer people to other agencies before they could offer a service. An example was provided of an older person whose house was in poor condition and required social care support. Another example included a person who was at risk of losing their home, thus a referral was made to the local authority. Nevertheless, soft touch support was maintained whilst other concerns were addressed.

Whilst Cara has taken steps to maximise engagement, it was recognised that reluctance persisted. In fact, it was identified by participants that some older people will never engage in a service such as Cara, regardless of the resources used to target and identify this population.

Capturing outcomes is more difficult when working with vulnerable people

Another challenge is how to capture the experience of beneficiaries with complex needs, which may be necessary to make the case for future funding. In one example, a Cara worker went to complete a Common Measurement Framework[1](CMF) form with a beneficiary, but instead needed to make an emergency referral to mental health services. In fact, Cara provided information as to why a number of people they worked with did not complete a follow up CMF, this included reasons such as the participant not being matched due to a mixture of complex needs, a chaotic lifestyle, and health problems.

The community development of Cara is difficult to self-sustain

Cara has successfully identified and worked with vulnerable older people and ensured a broad range of organisations are encouraged to refer potential beneficiaries. The identification element of Cara (i.e. finding older Irish people and making them aware of what is on offer), can potentially work if organisations continue to both signpost, and offer activities with this group in mind. However, in terms of sustainability, it may be that an outreach worker,

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[1] This refers to the survey which contains specifies data that will be collected by partnerships to inform the overall programme level evaluation.

provided through Cara, is necessary, particularly for more vulnerable groups. Indeed, as a citywide service, the Cara Project Coordinator conceded that it has been challenging to raise awareness across local communities, and that there was still work to do in this area.

Learning and recommendations

The learning from Cara supports the effectiveness of a targeted approach to engaging older people who may have complex issues or cultural needs. However, by reaching the most vulnerable, Cara participants inevitably tend to experience other issues which interact with, and sometimes take precedence over, their experience of loneliness or social isolation. Measuring the impact with such a target group is undoubtedly challenging, and it could be argued that without a significant injection of resources it will be difficult for Cara to establish and sustain activities and networks for the target group across the city.

It is difficult to unpick the extent or ways in which being of Irish heritage has contributed to feelings of loneliness or isolation, particularly as this interacts with factors such as ill health or bereavement. Though in support of the broader literature, focus group participants provided examples of where engaging with their heritage helped to alleviate loneliness.

The findings also show that people who are particularly vulnerable due to complex needs will likely require a two-tier support model, alongside a signposting system, to ensure practical, financial and health issues are identified. Though Cara has provided this effectively, evidence also demonstrates that projects hoping to follow a similar model would need to factor in additional resources to manage this (such as training and supporting volunteers, appropriately matching etc.).

Ideally, befriending projects such as Cara should aim for participants to use befriending as an initial support mechanism before becoming more independent, through maintaining friendships and attending events without a continuing need for one to one support. As building friendships is viewed as offering a protective element against loneliness, evidence that this had developed to some extent through Cara is positive. However, encouraging beneficiaries to try activities in their community, both with a befriender and independently, has proven more difficult.

References

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Wigfield, A and Alden, S. 2017 Evaluation of Time to Shine: Year 2: Interim Findings https://timetoshineleeds.org/projects/local-evaluation.

Also check out the Time to Shine programme website on: https://www.timetoshineleeds.org.