

New Horizons - project summary

Overview

The aim of the New Horizons project was to enable socially isolated older people in the rural town of Frodsham to engage with new activities and form new social connections, through a 'buddy' scheme designed primarily to build confidence.

New Horizons was commissioned as part of Brightlife's 'Bright Ideas' strand and was delivered by RCS (Rural Community Services), a registered charity working with older people in the rural localities across Cheshire West and Chester.

New Horizons was initially awarded £8,752 for a year-long project and was subsequently awarded a further £9,432 to extend the project for another year.

Background and context

Social isolation and loneliness can significantly reduce individuals' confidence. This can then serve as a barrier to creating new social connections.

Volunteer 'buddies', trained to support older people to try out existing local activities, can provide an opportunity for socially isolated older people to make new friends and get more involved in their local community. Once their confidence has been built sufficiently, the buddy can withdraw.

Development and delivery

New Horizons employed a part-time project officer to deliver the project.

Existing activities available to over-50s in the Frodsham area were identified using asset-mapping, and volunteer buddies from within the local community were recruited and trained.

Service users were recruited directly using promotional leaflets and posters, and referrals were encouraged from the providers of existing activities and from health and social care practitioners. Upon referral, new service users were matched with a volunteer buddy.

Initially, a screening tool was used to assess potential participants' suitability for the scheme. However, it was found that the subjectivity of loneliness and social isolation made it difficult to

use this method to accurately identify those requiring support. Several potential service users were also uncomfortable sharing what they perceived to be intimate details as part of the screening process. For these reasons, use of the screening tool was discontinued.

Due to a smaller-than-expected number of volunteer buddies being recruited, and the unanticipated extent of support required by those participants who had lost their confidence, the model of the scheme was changed so that instead of providing one-to-one support, volunteers worked together with small groups of service users in local cafes and activity groups. The requirement by many existing local activities for regular attendance and up-front payment was a barrier for some participants due to health issues and other commitments, so one-off social events were also organised, such as trips to local theatres.

The Project Officer and volunteers also began running drop-in sessions at the local library, in conjunction with another community programme. Regular social events helped raise the profile of this service amongst older people and activity providers, and it soon became established as the main hub for the buddy scheme.

Buddies continued to work with people 1:1 in addition to the library drop-in, but it was observed that people were more likely to give a group or an activity a go if they were encouraged by other users and not just volunteers. Existing New Horizon members became unofficial peer mentors and were able to use their own experiences to motivate new people to become involved.

Impact and legacy

Reducing loneliness

While the data does show improvements for some participants in terms of a reduction in loneliness and isolation, higher levels of social contact and improved health and wellbeing, reluctance of many participants to complete the evaluation questionnaire means that the conclusions that can be drawn from this data are very limited.

Anecdotal evidence from participants was that the project did have a positive impact on their feelings of social connectedness. This was especially true for those whose circumstances had changed and they found themselves less able to access services and activities in other areas.

Sustainability

Further funding has been secured to continue the New Horizons project in Frodsham over the next 12 months (and potentially beyond), including the library drop-in, regular social activities and some limited one-to-one buddying.

Key learning

Co-production and applying flexibility to a service model during the life of a project ensures that it meets actual rather than perceived need.

Buddy schemes can benefit from a group approach to building confidence in addition to 1:1 work. This enables a larger number of participants to be engaged and facilitates the building of social connections in a supportive setting.

Encouraging existing participants to become role models or informal mentors to new participants can be an effective way of building confidence for both.

'No-strings' pay as you go activities should be part of a community offer.

Regular drop-ins based at a community venue can be an effective method of engaging participants and volunteers and increasing awareness within the community about a scheme.

Using a screening tool to assess levels of social isolation and/or loneliness is problematic and can be counterproductive.

Working in partnership with other local providers to develop activities and carry out joint recruitment can be an effective way of pooling resources.

Those aged 50+ do not always identify as being 'older'. This must be given consideration when designing projects aimed at this age group.

Participants recruited = 26 (Target = 31)

Volunteers recruited = 3 (Target = 12)

CMF Entry Questionnaires completed = 48% (Target = 60%)