



Case study of the Bee Together Project

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Introduction

Bee Together was a Health For All project developed in partnership with Purple Patch Arts and Aspire Community Benefit Society (CBS). The project was service user led and aimed to engage older people with learning disabilities in their local communities. Bee Together was funded through the Time to Shine (TTS) programme, which aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst older people living in Leeds. Time to Shine is supported by the National Lottery Community Fund through the Ageing Better programme, which operates in 14 areas across England. Time to Shine was one of only two Ageing Better programmes to fund a specific project aimed at tackling social isolation and loneliness amongst older people with learning disabilities (OPLD).

Background

According to Sense, over half of people with learning disabilities experience chronic loneliness (Sense 2017). The causes of loneliness amongst older people with learning disabilities (OPLD) are complex, and can be worsened by other health and social care needs that are commonly associated with ageing (such as frailty, visual and sensory impairments). As a result of increased life expectancy and living standards, people with learning disabilities are now living significantly longer into their later years (Haveman et al. 2011). This means that at some point in the future, OPLD will eventually start accessing mainstream services that are traditionally aimed towards older people. The Equality Act (2010) states that people with learning disabilities should have the same access to care and support as everybody else, regardless of their age; yet for many years, the needs of OPLD have been addressed by segregated specialised services, which can limit their opportunities to mix with others outside of their peer group. These are all factors that have subsequently led to people with learning disabilities becoming socially isolated in old age.

Bee Together was a community development project targeted towards OPLD. The project began in June 2017 and was led by one project worker, who managed and delivered the project. Bee Together was supported by two project partners, Purple Patch and Aspire (both are involved in delivering education based creative workshops and support for people living with learning disabilities in Leeds), and Health For All, which is a Leeds based charity that works in partnership to deliver services to disadvantaged communities.

Prior to Covid-19, the Bee Together project worker met face-to-face with the OPLD to explore their interests and discuss the activities, or groups, they would like to take part in. The project worker then supported the OPLD by attending the activities together, until they were comfortably embedded in the

project and felt able to attend independently. Some of these activities have included: arts and crafts; seat-based exercise classes; café socials; and knitting groups. One example of an activity which developed as a result of the Bee Together project is the **Bee Friends** social group, which prior to March 2020, had been held weekly at four cafes in different areas of Leeds. Bee Friends was open to anyone within the local community, of all ages, and specifically inclusive of OPLD. Across Leeds, many community activities and TTS projects were paused or reduced in mid-March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time, the Bee Together project worker continued to offer one-to-one support via phone on an informal basis to participants and used this time to further develop EasyRead information aimed towards OPLD. The Bee Together project ended in September 2020.

Based on monitoring data, **91 beneficiaries** were involved in the Bee Together project. This included **three older volunteers** (aged 50+) and **73 people who participated regularly** (on three or more occasions). The three volunteers gave over **61 hours of their time** to the project. As the Bee Together project provides a useful way of exploring the involvement of OPLD in their local communities, the specific TTS outcome will be discussed in this case study:

- Project beneficiaries feel confident and able to participate in their communities.

Methods

Information was gathered from March to October 2020. The following methods were used to collect data for this case study:

- One telephone semi-structured interview with a project worker.
- Two face-to-face interviews with project beneficiaries (fieldnotes taken, no recordings).
- Participant observation of three social activities attended by Bee Together participants: a seat-based exercise class; an arts and craft activity; and the Bee Social group at the Bridge Café.
- A review of TTS documents including monitoring returns, case studies and Test and Learn examples.

Key Findings

Older people with learning difficulties remain a hard-to-reach group

The Bee Together project sought to identify OPLD in a number of ways. The first involved referrals through existing networks, including Purple Patch Arts and Aspire CBS, and social housing services, such as Leeds City Council housing and St Anne's Community Services. The project worker noted that these routes produced mixed results, and supplemented this with publicity through local Leeds community radio and distributing leaflets. The second route involved approaching social care services in Leeds to identify people on the periphery of support services with unidentified needs.

Gathering information on the needs of OPLD posed some challenges, as some may not necessarily view themselves as disabled. The project worker suggested that one of the reasons for this was that some individuals represented an *'in-between group'*, who did not traditionally fit into social care services for people with disabilities, but also **“do not fit into everyday life.”**

Making friends was a top priority for older people with learning disabilities

Research shows that maintaining meaningful friendships can reduce feelings of loneliness, and that people with disabilities are more likely to feel included and valued when they have an active social life (Mason et al, 2013; Wilson et al 2017). Generally, people with disabilities tend to have smaller social networks, largely made up of family members, support staff, or their caregivers (Kamstra et al, 2014). This reflects the reality that while some individuals may have seemingly busy social lives and daily contact from support services, they may not have meaningful friendships.

Bee Together participants expressed their desire for a friend made by mutual choice; someone who shared their hobbies and interests, with whom they could socialise.

“Having 1:1 support does not mean that you are not lonely; if someone is paid to spend time with you, it is a different relationship to that of a friend.” (Project Worker, Bee Together)

The ethos of Bee Together was therefore to encourage OPLD to become more involved in their local communities, which would in turn foster social connections and meaningful friendships within the place where they lived. The project worker acknowledged that the first step to becoming embedded within a social group or activity was simply being present and turning-up, to **“encourage friendships to grow and then moving on from there.”**

What has worked well?

Pollination: Connecting people with existing organisations

The uniqueness of the Bee Together project was that instead of setting-up a range of new social activities from scratch, the project worker would seek out existing activities within the participant's local community, with a view to encouraging social integration between the OPLD and the people who lived within their local area. This also involved engaging with the wider community and third sector organisations to encourage awareness of this target group and in turn, make community organisations more inclusive.

“My aim is to make their community more welcoming, and therefore let the community invite them in. In other words, flip the problem.” (Project Worker, Bee Together)

This approach also considered feedback from initial conversations between the project worker and participants upon joining the project. An important finding from these conversations was that many OPLD expressed their preference to not attend groups or activities targeted specifically towards people with

learning disabilities. In some cases, this was because the individual did not associate, or label themselves, as having a disability.

The process of finding activities within the OPLD's local community began by actively listening to the needs of the participant through a discussion of their preferences and interests. Some of the activities that were attended by Bee Together participants included: an arts and craft felting class run by Leeds Mind at Inkwell Creative Arts; Open Voices at ChapelFM; Lunch Club at Seacroft Friends and Neighbours; and Beeston Skills Hub. After locating an activity or group, the project worker would then support and accompany the individual to the first few sessions until they were fully embedded in the project and felt comfortable enough to attend independently.

Involving older people with learning disabilities in their local communities

Linking OPLD into existing social groups worked towards achieving the TTS aim of **encouraging community engagement**. An overarching aim of the Ageing Better programme was to encourage older people to participate in their communities by making them more accessible and inclusive of people, regardless of their age and ability. Similarly, Bee Together's mission statement was that for OPLD, **inclusion within their own community is the best way to beat loneliness and social isolation**. The project worker highlighted that in order to tackle loneliness, this meant engaging OPLD in their local communities – through attending universal community groups and not just those aimed towards learning disabilities. This was the ethos behind establishing a new social group, called **Bee Friends**.

“If we want people to be more accepting of learning disabilities, we need learning disabled services to open our doors to the public. Bee Friends is aiming to do this” (Project Worker)

The aim of Bee Friends was to bring the local community together, encourage conversations between people of all ages and abilities, and promote inclusivity. To create more potential for social interactions, conversation starters were left on the tables and telephone slips for people to exchange details and make friends. Bee Friends was initially held weekly at the Bridge Café on Thursday afternoons as an informal drop-in service for people to meet, and expanded from there.

Barriers and Challenges

Building trust and confidence takes time

According to survey data collected by the project, around 75% of participants who engaged with Bee Together reported having mental health difficulties. In the TTS Test and Learn case studies, many Bee Together participants described feelings of anxiety, depression, and a lack of confidence. Negative past experiences, such as stigma and abuse from members of the public, had led to a reluctance for some participants to go out alone or use public transport. One participant was over-cautious of sharing their contact details with the project worker, and as a result was often unreachable. Over time, these past negative experiences had resulted in participants becoming increasingly socially isolated, lonely, lacking in confidence, and in need of a safe space to socialize and make new friends. To build trust and increase

the individual's confidence, the project worker adopted a **warm handover approach**, which involved accompanying the OPLD on their first few visits to a new group, until they felt able to attend independently. The length of this process varied on an individual basis, as some were accompanied for around six sessions before feeling confident enough to attend on their own.

Need for volunteers and consistent staff

A key challenge for the Bee Together project was sustained volunteer recruitment. Having one project worker had on occasion led to some OPLD feeling unable to attend activities as a result of not having support to accompany them. This was disappointing for participants who needed consistent support, as many described being bounced around different services throughout their lives:

"I feel just feel like a football, I get kicked from one person to another." (Bee Together beneficiary)

Managing expectations was also a challenge for the core Bee Together project worker:

"I may be able to help them, but it is building their hopes, and it is difficult to not leave them feeling worse afterwards."

It was acknowledged that more volunteers would be needed in order to expand the Bee Friends social group, and support further activities developed as a result of the project.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

Covid-19 and social distancing measures had huge implications for OPLD, the Bee Together project and the TTS programme itself. The shift towards moving social activities and groups online created a barrier for some OPLD, and segregated people with disabilities from their local communities. The project worker highlighted the lack of information provided by the government and local authorities in respect to Covid-19, suggesting that people with differing abilities were forgotten about during the pandemic:

"One guy was still going out and about, wondering why nobody was there and was really confused. It has had a big effect on his mental health." (Project Worker, Bee Together)

Prior to lockdown, approximately 20-25 people were regularly attending the Bee Friends social groups weekly. During lockdown, the project worker did attempt to establish the social group online using video conference software (such as Zoom), although some participants struggled with accessibility and lacked the support to get online. This was further reinforced in TTS questionnaire findings from Bee Together participants, where **50% reported not having access to a computer** and **only 9% reported having access to a computer**. Some Bee Together participants were loaned iPads during the pandemic but struggled to use them without one-to-one support.

Making and maintaining meaningful relationships was challenging for older people with learning disabilities

Prior to the pandemic, some participants were beginning to attend activities independently, however, very few had formed meaningful relationships with others from the groups. It was noted by the project worker that despite two participants attending activities on a regular basis (a seat based exercise group and an arts and craft group) for a considerable length of time, neither had gone on to develop friendships with their peers or meet-up with others outside of the group. This was reinforced during the Covid-19 pandemic, as other members of the activity groups had not been in contact with the OPLD to check if they were okay or needed support. Both participants who were observed by the evaluator as part of this case study had remained socially isolated during the lockdown.

Learning and Recommendations

The findings from this case study highlight that considerable time and one-to-one support is needed to embed OPLD in their local communities and existing social activities. While it was noted that some of Bee Together's participants did not go on to develop friendships and meaningful relationships within the activity groups they attended, these may have eventually flourished over time had the pandemic not put their social activities on hiatus or moved the groups online.

Support with using technology and having access to inclusive tailored information has been highlighted by this case study. Prior to the pandemic, the project worker had approached Leeds libraries to discuss using the library network to create a safe space for OPLD to access information, and the library was reportedly keen to progress this idea. Libraries were also identified as a place for training community groups on how to be more inclusive of OPLD and offer services around producing EasyRead¹ documents.

Enabling people with learning disabilities to voice their needs and be included in the outcomes of the TTS programme was also a key insight. The project worker highlighted that the Common Measurement Framework (CMF) evaluation questionnaire used in the Ageing Better programme was not initially adapted for people with learning disabilities, and as a result, participants were unable to complete the questionnaire independently. To address this, the project worker created EasyRead versions of some questions within the TTS questionnaire, but even this was difficult to complete independently, and it became clear to the project worker that one-to-one support was needed. This further highlighted the need to tailor information in an accessible way for all abilities, particularly when evaluating research programmes.

Sustainability and Legacy

Prior to Covid-19, the Bee Friends social group was up and running successfully in four cafes, with further plans to set up a chatty café in mid 2020. The aim of Bee Friends was to compliment the activities run by

¹ EasyRead simplifies information to be more accessible for people living dementia, sight problems and those who want basic information, as well as those with learning disabilities.

other service providers and offer the potential for networking, sharing information and future expansion. Another aim was that when the project ended, the ideas and learning would be carried forward and the social groups would be sustained as a result. Due to Covid-19, some of the Bee Friends groups that were recently set-up did not become fully established, and it is unknown if Bee Friends will be reinstated when social distancing measures are relaxed.

The EasyRead documents developed as a result of the Bee Together project have now been disseminated to Neighbourhood Networks in Leeds and shared widely with other Ageing Better areas. Ecorys (the authors of the TTS questionnaire) have allowed the demographic data to be entered into the portal and will separately look at Bee Together's EasyRead returns to analyse trends and consider how these can be built into the wider results of the programme.

A further two booklets have also been developed as a result of the project; one is around producing accessible information aimed at Neighbourhood Networks, and the other is about including people with learning disabilities and interacting with them. These will be distributed to other Ageing Better areas in the UK. As part of the Bee Together project, the worker has also developed EasyRead information on will writing and power of attorney, and planning funerals.

References

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Further project information:

Bee Together Twitter: **BeeTogetherLeeds** @BeeLeeds

[Findings from the Bee Together project](#)

[Ideas on how to include people with learning disabilities](#)

[Ideas on how to include accessible information](#)

[Link to BT blog](#)

[Reducing social isolation and loneliness for older adults with a learning disability](#)