

## Young at Arts: Reducing loneliness and social isolation through offering creative social opportunities

### Summary

**Young at Arts**, delivered by the LEAF partnership (see <https://yorkshiredance.com/project/young-at-arts/> for more details), created social opportunities for older people through activities based on art, theatre, music and dance. It was funded through the Time to Shine (TTS) programme, which aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst older people in Leeds (it ran for two years and finished July 2017). TTS is supported by The Big Lottery funded Ageing Better programme, which operates in 14 areas across England.

Young at Arts offered activities in various community settings, in four residential care homes, and also provided home visits. Activities included regular participatory dance sessions and bespoke projects which focused on men, culture and migration. Young at Arts involved older people in the development and delivery of the project through a steering group which helped to plan, deliver and evaluate the project, and through a team of volunteer ambassadors (who were also involved in the steering group). This case study focuses on the ambassadors, described as:

*A community networker with the objective of spreading the word about arts and cultural events and/or representing the views and aspirations of a target community. (Jennings 2003).*

The primary goal of ambassadors is to use word of mouth to advertise events to *people like them*; Young at Arts were particularly interested in reaching the most lonely. However, as this case study highlights, ambassadors were also very much involved in running Young at Arts, contributing to steering groups and designing and supporting events.

Young at Arts held eight ambassador training and 23 steering group sessions. Ambassadors carried out 256 door to door visits, and supported events such as the *Spring Fling* (one of a number of one off events ran across the duration of the project).

### Background

It is generally agreed that ensuring intended beneficiaries (in this case older people) contribute to the design and delivery of a project increases its chance of success. Indeed, the Big Lottery Fund, which funds the Ageing Better programme, expects that older people will be at the heart of both the main programmes and individual projects delivered across the 14 areas.

The evaluation of Time to Shine to date (see: <https://timetoshineleeds.org/projects/local-evaluation>) has identified that volunteering is an effective way of reducing social isolation and loneliness. This is supported by research into the impact of volunteering on the health and wellbeing of over 50s, which found that it buffered the effects of depression, loneliness and social isolation (Volunteer Now/University of Ulster 2013). With regard to volunteers who train as ambassadors, wider research identifies that it can lead to greater networking and socialising opportunities and can enhance the volunteer's own role in their community (Jennings 2003).

As a project which aimed to ensure older participants were actively involved in its design and delivery, Young at Arts provides a useful way of exploring the impact of involving older people. The specific TTS outcomes discussed in this case study include: **‘Older people have been actively involved in managing, designing, delivering and evaluating the project’** and **‘project beneficiaries feel confident and able to participate in their communities’**.

This case study focuses specifically on the contribution made, and the benefits derived, by volunteer ambassadors.

## Methods

Data was collected through:

- scrutiny of quarterly monitoring reports
- participant stories and marketing material
- interviews with seven Young at Arts ambassadors (6 women and 1 man)
- an interview with a Young at Arts project manager
- observations of two planning meetings and the Weekend of Wonder "Spring Fling" event, held in May 2017 which was organised by a team of ambassadors.

## Key findings

### *Older people were actively involved in managing and delivering Young at Arts events*

As enthusiastic participants, ambassadors were passionate about the activities offered and wanted to be involved more widely in the planning and running of events. In fact, this led to movement in an unexpected direction, where ambassadors merged with the steering group.

An example of how older volunteers helped shape an event run by Young at Arts is the *Spring Fling* event (see <https://yorkshiredance.com/whats-on/event/spring-fling/>). The Spring Fling was designed by a team of six ambassadors, supported by a Young at Arts project manager. All had been regular Young at Arts participants and had been involved in marketing and helping at events from early on in the project. The team met five or six times over the five months preceding the event. Together, volunteer ambassadors suggested activities, contacted potential contributors, checked proposed venues, arranged a raffle and marketed the event through word of mouth, leaflets and a radio interview.

The Spring Fling event started with a community choir and was followed by workshops, including making musical instruments from vegetables; colouring; cake appraisal; gardening conundrums, a memory box dance and a writing workshop. Also available were free hair trims, a cabaret and a showing of films made at a previous Young at Arts event. Promotional materials about future events were also given out. Approximately 50 people attended and provided very positive feedback about the experience. The Spring Fling project manager concluded:

*The ambassadors were fundamental to the success of Spring Fling. It was entirely their event and it wouldn't have been anything without their hard work and creative ideas.... They were so proud of what they had created and that feeling was a pleasure to see*

### ***Providing appropriate training and support was assessed as important***

Some ambassadors felt unsure what their role would entail and were concerned with the amount of commitment necessary:

*I don't want to get into things I can't get out of. I want to go when I can go*

Another was concerned about whether they had the skills to undertake the role. One said that she felt out of her comfort zone at first *Can I do it?*

Ambassadors felt better able to carry out their role following training, but ongoing support was also needed. For example, for the Spring Fling event, although enthusiastic, the project manager noted that members were unsure of what the event should look like. Yet with staff support, ambassadors were reassured that their event was an opportunity to create something new. Patience was important as ambassadors needed time to recap what had already been organised and what needed to be done. Illness and other commitments meant that the whole team was rarely at meetings and communication outside of meetings was difficult due to a lack of computers.

Yet these difficulties were offset by what the ambassadors brought to the project:

*They care a lot about the cause and strive to get the best out of everything...They are so caring and sensitive to other people's ideas, ensuring they are all carefully considered. (Project Manager).*

As well as providing training and support, it is also important to ensure that volunteers feel valued (Volunteer Now 2016). This was recognised by the project team where 25 ambassadors/steering group members attended a celebration event where they received a badge and message of thanks.

## **What has worked**

### ***Recruiting ambassadors was viewed as central to the success of Young at Arts***

One of the key successes of the project has been the co-design with older adults, with staff identifying that the volunteer ambassadors were central, with one describing them as:

*A pillar within their community and the community we have created. They are the very core of the project who work extremely hard to organise, publicise and promote the project as a whole.*

Another staff member agreed that using volunteer ambassadors had provided additional value to the project and recommended that similar projects adopt the same model:

*It will surpass all of your expectations and can offer a completely new and alternative thinking to your programme. Don't underestimate the power, commitment and creativity of older people.*

In fact, Yorkshire Dance aims to continue to develop the work of the steering group (which included ambassadors) in future project work.

### *Using ambassadors was an effective way of engaging older people*

Young at Arts reached 638 individual older adults. Feedback from participants suggested that they had fun, developed new skills and built confidence and pride in their achievements, with one saying she *would not have even left the house this past three weeks* if she had not participated, another said they had left a session feeling: *energised, happy, useful and with a feeling of worth.*

The ability of ambassadors to help attendees of events feel comfortable right from the start was clearly observed. For example, during events they visited tables to chat, encouraged participation and introduced people to each other. Feedback from one participant who attended a Weekend of Wonder event referred to receiving: *lots of support from volunteers.*

Ambassadors (and project managers) involved in designing and running the Spring Fling event felt a deep sense of satisfaction as they felt they had contributed not only to a sociable and creative experience but also encouraged further participation with 15 people signing up for future activities. The ambassadors were delighted that they had been able to share their passion for the arts with other people, many of whom were new to the project.

### *Participating as an ambassador helped volunteers increase their social contact*

The opportunity to help others was a strong motive for being an ambassador. One ambassador had been unable to care for her parents as they now lived overseas and now felt she had an opportunity to make up for it with older people in her community. Others recognised that having had caring responsibilities and experienced bereavement, they were better able to understand and support others in the same situation. Indeed, such shared experiences contributed to the warmth and cohesion felt within the ambassadors' group.

The Ambassador team working on the Spring Fling event fully recognised both the opportunities for social contribution and for the development of their own social relationships:

*We have met lovely people and made very good friend*

One ambassador said:

*It makes you get out of bed in the morning*

### *Participating as an ambassador increased confidence and well-being*

Ambassador training had helped volunteers develop skills and deepen their engagement. The team building and skills training were effective in developing confidence, as one put it:

*The first time I went to an Ambassadors' lunch I daren't say anything. It doesn't worry me to say things now.*

*I couldn't believe how well I felt and I feel quite proud of myself, what I have done. (participant and ambassador)*

When ambassadors were asked if it had been a good idea to take on the ambassador role there was a unanimous positive response, for example:

*Very good idea. It's very rewarding. I feel valued.*

## **Barriers and challenges**

### *Volunteer recruitment and support*

Young at Arts found it difficult to recruit the number of ambassadors originally planned and also to separate the roles of the steering group and the ambassadors. It was also necessary to ensure training and support was in place. This, of course, has implications for the sustainability of the project without some form of external funding to resource this.

### *The ambassador model may not be appropriate for engaging the most isolated*

Whilst some door- to -door marketing in the neighbourhoods of the ambassadors was completed, many ambassadors were not comfortable with this and preferred to use other means to promote Young at Arts, such as notices in venues like libraries or churches or talks to groups they were already involved with. This did not necessarily target or reach the most socially isolated.

## **Learning and recommendations**

The case study found that Young at Arts has been successful in actively involving older people. Further, becoming an ambassador contributed toward social contact and well-being through increased confidence and self-worth. In turn, participants who took part, or were supported by volunteers, reported improved well-being and that their isolation had been reduced.

A strong and supportive friendship group has developed which will outlive the life of the project and the skills and confidence engendered can transfer to other types of projects that wish to increase community participation.

Based on feedback from volunteers, projects which follow an ambassador model are more likely to run well if a clear role description is developed at the start, ensuring ambassadors are not overburdened, and to also acknowledge volunteers may have time and financial constraints. It is also necessary to build confidence through training, ongoing support, and by ensuring volunteers feel valued for their contribution. Finally, it is important to note that ambassadors may be less effective for projects wishing to engage very isolated people.

## **References**

Volunteer Now/University of Ulster (2013) *The impact of volunteering on the health and wellbeing of the over 50's in Northern Ireland: summary report*.  
[Volunteernow.co.uk/fs/doc/publications/impact-of-volunteering-on-health-report-summary-2013.pdf](http://Volunteernow.co.uk/fs/doc/publications/impact-of-volunteering-on-health-report-summary-2013.pdf)

Volunteer Now/Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Arts Council N. Ireland (2016) *Arts and volunteering: A practical toolkit for arts organisations and groups seeking to involve volunteers*. [www.volunteernow.co.uk](http://www.volunteernow.co.uk)

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>.**