



Float Your Boat: encouraging people to talk on the waterways

Time to Shine end of project report
August 2021



Summary

Float Your Boat purchased a wide Dutch boat, 'Tulip', and planned to use canal boats and trips on the waterways around Leeds to encourage social connections in a variety of ways. They particularly wanted to involve older men who would seize the opportunity to engage in hands-on, practical volunteering as a substitute for paid work and, after appropriate training, for them to become part of the boat crew.

The team planned to work with older people to provide boat trips to places of interest along the canal, and to facilitate relationships in a space where - as they described it - there's not much to do apart from talk.

[Canal Connections](#), the parent organisation, often undertakes intergenerational work, and Float Your Boat activities were also planned to offer intergenerational opportunities. It was hoped that eventually the volunteer crews would be able to support a sustainable service.

The initial part of the proposal worked well, with a good crew of regular members becoming very engaged and benefiting personally. Working with young people stimulated the crew. However, a number of technical issues with the boat and the mooring meant Float Your Boat had to deviate from their initial ambitious programme, and were unable to develop sufficient long-term relationships with passengers to see the benefits they had hoped to achieve.

Problems with boats, and with Covid-19 forced Float Your Boat to diversify. They have emerged from 2020 with new partners and a strong future.

Float Your Boat in numbers

570 people have taken part in Float Your Boat since 2018

- Demographic data was collected for 429 people
 - » 64% were of White British heritage
 - » 32% were of Asian / Asian UK heritage
 - » 1% were of Eastern European heritage
 - » 0.7% were of Black African / Caribbean / Black UK heritage
 - » 2.3% were of Other Ethnic heritage
- Gender data was collected for 330 people taking part in trips with Float Your Boat, of whom 63% identified as female
- Float Your Boat has been supported by 3 younger volunteers (aged 49 and under) and 23 older volunteers (aged 50+) since 2018, with the majority being trained as volunteer boat crew and volunteer boat captains
- Volunteers have given over 2,800 hours of their time to Float Your Boat



Activities

248 activities have been organised since 2018, including pleasure boat trips for local groups and special events, crew socials, boat maintenance sessions and planning meetings.

Float Your Boat found it very difficult to engage visitors on a regular basis. People tended to visit as part of a group, and although they might have greatly enjoyed the experience, few of those individuals returned. The plan to run a series of creative cruises was scuppered by Covid-19 as the boats were too small to allow enough social distancing.

These challenges forced the project to diversify, and although 2020 was a struggle at times, Float Your Boat now has a strong future based on this learning. It gained a land base at the Lock-keeper's Cottage, a new partner in [Yorkshire Water](#), and a great intergenerational development team made up of Float Your Boat and [Ignite](#) volunteers.



What difference did it make for older people?

A member with experience of group work facilitated a discussion with the regular volunteers (many of whom were reluctant to complete the standard evaluation paperwork) to help identify exactly how members had benefited.

At that point the group had 20 volunteers, 16 of whom attended each week, the others as and when they were able. Some members worked on the boats every day.

Six had passed the Captain's Badge and six others had completed the RYA competent crew course.

One member had gone back to college to do a course 'Working with Children with Autism' so he better understood some of the groups they crewed for.

Group members said:

- Love the banter and jokes
- Gives me purpose
- It's like being at work again
- Meet people and interact
- I am not as lonely
- I was isolated and felt worthless
- I love the structure and having a place in the group
- Learnt so much about boats
- We are like big kids
- I arrive here and find peace and happiness
- They also found health benefits:
 - My joints don't hurt as much
 - I have lost weight
 - I am not drinking as much
 - My breathing has improved
 - Getting far more exercise
- One of the men said he suffered with depression but since joining the group he felt much better and not had as many bad days
- One man jokingly said it had saved his marriage. He and his wife were getting on for the first time in years. He said it was because he was happier; he felt he had a reason to get out of bed



Learning

It was much harder to recruit regular passengers than the Float Your Boat team had originally foreseen, so although the project was really popular with older people from various Time to Shine groups, it was within those groups that the benefits would have been measured. It was also difficult to undertake formal evaluation when visitors didn't attend regularly.

The one off nature of many of their encounters meant the project collected individual stories orally but found it hard to keep records of the benefits.

Float Your Boat had not anticipated people's reluctance to undertake this sort of activity in poor weather and ran fewer activities in the winter than originally planned.

The Float Your Boat project managers strongly advocated the test and learn model, aware that this approach had allowed for significant experiential learning that will be built on as the organisation moves forward. The length of the funding also gave them time and space to discover themselves.

Legacy

Participants of Float Your Boat trained in boat management and gained qualifications as skippers who not only steer the boat but take responsibility for passenger safety. They also accessed training in first aid, mental health first aid, photography and mindfulness and are developing a wellbeing delivery programme. They will be able to continue crewing boat trips.

Yorkshire Water are planning to fund the continuation of Float Your Boat as part of their Community Engagement Project. The Project had started to plan a series of water-based short courses to develop this engagement when the first lockdown happened. These courses are now planned to run as part of Yorkshire Water's Esholt project, so although 2020 was a year of frustration for Float Your Boat, it certainly wasn't wasted.

Project participants formed part of an intergenerational project development team which has created a set of quality standards for boat safety that form a toolkit that can be shared with other community boat projects.

The project developed some strong partnerships with other Time to Shine delivery partners, creating connections that will continue long after the project ends. Thanks to those partnerships, Canal Connections created plans for future work with the younger-older community, taking ownership of a lease for a lock-keeper's cottage close to Leeds City Centre that will develop as a pre-retirement hub. Co-production and the benefits it brings, were used to help them pull this plan together.



Covid-19 response

Float Your Boat was unable to do any face-to-face work during the pandemic as the boats were simply too small to allow for social distancing. This meant they were unable to recruit new participants. They have, however, undertaken online work to further the development of the project, including intergenerational work, and a series of photographic Reflections on the canal and river, which have been posted on [their blog](#).

As a result of moving all activity on-line they were able to create a development team made up of younger and older people who have experience of the boats and of the benefits the waterways and boating can bring. This would have been much less likely to have happened before as the projects were separated by time and space.



Story: Spring-cleaning your soul

Graham had spent a lot of time caring for his mother before she died, and had allowed himself to fall into an unhealthy life of isolation, sitting in a little flat watching television. He joined Float Your Boat for a one-off cruise and later wrote about his experience.

“That trip, interacting with other guys in the same boat, excuse the pun, took me back to my working days, with all the humorous banter I sorely missed, was like a dose of medicine. I got the bug and just wanted to go out on the water again so asked if and when that would be possible. When I was informed more volunteers were needed to be trained up to work the boat, I decided to have a go at the training, but was rather dubious as I hadn’t studied anything new in many years.

A few weeks in and we began taking a group of thirteen year old schoolchildren up and down the Aire and Calder Navigation. These kids had learning difficulties and I was struck with the amount of energy they had and their behaviour when boarding. Over an hour had passed when I had a chat with their teacher, asking him if I was mistaken in seeing a difference in the boys and girls. “I can’t believe it; they would never interact like this with anyone until they knew them well, never mind total strangers”.

This statement had a profound effect on me as I have a brother who has been ‘different’ all his life but never been diagnosed.

I became more and more interested in the word ‘autism’, which found me enrolling in a college course titled ‘understanding autism in children’.

I even did the dreaded homework, which I hated in my teens. It was a struggle but, when I completed the course, I had gained so much confidence that I did what I had wanted to do for a long time, I started another course on creative writing, at the age of sixty-eight.

This past week I had an interview with a view to doing some voluntary work for a local charity that works with senior citizens, some of whom will be younger than myself. So, I guess this past year’s experiences have given me the wake-up call I never knew I needed. One thing’s for sure, it certainly put a smile back on my face and I enjoy waking up every day.

So, a huge thanks to Canal Connections, Float Your Boat and those great schoolchildren without whom I would still be vegetating alone, blaming society for my lot in life. That leaves me to highly recommend getting involved with any organization that cares for others and believe me, when you do it feels like having spring-cleaned your soul.”

Resources

To find out more about Canal Connections go to
<https://canal-connections.com/> <https://canal-connections.com/>

To find out more about Time to Shine go to
<https://www.timetoshineleeds.org>

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