Time to Shine

Volunteer Listeners

Report

Report December 2019

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All of the volunteer listeners

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Summary of the Report

This Volunteer Listeners report provides stories about older people's experiences of social isolation as part of the evaluation Of Time to Shine, Leeds. The report details the Volunteer Listeners Approach as an idea, its development, pilot testing and full implementation during 2019. The methodology is simple, volunteers hold conversations with older people to capture their stories, and notes about these are then produced as stories.

The common themes found within the stories are reported in detail here, and show that the older people telling their stories had experienced complex life circumstances, including loss, bereavement and loneliness. Their participation in Time to Shine Funded activities led to a number of individual benefits. Some also discussed being able to give back by supporting others and volunteering themselves. However, several barriers to participation were also identified.

1: Introduction

1.1 The Volunteer Listener Approach

Volunteer Listeners is an innovative way of evaluating Time to Shine, a programme managed by Leeds Older People's Forum (LOPF) and funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better programme to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst people over 50.

Time to Shine works with partners across Leeds to deliver unique and creative projects which engage socially isolated people. The programme includes a robust external local and national evaluation to test and learn from the approaches and inform future work. The local evaluation is being led by the University of Sheffield, working with colleagues from Leeds Beckett and Leeds Trinity Universities.

Volunteer Listeners intends to add a very human angle to the impersonal evaluation data gathered nationally for the Big Lottery through questionnaires. It aims to look beyond the numbers and hear from the people involved, in their own words. This is a different way of capturing people's opinions, feedback and experience in a more person-centred approach, where volunteers hold conversations with older people to allow their stories to emerge.

1.2 Background

Volunteer Listeners' is based on ideas used in Phase 3 of the Leeds University project led by Dr Vicki Ward entitled "Service User Feedback Framework for Improving Integrated Care Project (SUFFICE)" which took place in Leeds between January 2013 and June 2014 (https://medhealth.leeds.ac.uk/info/555/research/746/developing_a_service_user_feedback_framework_for_improving_integrated_care_suffice) and was designed to look at the impact on service user experiences of the integration of teams of NHS and Social Care staff working together.

The development of the Volunteer Listeners was led by David Woodcock, a "free-lance volunteer, who has a wealth of previous health service and research experience. David has worked as a member of the Time to Shine Evaluation Sub-group during the life-time of the project, and within this context discussed the idea of using 'Volunteer Listeners'.

In March 2017 a Steering Group was established to manage the Volunteer Listeners approach. It was made up of senior academic members of the Evaluation Sub-group from Sheffield and Leeds Becket Universities, 3 programme providers, a researcher from Sheffield university, supported by Time to Shine's Learning Facilitator, and David who was a *Listener / Storywriter* in the original SUFFICE project. The Monitoring and Evaluation Sub-Group later agreed to appoint David as a Project Leader.

2: Listener Methodology

2.1 Approach

The idea is simple - Conversations (as opposed to formal, structured, interviews) between project participants (referred to as 'Storytellers) and 'Volunteer Listeners', are held to gather more in-depth views in the form of stories. Storytellers are recruited from partnership organisations and their individual stories are written up by volunteer 'Storywriters'. The Volunteer Listeners are tasked with listening and capturing the stories (see appendices for the tools used).

Volunteers were provided with training about the evaluation and the Volunteer Listener approach. Volunteers were provided with detailed role descriptions of Listener and *Storywriter*.

Role Type 1- *Listener*

As a Volunteer Listener you will be part of Time to Shine's local evaluation - feeding in data about our projects and participants.

You will be asked to go out and meet project participants across the city and listen to their thoughts/feelings and experiences about being older in Leeds. You will work in pairs and decide who leads the *Conversation* and who takes notes. You will discuss them afterwards to ensure nothing is missed.

It is possible to combine this role with that of *Storywriter* (see below)

Role Type 2 – *Storywriter*

Storywriters can operate in one of two ways:

1. Listener/*Storywriter* where you will write up a Story using the notes that you and your colleague have taken in a *Conversation*; the second is in an individual capacity, writing up a Story from the notes of someone else's *Conversation*.

2. As a *Storywriter* you will use your notes and details or those from other Listeners and write the key themes into Stories. The Stories will be completely anonymised. These stories then become part of Time to Shine's local evaluation and a true reflection of what older participants in Leeds feel about their situation and the Time to Shine projects they are involved in. As a *Storywriter* your role is vital in getting the information collected out to a wider audience. It is you who makes sure that all the information gathered by Listeners is used to share stories of Leeds and how what is happening is affecting the people living here.

2.2 Methods

In 2018, the idea of the Volunteer Listeners was tested via a pilot programme. Two delivery partners committed to Volunteer *Listener*s and in January/February 2018, following training sessions for the Volunteers, conversations were arranged between 4 *Listener*s and Storytellers to take place in March 2018. Unfortunately, these had to be cancelled due to bad weather and illness and were rearranged for the following month, at which point one of the Storytellers was unable to take part due to an accident. All 3 *Listeners* who did participate said that they enjoyed the process of story gathering through *Conversation* and wanted to continue.

During 2019, the Volunteer Listeners Programme was re-launched with the support of Leeds Older People's Forum, who advertised and recruited people interested in becoming Volunteer Listeners and Storywriters. Training sessions were held in February, March and October 2019. Following on from the training, 10 Volunteer Listeners (8 women, 2 men) went onto visit Time to Shine funded projects and to hold conversations with older people. The total number of conversations held between June and November 2019, was 26.

Projects that Volunteer Listeners attended (2019)

- Armley Helping Hands – Don't Call Me Old

- Toast Love Coffee

- Feel Good Factor

- Carers Connections Leeds

- CARA 2

- Dancing for Parkinson's Ascendance UK

- Trust Conservation Volunteers

- Float your Boat

Stories were summarised by the Storywriters, either in their own voices, or in the voices of those that they had listened to, with Storytellers anonymised during the writing up process, by the Storywriter. These stories were sent into the evaluation team, and thematic analysis was used to produce the findings reported here.

The evaluation was given ethical approval through The University of Sheffield ethics procedures. The following practices were adhered to, to ensure ethical rigour:

- Informed consent – written consent was obtained from all who told their stories to the Volunteer Listeners.

- Confidentiality and anonymity – no personal identifying information has been used in the reporting of the data.

- Secure information management – security (data storage) was maintained through password-protected university systems.

3: Findings

Routes into TTS activities

Older people described learning about the TTS projects in a **variety of ways**, some via word of mouth, others by social media and some from professional sources:

> *"A lady from the doctors got me coming here."* (Storyteller 6)

One older woman heard about a TTS funded project at her local church where the Project Co-ordinator was attending and giving a talk about making new contacts. One women telling her story noted that she needed a locally operated group, and that as she had no access to the internet (or desire to use it), she had heard about the activities via word of mouth.

Complexity of life circumstances

Many of the older people who talked to the Volunteer Listeners articulated the complexity of their life circumstances and feelings of **loss and loneliness** resulting from events such as **retirement, bereavement and poor health**:

> *"I am retired and a widow"* (Storyteller 1)

> *"I was very, very low, I had counselling."* (Storyteller 2)

> *"I have a chronic illness which affects my nerves. This means I can't use my hands very well…My husband and then my son died a few years later."* (Storyteller 6)

> *"I was distressed being at home. I'd just moved into a new flat but it was in bad condition and everything kept breaking down. I felt isolated and lonely and wished I hadn't moved."* (Storyteller 8)

> *"I was just divorced. I was living on my own with my grown up children living elsewhere and I felt very sad."* (Storyteller 26)

One of the Volunteer Listeners summarised the range of complex circumstances being experienced by the older people who had told their stories. "*Some (older people) told us that they had mental issues, one had a broken unsupportive marriage, one was in a lot of physical pain, all had family that they has brought up and supported but had now left home so they admitted that they were lonely and used to not go out of the house a lot. One widow said that she had a husband who has dealt with all the money issues and she felt very vulnerable when he died.*" (Volunteer Listener). Another Volunteer Listener described the very complex circumstances experienced by an older man: "*He'd experienced a lot of difficulties before he came to (project name) including being made redundant, losing his mother and being homeless for some time, which included living on the streets for a while.*" This man also had experienced ill health which limited his ability to leave the house.

Benefits

Those who spoke to the Volunteer Listeners, noted a range of benefits from attending the activities and community groups, such as **routine**, **enjoying the company of others** in an environment different to their own home, and **getting out of the house:**

> *"Being involved [with project name] gives structure to my week."* (Storyteller 1)

> *"You have contact with others, people are so friendly. It motivates you."* (Storyteller 2)

> *"It gets me out of the house. Before I'd sit at home watching TV."* (Storyteller 7)

> *"Companionship…Being with others. It is getting people together- not sitting at home stagnating."* (Storyteller 29)

A Volunteer Listener reported that all of the people she had spoken to were "*all tremendously appreciative of the friendship and support they had been given."* Having a befriender visit was also discussed as being a nice experience by some older people. An older man told his Volunteer Listener that he loved the visits from his befriender who was knowledgeable about sport and just sat and chatted during her visits to him. He liked her **company.** Others discussed their **increased confidence** as a result of joining:

> *"It's given me more confidence everywhere. If you try, nothing is impossible." (*Storyteller 12)

> *"It's given me more confidence…many women have a lot of talent but don't have much opportunity to use it, this has been addressed here. It's all about building confidence."* (Storyteller 16)

One woman reported that she had developed **new skills** as well as experiencing **enjoyment:**

> *"I didn't think I would be any good and feel lucky I've been able to do this. I have a new skill now…and I've enjoyed it more than I thought."* (Storyteller 14)

Similarly, another women described her participation as **fulfilling** and the project as **worthwhile.**

Improved mental health, and **generally feeling more positive** were discussed as benefits associated with being involved:

> *"I never thought I would smile again when my son passed away. Coming here has taken my mind off things…The staff are amazing, they do care. It's real…I wouldn't have my friends without here. It's changed my outlook on life and I'm going places I never thought I would again. It's been fabulous. It's great, it'd done so much for me."* (Storyteller 6)

A Volunteer Listener described the benefits that being involved had brought to an older man as *"helping to get his spark back…he doesn't feel lonely here, whereas he felt lonely before coming. His face lights up when he talks about the project, he says he loves it. Since attending, he feels he has more determination and his attitude has changed. He has developed social networks and other voluntary organisations."* Another Volunteer Listener noted that *"Although this lady has been through some very desolate times…she felt that the understanding and kindness shown to her by members of the team had helped with her mental wellbeing."*

For some people, attending TTS funded activities contributed to them **feeling heard** as well as **opening up new opportunities** for them:

> *"The staff will sit and listen to me and give me a private space if I need to talk. My family ask me for money and I've been able to say no. Coming here has opened up other opportunities. When I come here, I feel great. When I wake up in the morning, I feel excited knowing I'm coming here. Sometimes I don't like going home and would bring my bead here if I could!"* (Storyteller 8)

A Volunteer Listener described the experiences of one older man as *"he is on the up, and the (project) gives him structure, companionship, the chance to feel empowered, learn new skills and have something to look forwards to."*

Following on from their own positive experiences several older people discussed how they had decided themselves to **give something back** to their communities by volunteering and by helping to support others who attended:

> *"I want to encourage others to talk about their experiences and to ease their pain…I'm encouraging others to come and join us. I've brought two people here who are also thinking of coming. I want to help the next group who will start. This is better than sitting at home."* (Storyteller 10)

> *"I enjoy the involvement and get a great deal of satisfaction from the project and feel that it is effective in reducing social isolation."* (Storyteller 19)

> *"I'm a people person. My joy comes from helping other people."* (Storyteller 28).

Storyteller 30 - in the words of a volunteer listener

"Jim's mum had passed away and he found himself spending more time in the pub, he could spend three or four hours in there spending money and not really enjoying himself.

> *He was in a rut which he described as 'easy to get into, not easy to get out of'. He lived alone. He heard about (project name) though a centre he used to visit with his mother when she played bingo. He attended one trip…with some others, when the project was just starting. He says that this experience left him "gobsmacked" as he loved it. That first trip alone made a difference for himself and others as he made friends who would meet up regularly outside of the project and still do. He feels that the project has helped him to get out of the rut he was in. It has given him structure and he has enjoyed making connections with people which also proved helpful. For example, someone is helping him with his MOT. He gets a great deal out of learning about others' life stories and having a good laugh with people. When he was younger, he travelled the world…he feels this experience of travelling has given him a love of integrating with others. He enjoys helping others too, and seeing people come out of their shell. Jim has a respiratory illness and says being involved with the project helps him with this, moving around is good for his lungs. He has trained as part of the project and has some responsibility which also helped to give him back a sense of identity. He describes Leeds as a 24 hour city and feels that being involved in the project gives him a break away from it. Whilst being involved with the project, he has also had other opportunities which have included working with students. This encourages Jim to go back to college at the age of 67."*

Barriers

Several of those who discussed their experiences with the Volunteer Listeners felt that it can be **generally difficult to persuade older people to join** activities, and that a range of barriers exists such as culturally specific issues including **language:**

> *"It's difficult to persuade elderly people to come out – it may not be their culture to do that."* (Storyteller 1)

> *"Language can be a real barrier to assimilation into the mainstream of society – but people do need some kind of encouragement to escape their own communities...people tend to be shy of going into a new place, especially if there is a language barrier."* (Storyteller 3)

Low confidence was also a perceived barrier discussed by some of the older people:

> *"I am trying to get my neighbour to come here as she doesn't get out a lot. I am trying to persuade here but she hasn't come yet although I tell her about it – some people can't bring themselves to get out as they have no confidence but I keep on trying."* (Storyteller 2)

This meant that some older people found **initially attending a challenge**. One of the Volunteer Listeners noted that the people they met at community groups often said that they were very shy and felt lost at the beginning but then moved onto feeling supported and befriended once they were participating.

What is working

Several older people discussed the importance of project places and spaces feeling **welcoming** and having the right **atmosphere:**

"(Project name) makes them (older people) feel included in a welcoming space, a place where people will be listened to." (Storyteller 1)

"(Project name) has a welcoming atmosphere that can provide opportunities for addressing concerns within the community." (Storyteller 3)

"If you feel that you are a bit down, you feel that you can drop in anytime and will be helped...I have tried a couple of other centres but feel most at home here – it is the atmosphere." (Storyteller 2)

Supportive staff and a variety of different activities were also noted as being important for some of those who told their stories. Cost was also mentioned as a potential barrier:

"It was a big bonus for me that it was free." (Storyteller 14)

The geographical location of the group and activities was important for several of those who spoke about their involvement, as transport was discussed as a barrier by some. A Volunteer Listener noted that *"The project is only ten minutes away from his home by car, which means he can drive himself…the downside was availability of transport to the venue."* Another older person discussed knowing about an activity but not being able to get there because of the cost of the taxi fare.

Several older people said that they had no hesitation in recommending the activities/groups to others.

Areas for improvement

One older woman had been linked up with a befriender, who she talked about visiting, sitting and chatting to. However, her befriender had become ill and she has been not had any further visits. She was keen to have visits once each week, where someone could come to her home for her to talk to. Her Volunteer Listener felt that she was commenting on her loneliness indirectly and appreciated having the space to tell her story. Another woman who had participated in the befriending mentioned that her first pairing did not work as she and the other woman simply *"hit it off"* (Storyteller 19), but the following match was a success

Several older people felt that the projects could try to **increase their reach** and to **support others to attend** more generally:

"Something is needed to encourage them (older people) to come to places like (project name) where they could start to find that help and to make contacts or be directed to other suitable activities or assistance... Remember the value of visual communication with well-chosen images." (Storyteller 3)

"My daughter thinks there could be better advertising, perhaps in local shops and supermarkets." (Storyteller 20)

One Storyteller said: *"I do try and encourage other people to come along and I think that although the project is advertised, personal contact and personal recommendation are most important when attracting others to try it."* (Storyteller 26).

Summary of key themes from Volunteer Listeners

Many of the older people who told their stories articulated the complexity of their life circumstances, including loss, bereavement and loneliness.

They had heard about the activities through a range of routes and described a range of individual benefits that had resulted from their involvement. These included having a routine, having structure, being able to leave the house, feeling motivated, having increased confidence, developing skills, improved mental health and being heard. Some older people also discussed being able to give back by supporting others and volunteering themselves.

Older people discussed a range of barriers to involvement, such as culture, language and low confidence. Several said that they found initially attending difficult but that they were welcomed, and found that the group that had joined had the 'right atmosphere'

In terms of making suggestions for how their project could be improved, suggestions included increasing the reach of advertising and offering support to people to initially join/attend for the first time.

4. Appendices – Example prompt sheet to support Volunteer Listeners gather stories

Show them the TIMELINE to generate discussion about their experience and add that you would like to make notes on the Timeline during the Conversation.

To get the Conversation started, you could use a general prompt such as "How long have you been on the Project?" or "When did it all start" or "What was it like at the beginning?" or "What has it been like, being on the project over the last 6 to 12 months?"

"Conversation topic"	"Conversation prompt"
What attracted or motivated people to join in an activity?	How did you hear about this project? What attracted you to this project? Why did you decide to try it? What happened?
What barriers to participation are happening now for participants and volunteers?	Did you find it easy to get on to the project? Were there any problems in the beginning?
What approaches work best to engage target groups of people most at risk of loneliness?	What did you do whilst on this project? What do you like most about this project? Why? What do you like least about this project? Why? What was enjoyable? What was not enjoyable?
What has worked? What hasn't worked? Why? For whom?	What has worked? Why? What hasn't worked? Why?
How have older people benefited from new partnerships and new ways of working?	Have you benefitted personally from your experiences? In what way(s)?
Have people developed social networks / accessed other services after becoming involved?	Have you taken up any other new things? E.g. new activities/ joined other groups
How has involvement in Time to Shine made individual people feel?	Have you noticed any changes in yourself since you have been involved? E.g. Happier? More confident? Know more people? Feel better/healthier N.B. don't leave out negative experiences
Does Time to Shine help prevent social isolation and loneliness?	Is there anything that we could do to make life better for other older people who might be feeling isolated or lonely?
How does loneliness and social isolation make people feel?	???
Are we reaching socially isolated older people? How?	???