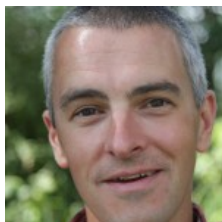


Apr 9 2013

Shared Lives Plus

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by Alex Fox

Shared Lives Plus is the UK network for family-based and small-scale ways of supporting adults. Here Alex Fox talks about how the collaboration between their UK-wide network of members and researchers is needed to raise awareness of the value of Shared Lives, Homeshare and micro-enterprise approaches, to strengthen the evidence base for them and to understand better what works and what doesn't in this cutting edge area of care, support and inclusion.

As the charity representing micro-scale and family-based approaches to care and support, we see our 4,500 members doing some of the most exciting work in adult social care, but doing it largely out of sight of the academic community. So about every year, we publish a briefing which outlines the research which is happening in our little-known sector and the remaining huge gaps in the evidence base which we would love to fill. We don't have a dedicated fundraising team, but we do have a strong record of collaborative funding bids with engaged academics who have relished the opportunity to work with an under-researched but extremely promising sector.

Our members work in the Shared Lives, micro-enterprise and Homeshare sectors right across the UK. Shared Lives is one of the few areas of social care growing currently, in some areas by 25% pa and it was highlighted in the Care and Support White Paper as an example of the government's vision for a more community-based, co-produced version of personalised care. Micro-enterprises include some of the most innovative approaches to support, inclusion and employment in the sector. Homeshare is tiny in the UK but growing rapidly in other countries.

There is huge interest in these sectors, which all draw on strengths-based or asset-based approaches and tackle big challenges through working at a micro-scale, often utilising people's spare rooms and ordinary family and community relationships to tackle some of the biggest challenges in social care, such as how to help vulnerable older people to avoid isolation and loneliness, or how to help people with learning disabilities to become active citizens.

Paul, 50, has recently moved in with registered Shared Lives carer, Sheila and her family. Sheila helped Paul to get a bus pass, to learn to use public transport and to cross roads safely, so that he can make use of the community for the first time in his life. He bought his first bicycle and enjoys long bike rides with Sheila and her husband, who have helped Paul become a visible and popular member of the community. He knows local shopkeepers, library staff and even bus-drivers by name. Sheila encourages everyone to 'look out for Paul'. Paul doesn't have a lot of speech, but when asked if he understands what 'independent' means, he smiles and says 'walk'.

Jess has a learning disability. She wanted to work in a posh restaurant but couldn't find anyone to give her a chance until Jess and her mum Jill saw a 'smoothie bike' (a fixed pedal bike which powers a food blender) at a local fete and thought 'we can do that!' They got a small grant for their first bike, started to take it to local fetes and, with support from Community Catalysts, set up their company Pulp Friction, which now owns six smoothie bikes and employs Jess and three other people with learning disabilities. Jess recently won a 'young entrepreneur of the year' award.

Our members show how we could make new use of family homes instead of expensive institutions. They all work on a small or family-sized scale and they show how personal relationships can be more effective than professional/client transactions. A number of articles set out this vision, such as Personalisation: lessons from social care, RSA: <http://goo.gl/QSIDg> and Redesigning the front end of social care: <http://goo.gl/dcxzh>.

There is little existing academic research, but the [Personal Social Services Research Unit \(PSSRU\)](#) at Kent University is currently carrying out research into the *Outcomes, processes and cost-effectiveness of Shared Lives for older people*, funded by School for Social Care Research and [Department of Health](#), whilst the [Health Services Management Centre](#) at University of Birmingham is researching the cost-benefits of different models of micro-enterprise, funded by ESRC. The briefing summarises the existing research and work in progress and is available as a download.

Alex Fox is CEO of Shared Lives Plus, the UK network for small community services. For more information on the work of Shared Lives Plus please visit the website [here](#), or Alex Fox's [blog](#) and [twitter](#). This briefing summarises the existing research and work in progress and is available as a download [here](#).

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