

AGE BETTER
IN SHEFFIELD

Farming Comes to You

An Innovation Fund Project delivered by
Heeley City Farm



Introduction

Age Better in Sheffield is a partnership of organisations working to reduce loneliness and social isolation amongst people over 50 and to help them to live fulfilling lives. It is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and is one of 14 Ageing Better pilot areas across England working to explore what works in reducing loneliness and isolation. Age Better in Sheffield services are commissioned to focus on four target wards (Burngreave, Woodhouse, Firth Park and Beauchief and Greenhill). These wards were identified as having a high percentage of the older population at risk of loneliness and isolation. The first round of Age Better in Sheffield Projects also focused on a number of hotspot areas across the city where there are particularly high numbers of people in groups at higher risk of loneliness and isolation (carers, people experiencing poor physical or mental health, people experiencing financial hardship and people from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds).

In 2017, eight pilot projects were commissioned through an Innovation Fund to explore new ideas for tackling loneliness and isolation. After an initial seed funding round in which organisations were supported to refine their proposals through co-design and design thinking tools with potential participants, five projects were commissioned to deliver their service over a year.

This report provides an overview of the Farming Comes to You project including the outcomes achieved and the lessons learned.

Methodology

This report has been compiled following a learning and reflection workshop with the delivery partner Heeley City Farm and draws on individual case studies and data from the CMF and Bespoke questionnaires.

The project

Context

Heeley City Farm, a registered charity situated in the heart of Sheffield in the community of Heeley is committed to addressing the problems of poverty, inequality, prejudice and lack of opportunity in the inner city. There are opportunities for all generations including volunteering for anyone aged 8 years over, supported and SEN learning for 8 to 16 year olds where young people can attend vocational placements at the farm and visits to older people in sheltered housing and care homes with an emphasis on animal assisted therapy with dementia patients.

Innovation

At the start of the project, during the seed funding phase, animal assisted therapy was starting to become increasingly recognised in the UK, as well as internationally, as an intervention for patients who were deriving limited benefit from existing medical treatment. There had been academic research which indicated that pet therapy could play a role in overcoming loneliness:

“Animals in a therapeutic setting offer similar benefits to those of animal companionship. Animals may serve as a catalyst for discussion between therapist and client.” Fine, 2000; Kruger et al., 2004

Prior to the project funding, Heeley City Farm had run 10 unfunded animal assisted therapy sessions with older people in various settings over 12 months. This helped inform both the need for the project and the way in which it would be delivered. Early piloting took place with 42 older people from the lunch club at the Church of Nazarene, as well as 14 men who were very socially isolated and rarely went outside of their homes. In addition to this 100 people were randomly “spot asked” during events at the farm: “Do you think if HCF took the animals out into the community it would help people who might be lonely or isolated?” The responses provided valuable input into the co-production of the project bid.

Farming Comes to You was an opportunity for Heeley City Farm to explore the value of animal assisted therapy for older people experiencing low mental wellbeing including depression and bereavement or health conditions including physical conditions, sensory impairment and dementia. It built upon some earlier ventures into animal assisted therapy with dementia patients and, through the innovation funding, Heeley City Farm were able to develop and test a cohesive model of delivery including working with volunteers to support the continuation of the project.

Who we worked with



The project worked with a number of care homes and sheltered housing schemes in two ABiS target areas: Burngreave and Woodhouse, with a particular emphasis on older people with dementia and low mental wellbeing. In total 243 older people were involved in the visits and activities but a significant number of those who participated, 134 people, were not officially signed up to the project. Balmoral Care Home in Woodhouse had the largest number of participants across the project with a total of 43 people involved and 40% of male participants were resident here.

The project struggled to recruit formal volunteers but benefitted from a large number of “unofficial” volunteers with 53 people getting involved in this way. As well as engaging with people with dementia, including early stage dementia, the project also worked with people with brain injury, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Project Delivery

Taking animals large and small into care homes and sheltered housing schemes was the focus of the innovation in this project but alongside this Heeley City Farm also developed two other strands of the project: “Cinema Comes to You” and community gardening. In addition, the project offered opportunities for residents to visit the city farm, go out on visits to Chatsworth and Bakewell or to play bingo. The project included pop-up gala celebration days at Newton Croft and at Crabtree Grange, which brought the community together and acted as a showcase for Farming Comes to You.

Approximately 25% of older people involved in the project were bed bound and unable to join in activities in a communal lounge or garden but the project staff took the animals to these residents’ rooms so they could be included.

Key learning points

Engaging family members was essential for the project to work, particularly if the older person had dementia as in the case of many of the residents at Balmoral Care Home. Working with relatives was key to enabling project staff to engage with the residents with dementia and family were instrumental in allowing the project to gain consent from their relatives and to gather data by helping to complete questionnaires.

Family played an important role in the project as a whole with 40% of participants having family involved at some stage. Getting family members on board was done largely through fliers distributed by the care homes; the project would have liked to go to relatives’ and residents’ meetings, but the care home was resistant to this. Relatives often had low mental wellbeing themselves and so it wasn’t always possible for them to be as completely involved in the project as was hoped, but having family present at the care home activities did bring family and residents much closer together.

Trust is a major issue in working with so many vulnerable older people. The time scales were short for building effective trust with families and care homes, but a very good foundation was laid down which has been built on as work has continued with residents with dementia beyond the life of the funded project.

Risk assessments, which were very important before bringing animals into care home situations, were quite complex. For example, some of the residents might be “nil by mouth” but there was animal feed present during the session which they could have eaten. Aggressive dementia was another concern that needed to be factored into risk assessments.

Awareness of the emotional effect of working with people near the end of their life can have on the staff was important. It was necessary to acknowledge situations where staff/volunteers became emotional and provide space and time for debriefing.

Flexibility in the project and the ability to be responsive to what was coming though from co-production and change the delivery model was extremely important. Initially it was thought that the assisted animal therapy would be delivered only in the care homes and sheltered housing schemes but, after co-production, it was clear that participants wanted to visit the farm and go on other trips. The community gardening was also included as a result of co-production with residents in sheltered housing as was “Cinema Comes to You” which was a response to residents’ desire to share in the experience of watching a film together, eating popcorn and having “a night out” from their normal routine. Co-production gave people the freedom to have their say, to shape the project, to feel a sense of ownership and to build trust with the delivery partner.

Outcomes

Data collection was a challenge for this project. Collecting the data for the Common Measurement Framework using questionnaires with care homes where the majority of participants had dementia, or a diagnosed mental health condition proved to be impossible. All the completed questionnaires came from participants in sheltered housing, but this was also challenging. It was also difficult to get residents officially signed up to the project so inevitably there were more unofficial participants compared with official.

Focus on Crabtree Court Sheltered Housing Scheme

At Crabtree Court, a sheltered housing scheme in the Burngreave ward, a community gardening project was set up in addition to the animal assisted therapy. In total 21 visits and/or activities took place with the residents here with 20 older people signed up to the project and 12 “unofficial” participants. There were also 9 people helping, giving their own time, who preferred not to be known as volunteers. Residents also benefitted from a visit to Chatsworth House, a visit to Heeley City farm and the chance to be involved in ITV’s filming at the farm of the National Lottery People’s Projects awards which HCF was short listed for and won in 2018 with their “Farm Days for Dementia” project.

“We helped Heeley City Farm to win the ITV and Lottery’s People’s Project. We even got to be on TV.” Crabtree Court resident

For some of the residents the opportunity to become involved in the community gardening was life changing:

“I want you to know how much we value what you have done for us. I am now volunteering after being involved in the garden project. My life has started again.” Crabtree Court resident

For others it was a way of connecting with other residents, spending time outdoors and making friends:

““This project helped us to be together and connect. We are closer now than ever.”

I’ve spent more time outside than I have done for a long time. Thoroughly enjoy it.”.

Focus on Newton Croft Sheltered Housing Scheme

Newton Croft is situated in the Woodhouse area. 14 Residents signed up to take part in the various activities offered by Heeley City Farm and there were an additional 8 “unofficial” participants. As well as participating in Farming Comes to You, the residents also benefitted from Cinema Comes to You, enjoyed visits to Heeley City Farm and had a day excursion including bingo.



For some of the residents the opportunity to become involved in the community gardening was life changing:

“We loved the trip to the bingo! It was a day out and it was lovely to see the scenery on the way.”

“It’s more than a film night, it takes your mind off other things. I sleep better after seeing a good film, especially on the big screen.”

Community gardening was another activity encouraged by the project and was particularly successful in bringing residents together and engendering pride in what they had achieved.

“The public have commented on how lovely the garden looks. It got us learning about different plants and flowers. We even won a trophy for the garden.”

“We have started to sit outside of an evening and look at the garden.”

The overall impact of the project on the residents at Newton Croft is summed up in these words:

“We’ve done a bit of gardening, watched some films, spent time with the animals and felt more confident to come outside.”





Animal Assisted Therapy

At the heart of Farming Comes to You is the belief that close contact with smaller animals has significant benefits for people with dementia as well as those with low mental wellbeing or diagnosed mental health conditions. Heeley City Farm took a variety of smaller animals: goats, guinea pigs, chickens, ferrets and land snails into care homes and sheltered housing. The goats and guinea pigs were particularly effective at encouraging relatives to engage with the project and appealed to all generations. Guinea pigs proved to be very calming for residents as they are responsive to human touch and are unthreatening. Goats are known to be intuitive and it is thought that they can form an emotional bond with people in the same ways that dogs do. For some of the residents with dementia there were challenges in differentiating dogs from goats. The goats tended to prompt reminiscence among participants and the pygmy goats often led to conversations about pregnancy and children. The snails stimulated curiosity with residents asking what they were, while ferrets and chickens were more popular with the men.

“It’s a whole afternoon of chickens, rabbits and guinea pigs; it’s really therapeutic.” Newton Croft resident

“The animals have made me have some wonderful comfort and we never get to hold or see animals; a truly wonderful project.” Newton Croft resident

“All sessions in care homes had a huge impact and engaged residents with varying dementias and limited mental wellbeing through animal assisted therapy. The project brought together families, young people, professional care staff and Heeley City Farm team who observed changes and positive shifts in dementia symptoms, behaviours and language and provided “in the moment” experiences.” Lee Pearce – Project Lead Heeley City Farm

Exit and progression and legacy

Animal assisted therapy is now an integral part of what Heeley City Farm do and they continue to work regularly with people with dementia. They won further funding through the 2018 ITV Lottery People’s Project to further develop this work.

Recommendations

Animal assisted therapy is now an integral part of what Heeley City Farm do and they continue to work regularly with people with dementia. They won further funding through the 2018 ITV Lottery People’s Project to further develop this work.

Data Collection

A project where a large percentage of the beneficiaries are living with dementia or a diagnosed mental health condition which means they lack capacity or are unable to complete complex questionnaires results in a very real challenge. When it comes to data collection and evidencing the impact of interventions and activities on the people taking part, careful thought must be given to how impact can be measured and recorded in ways which are accessible and enable people to have voice. Working with care homes and families to take a less risk-averse approach to capacity may enable more participants to be included in evaluation and adopting qualitative or other innovative methods of evaluating impact may be more appropriate.

Building relationships

The time scale of a year was too short to allow Heeley City Farm to build meaningful relationships with all the care homes and sheltered housing schemes. Trust between the various parties is key to delivering activities in this environment and it is very important to fully engage the relatives of residents with dementia. This takes time, energy and also skills along with appropriate training for those delivering the activities. The innovation fund was an excellent way of allowing Heeley City Farm to test their model for animal assisted therapy and learn from the challenges, the failures and successes. It may have been more effective to concentrate on a smaller number of care homes and sheltered housing schemes to allow more time to develop the relationships with the staff, residents and family.



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