AGE BETTER IN SHEFFIELD

Capturing stories of ageing better

Executive summary

This report summarises the findings of a study conducted by Age Better in Sheffield as part of a wider evaluation into the impact of Age Better in Sheffield projects. It took a longitudinal approach to understand more about the participants' stories and journeys through the projects using qualitative interviews. The study hoped to understand more about the mechanisms that make Age Better projects successful and the participants' wider experiences of social isolation and loneliness.

One of the core features of this study was the involvement of peer-researchers, in this case known as story catchers, in the study and in conducting most of the research. Interviewees were drawn from two projects, A Better Life and Start Up. Interviews were conducted with four participants from each project, with story catchers meeting participants on several occasions. Meeting interviewees multiple times allowed us to explore in more depth the themes arising from the interviews, develop rapport with participants and gain a deeper knowledge of their stories. Data from the interviews was then analysed by the research team.

The findings from this study show the importance of social networks and connections to older people, for both friendship and support and reassurance. These networks may be harder to develop and sustain in older age and a sense of isolation and loneliness may be particularly acute in communities more deeply affected by marginalisation and deprivation. The study has also considered the ongoing responsibilities, financial, emotional and practical that are part of older peoples' lives, contrasting with dominant narratives of older people as 'a burden'.

The participants' experiences of Start Up and A Better Life were overwhelmingly positive. Both the projects are environments in which friendships can be built and sustained. These relationships are highly valued by our interviewees. Our study demonstrates that both projects have the potential to build social capital and social resources. This is often reliant on having key individuals who work to develop and sustain environments in which this can happen, for example community workers at A Better Life and through the hubs in the Start Up project.

The participants in our study highlighted the importance of developing a trusting relationship with the project worker as key to the success of the project. This reiterates the importance of developing project models that allow time to be spent on building meaningful relationships with individuals and being able to respond flexibly to their needs.

This report also makes suggestions about how each project could potentially be maximised. At the heart of many of these recommendations is the working relationship between Age Better and project delivery partners. Projects may benefit from greater collaboration with Age Better to fully connect their work at a local scale with Age Better aims and values, potentially enhancing the impact the projects have on social isolation and loneliness.

1. Introduction: Social insolation in older adults

Social isolation and loneliness have significant negative impacts on quality of life and wellbeing, for example increased risk of depression and cognitive decline, poor health outcomes and social anxiety. Some of the key personal factors associated with social isolation and loneliness are exacerbated in older age, including loss of meaningful relationships, retirement, living with a disability or poor health and becoming a carer (Cotterell et al 2018; Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 2018; Kitzmuller et al 2018). A sense of social isolation can also be understood at community and society level. Changes in society such as non-nuclear families, more solitary employment, financial exclusion and austerity all create conditions that increase the risk of social isolation and loneliness (Cotterell et al 2018).

Age Better in Sheffield works in partnership with a number of organisations to deliver innovative projects that aim to combat loneliness and isolation for people aged 50 and over. Part of Age Better in Sheffield's role is to learn from the projects about what is effective in alleviating isolation and loneliness. Research demonstrates that many different approaches have been taken to combat loneliness and isolation including social facilitation, befriending, psychological therapies, building community resilience and leisure and skills development (Gardiner et al 2016). There is however

still significant work to be done to understand how the complexities of loneliness and isolation can be understood, prevented and managed (Cotterell et al 2018). This study considered two of the Age Better in Sheffield projects, A Better Life run by SOAR and Start Up run by Ignite Imaginations and looked at the impact the projects had.

2. Two Age Better in Sheffield projects: Start Up and A Better Life

The two projects that agreed to take part in the study are Start Up and A Better Life. Below are some details about each of the projects in their own words:

A Better Life, SOAR

A Better Life uses a mixed intervention approach with the aim of removing barriers to financial inclusion, and reducing social isolation, in a BME community. These interventions address improving personal finance (1:1 advice through CAB), removing financial barriers to social activity (low cost activity through SOAR), and improving social connectedness (how the two interact to reduce isolation). Interventions work individually and together (as needed) to provide clients with tailored support that suits them (for example, 1:1 advice and money workshops taking place within a social group). By offering a variety of support within a group setting, the project aims to increase engagement with the social group through the draw of 1:1 advice and workshops and use workshops to increase the financial literacy of group attendees who wouldn't have otherwise accessed the information (taken from A Better Life – revised project plan).

Start Up, run by Ignite Imaginations

Start Up gives practical and financial support to local people aged 50 and over in Sheffield to start something new or develop something they are already involved in to reach out to more isolated older people. This includes knitting groups, choirs, dance classes and social groups. The project wants to spark new ideas, give strength to existing provision and create new and interesting opportunities for older people in the area. There are 6 monthly city wide meetings which bring all the beneficiaries together to share experiences and support one another. Start Up also encourages its beneficiaries to become 'Champions', aiming to offer advice and support to newcomers (taken from Age Better Deep Dives 2018).

3 How the study was conducted: Study Design and Methods

This study was conducted as part of a wider evaluation into the impact of Age Better in Sheffield projects. The study took a longitudinal approach hoping to understand more about the participants' stories and journeys through the projects using qualitative interviews. One of the core features of this study design was the involvement of peer-researchers, in this case known as story catchers, in the study. The story catchers are a group of 6 people all aged 50 and over. Five volunteered to work on the study and one was an employee of Age Better in Sheffield. Reflections on the role of the story catchers are covered in more detail below. The study hoped to understand more about the mechanisms that make Age Better projects successful and the participants' wider experiences of social isolation and loneliness. Interviewees were drawn from two projects, A Better Life and Start Up.

The aims of the study were therefore to:

- Explore the impacts of Age Better in Sheffield projects for the project's participants and understand the features that influence how and why a project works (or doesn't) to reduce loneliness and isolation for participants.

- Reflect on the Age Better in Sheffield model and its legacy.

- Understand more about participants' experiences of loneliness and social isolation, and how Age Better projects may shape their experiences.

The study took a longitudinal approach, interviewing four participants from each project multiple times over the course of the duration of the project from June 2019 to February 2020. This meant dividing the study into rounds of interviews and completing a preliminary analysis of the data collected in each round before meeting the interviewees again. A longitudinal approach was taken because we wanted to be able to find out how participants' experiences of the projects changed over time, and at particularly points, for example at their initial engagement with the project, during and after they had exited the project. Interviews are a good opportunity to share

experiences, knowledge and personal narratives and a useful way to elicit how people feel and think about the projects they are part of. Four interviewees from each project were identified, with the delivery partners playing a key role in the recruitment process. The story catchers, working in pairs, were then paired with two interviewees, who they met on several occasions. Meeting interviewees multiple times was designed to allow us to explore in more depth the themes arising from the interviews, develop rapport with participants and gain a deeper knowledge of their stories.

In preparation for the interviews thematic guides were designed for each round of interviews. Separate topic guides were designed for each project, due to the diversity of the projects. In the first round of interviews questions focused on entry into the project, and life history. Based on a preliminary analysis of the data gathered in the first round of interviews, individual topic guides were developed for each interviewee for subsequent interviews, based on their individual stories, often trying to delve a little deeper into their experiences as they moved through the project. This would also sometimes involve seeking out more detail from the participants, asking them to expand on particular stories or clarifying details.

This process attempted to give an element of structural similarity to the interviews, whilst also allowing space for topics of importance to the participants within the interview. We also tried to be led by the interviewee and pick up on their cues for important topics of conversation. The interviews lasted from between 20 minutes to 1 hour. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, with one conducted through an interpreter. The locations for the interviews varied, with all the interviews for the A Better Life social café conducted at the social café, and the interview regarding the 1:1 stream at home. Three of the interviews for the Start Up project were conducted at the interviewee's home, with one taking place in a community venue. The original aim was to meet each interviewee on three separate occasions. The study design was modified as it progressed, and it became apparent for various reasons that a third face-to-face interview may not be appropriate for many of the participants. If this was the case, telephone, email and a more informal conversation were adopted in its place if this was deemed appropriate. Semi – structured interviews and informal

conversations were also conducted with delivery partners at the beginning and end of the study. In total 18 interviews, 2 follow up conversations over phone or email, and 2 photo shoots were completed.

All the (recorded) interviews were transcribed very soon after completing the interview by a transcription agency. After each round of interviews, the research team met to discuss our experiences of the interviews, to think about the data we had collected and plan what we might want to ask during the next round of interviews. This gave us an opportunity to reflect on the data we were gathering and a chance to see some key themes emerging. In this way the research was an iterative process where the data gathered from one encounter had the potential to shape the content of the next. It also gave us chance to reflect on the interviewing process, think through any concerns and share experiences.

Data Analysis

The data collected through this study process in the form of transcriptions was analysed through manual coding, incorporating a variety of codes to identify categories and sub-categories of ideas of importance and the relationship between them. Data analysis and data collection were an iterative and interwoven process, with some themes becoming apparent in the early round of interviewing and shaping subsequent interviews. Analysis was conducted by the whole research team. This was done by all the members of the team reading through and coding a transcript (by placing keywords or phrases in the margins next to the relevant piece of material) and then discussing our codes and what we thought this might mean as a group. The analysis took an approach influenced by the principles of grounded theory, allowing the codes to emerge from the data. This was done after rounds one and two of the interviews and allowed us to develop topic guides for the next round of interviews. In the final group data analysis session, we reflected on all of the material, trying to explore common themes found across the data, rather than focusing on an individual transcript.

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This group analysis process was backed up by the research associate conducting further analysis. This allowed for analysis of the transcripts that we did not have time to complete as a group, and for a re-reading of the transcripts to engage more deeply with the categories identified and explore the meaning behind them in more detail.

Ethics

The ethics of this study are based on training received on the ethical aspects of research from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University and are synonymous with those needed for ethical approval by a university board. The study was discussed with delivery partners and they were provided with an information sheet so they could accurately explain the study to potential participants. Once interviewees from the Start Up project has been identified they were then contacted by the research associate to discuss the study, ensure they were happy to take part and decide on a location for the interview. A risk assessment was conducted for interviews taking place at home. Before the interviews began study participants were guided through an information sheet and consent form by the story catchers. All the participants gave written consent to be interviewed. They were able to withdraw from the study at any time.

For study participants from A Better Life, the research associate and story catchers attended the social café prior to conducting the interviews. This allowed us to get a sense of the group and to introduce ourselves before starting the study. Again, before the interviews began study participants were guided through an information sheet and consent form by the story catchers. All of the participants gave written consent to be interviewed. They were able to withdraw from the study at any time. For the participant from the A Better Life 1:1 stream, the interviews took place at home, again with a risk assessment and support from the research associate in place.

Data collected from the study was securely stored, with audio-recordings and transcriptions stored separately from consent forms. Anonymity and confidentiality have been maintained, with the exceptions of the case studies detailed below, which the individuals involved have consented to.

Story catchers received training on interviewing and research ethics from the team at CECSR. They received a debrief phone call after each interview from the research associate. This was designed as an opportunity to discuss any concerns and reflect on their experiences of the interview.

4 Story catching: doing peer research in this study

The Story catchers are a group of five volunteers and one Age Better in Sheffield employee all aged 50 or over who were recruited to work on this project. Reasons for getting involved varied from wanting to understand more about qualitative research to a desire to evaluate how public money is spent to previous experience of volunteering with South Yorkshire Housing Association (SYHA) on similar projects. They received an induction on volunteering at SYHA and training on research processes and ethics from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. This training was positively received with the story catchers feeling that the training sessions were thorough, inclusive, comfortable, reassuring and thought provoking.

Story catchers worked predominantly in pairs to complete the interviews with their allocated interviewee. Working in pairs was designed to provide a supportive interview process and minimise risk. Working in pairs allowed the story catchers to debrief with each other after the interview, build rapport with different interviewees and work collaboratively during the interview. Story catchers commented that they had enjoyed getting to know their partner and working with people they might not otherwise have met.

The research team was involved in the analysis of the data, as detailed above, and story catchers have commented on drafts of this report. The research team has also considered our positionality as a group of researchers, with our discussions covering our closeness to our interviewees in terms of socio-economic status and cultural heritage, how we build different relationships with different interviewees, the role interpreters can play in interviews, how different locations may shape the interview process and our own feelings about the projects evaluated.

5 Reflecting on the research process: what worked?

This is the first time that Age Better in Sheffield has conducted a longitudinal study with peer-researchers. It is important to reflect on the process, and how this can be improved in the future. One of our story catchers commented that the study had been like "A Curate's Egg", this section then will concentrate on what was effective about this longitudinal study and then move on to its limitations, based on discussions with story catchers, delivery partners and reflections from the wider Age Better team.

Story catchers reflected on the opportunities that being involved in this project has given them, the chance to get to know people they may not otherwise have met and become involved in community events that they wouldn't otherwise have experienced. The study was also seen by some as an opportunity to develop new skills. Some felt they had built a good relationship with their interviewees and enjoyed talking to them. This was also reflected in feedback from delivery partners, SOAR, who felt that regular visits by the research team to the social café embedded the research team into the environment and helped us to get to know the way the group operates. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed researchers to get to know their interviewee in more detail, and to some extent build a rapport with them.

For delivery partners, particularly SOAR, the study provided an opportunity to think about how a longitudinal study might work in practice, and how taking a narrative approach can elicit rich stories that compliment other data collected.

The co-production of the analysis of the research has produced research findings that are perhaps richer and more diverse than those from a single researcher. This process also has the advantage of bringing together the research team to bounce ideas around and discuss the research findings from diverse and varied perspectives.

Reflecting on the research process: The limitations of this study

This type of study also has several limitations and challenges that it is important to reflect on. The longitudinal aspect of the study, whilst allowing us in one sense to build rapport with participants, also places greater pressure on interviewees and peer-researchers in terms of the commitment required. This is especially the case for more vulnerable groups, who may find it harder to sustain a more prolonged engagement with the study. Several participants did not complete the three interviews, for a variety of reasons, but it is important to consider how repeated interview requests may feel overwhelming to some participants, particularly if their life circumstances change in the duration of the project. Whilst we did struggle to maintain all our participants' engagement, others felt it was important to have their voice and perspectives heard. We could also have explained the desire to take a longitudinal approach more coherently to delivery partners and participants to aid prolonged engagement. The longitudinal nature of the study also places greater commitment and responsibility in the hands of the peer-researchers, as they contemplate re-meeting interviewees. Story catchers also commented that interview timings can alter, with some interviews being rescheduled, making the time commitment less predictable.

There was significant distance between the interviewees and the research team, with Age Better often not understood or recognised by interviewees. This may have made sustained engagement more difficult, with the relevance of the study quite divorced from their participation in the project. This felt particularly the case when the project lacked a geographical hub, and interviews took place out the context of the project. Story catchers also felt that having more knowledge of the projects, and possibly interviewees, before doing the interviews would have been helpful.

Another concern was engagement with participants whose first language wasn't English. In some cases, interviews were conducted in English, with support from an interpreter as required. With one interviewee, we utilised an interpreter throughout the interview. This experience could have been enhanced by translation of the consent and information forms and being able to use the same interpreter on each visit. We are also very conscious that we are predominantly a white middle class research team and

may not be able to fully understand the experiences of people with very different life experiences from our own.

Recommendations for future evaluations

These recommendations are drawn from discussions within the story catching team, conversations with the delivery partners involved and reflections from the research associate who worked on the project. The essence of many of these reflections is for studies and evaluations to be undertaken in a more contextualised way, so that researchers work more closely with delivery partners, and researchers have a greater insight into the context of the work and the projects they are researching.

The research team:

Have a smaller team of researchers working on the study, for example two researchers employed by Age Better in Sheffield and two peer-researchers working as a group from the start of the project. This would enable peer-researchers to have more involvement in the decision-making processes associated with the study, and for research training to be undertaken in a way that is contextualised to the study that was being undertaken. It may also allow all researchers to have a clearer understanding of the dynamics of the Age Better model and how the study will sit within these dynamics. This would demand an alteration in the demands made of volunteers and the time they are asked to commit but may also provide a more predictable and structured framework through which the work is undertaken.

Collaborative research design:

Develop the design of the study in closer collaboration with the delivery partners to reflect their individual project. The projects in the Age Better portfolio are enormously diverse and operate using very different models and infrastructures. Rather than setting an external timeframe for a longitudinal study and then fitting the projects into it, it may be beneficial to work more closely with delivery partners to work out a specific time frame for a longitudinal study that would suit their project. Discussion with the delivery team at A Better Life suggests that a longitudinal study over a greater length of time could have captured more change in the participants at their social café, as they

add more activities to the café over time, and any changes in participants' financial status can take a considerable time due to the complex and chronic nature of their financial instability. They also felt that understanding more about how the study may be beneficial to them and the questions that may be asked would have been helpful.

Designing the study more collaboratively with Start Up may also have helped identify participants who were at similar stages in their journeys through the project, and question whether a longitudinal study would capture the key and 'unique' nature of the project. The longitudinal study has been unable to fully capture the thoughts of people attending the Start Up groups or map the networks of social groups that have sprung from one Start Up group. These would both be potentially powerful examples of how the Start Up groups have fostered social capital in more organic ways. A more collaborative research design may also have helped with the structure and timeframe for the study (see below).

Structure of the study:

In this study the recruitment and training of the story catchers occurred before the recruitment of the projects to be studied. It may have been better to get the projects 'on board' first, develop the study design with them and then have contextualised training that is relevant to the projects that are going to be studied. This would allow greater understanding of the projects involved and for the training to utilise scenarios that are linked to the study.

Becoming embedded in the projects:

Researchers could become more embedded within the projects being studied. This was an effective way of working with the A Better Life social café, being able to attend the group on multiple occasions gave us an insight into how the group worked, helped us prepare for our interviews and gave us a sense of the role the group plays in the life of its participants. Whilst this may be more difficult with other projects, as they may not have a tangible hub for the project in the same sense, it would be worth thinking carefully about how researchers can gain insights and a sense of the projects alongside interviewing. It may have been helpful for example for the story catchers to meet with the project coordinators to find out about the project before meeting the interviewees.

6 Key findings from this study: Social connections; ongoing responsibility and finding your place

Having discussed the design of the study, this section will outline its key findings, focusing on our participants' experiences of older age. Our findings highlight the importance of social connections in older age, ongoing responsibilities towards others and the need to find your place in society.

Social connections are important, but can be harder to maintain in older age

Many of the people we spoke to as part of this project emphasised the importance of social connections and resources in older age. This was juxtaposed with a sense of these social networks becoming both harder to sustain and initiate in older age. Ideas of 'getting out of the house' and 'keeping busy' seemed particularly key, with a desire to nurture contact with a world beyond the boundaries of property or family.

"...I like the people, it doesn't matter which are people, black, white. If the people could talk with me, I will sit down and I am here, I talk with the people. Anyway, I like meeting the people..."

Layla 6th August 2019

These ideas were also extended to other older people, with Layla explaining here how important she feels it is for everyone to get out and be with people:

"When they go over 50, so some do you know sit down inside, because children grow, not anything to do, so they could come out and go outside and they be with the people and talk with people."

Layla 6th August 2019

"Still you need people, whatever age you are. In older age you need it more."

Layla 3rd December 2019

Participants spoke of some of the difficulties of maintaining relationships into older age, when circumstances change, with Layla, June and Denise providing different explanations for this change:

"I don't miss work in terms of the physical tasks of it, but I do miss the friends."

Denise 2nd September 2019

"Now today I feel is it hard to make the friend as well, honest. I feel, I don't know I'm right or wrong. Because nowadays everybody keeping self like this, I don't know… If [you] ask telephone number, they don't give. They ask address, they don't invite, but before, do you know, I like you, I see you, I like you."

Layla 6th August 2019

"You could go to a lot more places but it's transport isn't it, you know, because the first time when that lunch club, when I went there the bus never came so I got in a taxi and I thought I determined I'm going and it was £7.00 and the same for coming back, so it cost me £14.00 for a £2.50 dinner but I enjoyed it."

June 3rd December 2019

"Actually in the winter you need to go out more. You need fresh air, inside heating, heating. You need to meet people, in winter its harder to meet people. In summer people are in the park. In winter the group is the only way to meet people. I can't go to the countryside or go in the park, I can't meet people, the group is the only way."

Layla 3rd December 2019

The desire to be part of an exterior world comes with the caveat of the need for social resources that are accessible locally and easily. Participants also projected a concern for their future, worrying about greater isolation as they grew older or the possibility of their health or mobility declining. Our participants were, in a sense, future proofing – making. enjoying and maximising their social connections whilst it was still possible for them to do so, as one commented 'getting out, whilst I can.'

It was sometimes hard for our interviewees to articulate why social connections were important to them, but there was a sense of fulfillment about some of their social interactions, that these are elements that sustain a feeling of joy and richness in their lives. Some of the participants also explained the importance of building social capital from a more practical perspective, with their social networks and resources offering valued support, which in turn can be reciprocated when appropriate, as Kawa, Denise and Tim explain:

"Our situation get worse, my health condition, mental health problems get worse because we couldn't cope, even the friends were taking the kids to school and bring them back."

Kawa 26th July 2019

"We've all become very good friends...and we sort of support each other and do various things for each other as well...Lots of mutual support for each other as well... [Freda] in our group has got MS as well and she has had ... she's had a couple of occasions where her garage has flooded and her battery for her scooter is in there so that was ...So she rang somebody and said I don't know what to do and they said, well, Tim and [Denise] might know something so I went round there with the battery charger that we got and she was mobile within about ten minutes because of her High Five connections. There was somebody else who had a fall, didn't they...she had a fall and then she rang her and two people went round and did all the washing up for her and ran down to Sainsbury's it's that sort of thing has been really good....It's been good for that and I think we think oh, if we get in a difficulty I'm sure somebody will be able to help us. Yeah, the assurance of having a wider group locally have been really good."

Denise and Tim 2nd September 2019

We must acknowledge that social resources are not equally or equitably accessible to all, with barriers such as health and mobility, transport options and marginalisation all playing a role in shaping engagement with social networks. Socio-economic status is also an important factor, but one that is not fully understood, with individual hardship potentially limiting access to certain groups, events or workshops.

Continued responsibility and caring for others

Our second key finding from the study was that responsibility to and caring for others very much continues into older age. Many of our participants had ongoing responsibility to family members, financial, practical and emotional, whilst others were actively caring for children and partners. Financial responsibility towards the extended family was a concern for some of the participants, with Layla and Sal articulating this clearly:

"They sometimes need, sometime they borrow from the bank, but sometime you can't … I can't ask you if you have children, they need every time from mother, money…. Even grandchildren need money."

Layla 6th August 2019

"That's right, yeah, all the time, when I get spare money I send it to my kids, family, because they don't get no money from government, anything, pension credit, no, anything, nobody can afford it."

Sal 23rd July 2019

This ongoing financial responsibility is an area of concern for some participants, worrying how they can contribute to their own and others financial needs. As well as financial responsibility some of our participants continued to care for their adult children, and other family members as June and Paula describe:

"Well, I've had upset with [my daughter] not being well and my brother has got worse."

June 3rd December 2019

"What it's like to be a long-term carer of a child, and there's a lot on caring for elderly people but it's totally different, you know, most people become carers when they're in their 20s, 30s, and it's continuous…. It's absolutely draining, it's emotionally incredibly difficult… my son, he was born quite normally and then he suddenly had a brain haemorrhage when he was four weeks old, which then led to severe brain damage, and consequently it's left him with sort of moderate to severe learning difficulties… He's also absolutely marvellous as well, but the tension, you know, I always say it's like extreme highs and extreme lows… Most of the people my age now are over 50 and they've got young adults that they're still caring for, and a lot of them are burnt out"

Paula 18th July 2019

This sense of responsibility towards others perhaps contrasts with the dominant discourse of 'being a burden' in older age, with our many of our participants relied upon to provide multiple sources of support, often for family members, whilst also sometimes managing concerns about their own health and financial wellbeing.

Changing roles: Being part of a community and finding your place
The final key finding from our study is the importance of continuing to be part of a community into older age. This is connected to the desire for social resources discussed above, but is subtly different, with participants expressing a keenness to have a role in shaping society more widely and having a sense of contributing to

something worthwhile. This can also be linked to the sense of responsibility discussed above, with many participants conveying the importance of being an active part of something positive. This will be discussed more below in reference to the two projects studied.

This section has highlighted three key findings about older age, firstly the importance of social networks and social capital in older age, whilst acknowledging that these can be more difficult to build and sustain. Secondly, the ongoing responsibilities older adults may have to others, juxtaposing the dominant discourse of older people as 'a burden'. This idea was also challenged by our final key finding, the importance of having a role in shaping society, and being able to do something worthwhile. This report will now move on to discussing the impacts of the two projects studied.

7 Project Evaluations

As well as wanting to understand more about our participants lives and their experiences of older age, this study wanted to think more about how Start Up and A Better Life fitted into participants' lives, the impact it had and whether the project has been effective in addressing social isolation and loneliness in older adults. This section of the report will consider each of the projects studied in detail, outlining the experiences of project participants. It will also make some recommendations for the future of the project, particularly in considering the sustainability of projects and the potential they have to have an impact beyond the life of Age Better.

8 Start Up

The Start Up project, run by Ignite Imaginations, encourages people over 50 to start up new creative groups and activities. This section will evaluate the effectiveness of the project, based on the perspectives of those who have taken part. It will begin by considering the successes of the project and will discuss this at both an individual and project level.

Individual: what do Start Up beneficiaries' gain?

Start Up is an opportunity for learning and to build confidence:
The people who took part in our study have all started up new groups from scratch, and one of the key elements of this activity is the opportunity to learn and build new skills and diversify existing ones. One of our interviewees, Sue, exemplified how Start Up has been an experiential learning process:

"So, it's been a very, very interesting learning curve, one that I wouldn't have been able to do on my own. So, I've learnt an awful lot and one thing it prompted me to do is actually go down to find out about training or getting some help setting up a small business as a fitness trainer."

Sue 30th September 2019

Sue's project has given her the opportunity to learn and expand her skills and has encouraged her to think about how she can take this to the next level, for example through starting her own business or doing further training. Through her Start-Up project Sue was able to combine her passion for DJ-ing with fitness activities and then continued to build on this by starting a sound-engineering course. It seemed that Sue was resourceful and placed a great value on adult education, and this also helped develop and nurture a desire to explore and expand her knowledge and skills. Start Up has acted as a springboard for Sue to reflect on her own future opportunities, the directions she wants to go in and the activities she wants to pursue, all in the context of needing to adapt to a rapidly changing employment environment.

Another Start Up participant, Denise also highlighted the complexities of starting up a new group. She is starting up an exercise group and has been thinking about how to find an appropriate venue, an exercise instructor and how best to advertise and recruit participants. Here Denise outlines just how much learning she had been doing through starting up her exercise group:

Paula, another Start Up beneficiary, had run a small art group for carers of adult children. She reflected on the dynamics of this particular group, and for her, the importance of having a shared lifestyle with other members of the group:

"One of the spaces I offered to an older lady who wasn't a carer because someone dropped out and she was interested in coming anyway, so I said 'Well you're over 50, so why not come?', and that was a mistake actually because it's almost like she wasn't part of the club. My learning there was how very different the paths of the ones who are long-term carers is from any other path. I guess that's the case for anybody that goes down an extraordinary path, you know, if you've had a major illness your path is different, so there was learning in that actually, and whilst people didn't really talk about the impact there was that common … you know, we sort of knew what our lives were like, yeah."

Paula 18th July 2019

Denise also recognised the importance of learning to keep going in the face of setbacks, particularly when she struggled to find appropriate venues and exercise instructors, and when she has felt uncertain as to whether anyone would attend the exercise group. She articulated the sense of achievement she felt when the plans for the group began to come together:

"Because I've never done anything like this before. Like you've done things, haven't you, but I've never done anything. Thinking oh, I don't know if I can do it, and I've done it."

Denise 1st November 2019

This sees Start Up as a vehicle through which confidence and self-esteem can be built, and as an opportunity to gain a real sense of achievement, as Denise comments 'I've done it...'. Setting up a group through the Start Up initiative offers an opportunity to expand knowledge and skills and can act as a springboard to other ambitions. Both Paula and Sue used their group to trial ideas, and the process helped them think through their potential next steps. In this sense Start Up allowed them to try something out and take a risk. This echoed Tim's thoughts on the role of the Start Up project when setting up his Tuneless choir:

"And it did help that we had the money to start up the launch night, and also we had the security of knowing that."

Tim 27th October 2019

Start Up then encourages people to take risks and in doing so builds confidence and fosters a sense of achievement for its beneficiaries.

Start Up can help find a new role

The Start Up project also provides an opportunity for its beneficiaries to find a new role, one that often coincides with their personal motivations and worldviews. All the Start Up beneficiaries we interviewed drew on their own personal experiences to create and shape their group. Paula, for example, reflected on her experiences as a carer to shape the group she created, and the need for something specifically designed for carers of adult children.

"I don't know, my experience is that there's lots of things for older people, like I often see the walking groups up the woods and that, and I thought 'That's alright if you're that sort of person, but what if you're not, what if you have got ill health or you're an introvert, what do you do?"

Paula 18th July 2019

This was echoed by Denise, who is in the process of starting a chair-aerobics class. Here she describes how the idea was drawn from her own experiences:

"I don't know, my experience is that there's lots of things for older people, like I often see the walking groups up the woods and that, and I thought 'That's alright if you're that sort of person, but what if you're not, what if you have got ill health or you're an introvert, what do you do?' I think that's the group that needs to be ... somehow you need to try and target, and I guess that was what I wanted to do in a very tiny way, you know, just the thing that I knew, my subject, so to speak."

Paula 18th July 2019

"Yes, because it's purely self-interest. I don't know anything at all and I'm limited to being in a wheelchair so I thought, well, what can I do? And I've got another friend who goes to the group; the same group that Derrick started off with the High Five Group and she goes to a ... she's a bit more mobile... She's got MS but she can still walk a bit. But she goes to an aerobics thing and I thought that would be okay to do."

Paula 18th July 2019

Through her dance group, Sue, also found that Start Up was an opportunity to challenge the negative societal impact she perceived from austerity policies. Her dance class was designed to encourage freeform dance, aiding wellbeing and helping people with their mental and physical health. This study has shown that the Start Up project has been particularly valued by its beneficiaries as an opportunity to learn and diversify their knowledge and skills, build confidence and as a chance to build a role in their community.

Project design: building for success

The Start Up project has created and sustained many successful groups, and it is also important to think about which structural elements of the project are particularly important to beneficiaries.

Start Up hubs for friendship and encouragement

Start Up projects can be an environment in which new friendships can be stimulated. For our study participants this was particularly true of the hub of activities based around the High 5 social club in Beauchief. People in this group have formed important and sustained friendships, as Denise commented about getting involved in the High 5 group:

"...but we didn't know anybody so we thought it would be an opportunity for us to meet people in the area."

Denise 2nd September 2019

These hubs also provide encouragement for more Start Ups to begin, with support for the process and a model of success tangible. Here Denise describes how she found out about the Start Up project through another Start Up initiative, the High 5 club:

"Well, it was Derrick really who started it up. A man who lives round the corner put a leaflet through our door saying he was starting up a sort of a social group for over 50s. And he sent round this sort of little paper saying we're meeting at such-and-such in the café down the road so that ... and he started up a group and that's how I found out initially about it."

Denise 2nd September 2019

She also comments on how the High5 group has produced other 'spin-off' groups:

"We've had lots of start-ups, haven't we from the High Fives that have been spinoffs because somebody wanted to connect the two. In Hockley Wood there are two paths that go through. But they're parallel and there's nothing to join the two up so if you wanted to go on a particular place you have to go right to the end and back. So they got a start-up in a group together, Friends of Hockley Wood, and built some steps and put some steps in it so that's a very positive outcome..."

Denise 2nd September 2019

It is clear then that encouraging the development of hubs of Start Up activity is one way in which to encourage further activity. It is also important to consider Start Up beneficiaries outside of these hubs and how they can be supported and encouraged to engage with other Start Up beneficiaries. Meeting other Start Up beneficiaries is important for modelling successes (and reflecting on challenges), and Denise also provided positive feedback about the Start Up event:

"That was something that Kate Sully organised... And she had a one-off thing which she does every year and that is giving awards out to successful start-ups. And she organises a buffet sort of thing up there and there were all people from her organisations that had started up...Then somebody came across things from when she's at intake, was it, and just had a chat with you...She's already set a group up there and I said oh, I'm quite interested in doing that...she also said to me I know some instructors, which I'm currently looking into because I've been in touch with the place. We want to sort of bring it round here."

Denise and Tim 2nd September 2019

This desire for meeting others who had experience of being a Start Up was also reflected in feedback from Sue, who felt:

"I could have done with more help setting it up by talking to people who've set up a similar kind of event"

Sue 12th December 2019

Money and Support from Ignite Imaginations

The support, both practical and financial, participants received from Ignite Imaginations was valued. Kate Sully, from Ignite Imaginations, co-ordinates the Start Up project for Ignite Imaginations, and her visiting the group and building an informal relationship with the beneficiaries seems key, as Denise describes here:

"Well, I ... then I talked about Kate Sully before. She said oh, why you don't set one up. And we can ... we'll be able to give you a start-up amount of money and I thought oh, great. That will be good... Because that's one of the things that obviously was the drawback, how we set it up and how do we get somebody who's putting the money up..."

Denise and Tim 2nd September 2019

Denise also describes how Kate helped her try and find an instructor for her chair-aerobics group:

"Kate Sully, weren't it, that start-, she gave us a few pointers, and one of which was Roger who does another course for her at Intake I think, and I rang him but he wasn't able to do the dates that I wanted."

Denise and Tim 2nd September 2019

Paula, one of the Start Up beneficiaries, described to us how the flexibility of support offered early on in the project was beneficial to her, from being able to meet in a local café, to having face-to-face support to fill in forms:

"I met the woman that organises the Age Better Sheffield Project...I met her in just a local cafe, so she told me initially about the project, I met her, you know, she said 'Just meet wherever you want to be', so we just met at a cafe in between us both, and she got all the forms out and went through it, and then we had a series of meetings with her filling the forms in or me filling them in and she was there, which, as I said to [her] afterwards, was priceless for someone ... as a carer I spend a lot of time filling in forms... and if someone had just posted the forms and said 'Do it' I would not have done it..."

Paula 18th July 2019

Sue also met with Kate, who gave her advice on flyering and some help with social media.The financial and practical help offered by Ignite Imaginations, the chance to build an informal and trusting relationship with Kate, the focus on building Start Up hubs and the opportunity to share experiences with other Start Up beneficiaries are all important to the success of Start Up projects. These are exemplified in Tim's story below:

Tim's Story: Tim's Tuneless Choir

Tim, who lives in Beauchief, initiated a Tuneless Choir, taking encouragement from his sister-in-law's prompts:

"It was [my wife's] sister who said what terrible singers we were. So, we half joking said, 'You know, well, we'd like to sing in a choir,' and she said, 'I've heard about Tuneless Choirs."

Tim and his wife are part of the High5 social group, another group founded through the Start Up project. This gave Tim the idea of using Start Up to begin a Tuneless choir. The £200 small grant allowed Tim to take a risk in starting up the group, funding venue hire for the first month and allowing them to do a launch event. Tim did significant publicity for the event, including handing out leaflets and putting up posters. Tim also felt that having a small grant made easier to recruit someone to run the choir:

"...Because we'd got the funding there... I think that nudged her into saying, 'Oh, I'll step in instead."

Support from Ignite Imaginations was also helpful initially, but now the choir is operating independently:

"Continued support, we don't need it really, and that was the big thing about the choir, in that we set it up with her assistance and it's up and running and we'll carry on."

Photo courtesy of Jeremy Abrahams: South Sheffield Tuneless choir

Sheffield South Tuneless choir is now part of the nationwide Tuneless choir franchise. This opens up opportunities for joining in national events with other choirs. The choir meets fortnightly in Totley, with between 30 and 50 participants. They also take part in performances in public, recently at Christmas carols in Leopold Square. The choir is self-sustaining, allowing Tim to really enjoy himself:

"All I've done really is just given them that first nudge and… then it's off on its own. And we just turn up and enjoy yourselves…"

Tim, a retired judge, focuses his energy on assisting people with mobility needs to access the choir. His wife has reduced mobility, and they give lifts to other people who might struggle to access the choir otherwise.

Photo courtesy of Jeremy Abrahams: South Sheffield Tuneless choir

Tim feels and sees the difference attending the choir makes:

"It's nice because everybody does chat to each other, and you can see new friendship building. And we got four or five extra people that we're always talking to. And normally it's because they sit near us, but that's just coincidence more than anything else....People who come in first of all, and when they come in, they come with friends, they are talking to each other and might say 'hello' or whatever. But, when you're leaving, as you're coming out, everybody seems much more gregarious and then we'll talk about things."

Maximising the impact of Start Up

It is clear from the findings above that Start Up has significant impacts for many of its beneficiaries, and potentially for people attending the Start Up initiatives. However, this study also demonstrates that there are some areas that could be enhanced to fully maximise the impact of Start Up.

1 Greater and more explicit linkages between the aims of Age Better and Start Up groups: There are many successful Start Ups, we have focused on a few here. Some of the groups may have benefitted from more guidance on how starting up a group can contribute to reducing social isolation and loneliness and some guidance on how best this can be done through their own Start Up. This may involve thinking with the beneficiary about the location of their group, the accessibility of the group and the inclusivity of it for those on low incomes. This could involve a collaborative process between Ignite Imaginations and the beneficiary during the planning stages,

and something that is reviewed on a regular basis as the group develops. This may also include how to encourage more vulnerable communities to benefit from the Start Up project. ho have taken part. It will begin by considering the successes of the project and will discuss this at both an individual and project level.

2 Enhancing success and sustainability:

It may be possible to develop mechanisms to aid the success and continuity of each Start Up group. Ignite Imaginations already provide a flexible response based on the needs of the individual beneficiary, but it may be possible to build in ideas of sustainability into the planning process, by thinking with beneficiaries how they may respond if the group not does not go as they hope, and working with them to review and reformat the group as needed. If groups are purposefully designed as short-term interventions, then it may be useful to think with the beneficiary where they may take the idea after their Start Up has concluded and encourage them to develop these ideas. It is also important to be able to respond to the 'failure' of an idea, and to be able to support and give guidance in this situation. Whilst this cannot always be prevented, guidance in the planning stages may help beneficiaries to think about what is realistic and achievable. This however should be very much done with the understanding that Start Up allows you take a risk, and without taking a risk you would not have creative successes. In the context of sustainability and legacy it may also be important for Start Up to begin to think about how the groups they have facilitated can be sustained beyond the lifespan of Age Better. This might include thinking with groups about the form they take, for example becoming a community interest company and further opportunities for funding and support. Events where Start Up beneficiaries can meet have been shown to be an effective way of encouraging further thinking and activity.

3 Explicit learning opportunities:

Start Up could also be used explicitly as an opportunity for greater learning, with tangible connections between the Start Up group and the beneficiaries' own personal development. This may not be appropriate for everyone, but where beneficiaries are looking at future employment prospects it may be possible to use Start Up as a vehicle to enhance these, for example by developing digital or social media skills. This could be

facilitated through a personal development plan with the project co-ordinator where appropriate.

4 Mapping the impacts:

Greater emphasis could be placed on mapping the impact of Start Up beneficiaries, and the ways in which Start Up beneficiaries are building social capital in communities. At a primary level this could include numbers of people attending Start Up groups, and the impacts attending the group has on them. It could also involve mapping the networks of Start Up groups, for example the High5 group has spawned other Start Up groups. This networked structure based around geographical hubs appears key to sustaining the groups and building social capital in a particular area, and it is important to capture this impact.

9. A Better Life

The Better Life project is run by SOAR, comprising of firstly a social café with informal financial advice and secondly 1:1 financial advice over a prolonged period. This section will evaluate the effectiveness of the project, based on the perspectives of those who have taken part. It will begin by considering the successes of the project and will discuss this at both an individual and project level, starting with the social café and then the 1:1 stream.

A Better Life social café: friendship, being cared for and trusted financial advice

The social café provides a consistent, predictable and reassuring environment for its participants. It is an environment in which intercultural friendships can be forged and sustained. It is an important facet of participants' lives, with many feeling bereft if the group is not on, as Layla explains:

"This way because I know I'll go, I like to and go. I hardly pick up myself and come out. This is more important. If there's no group I say oh."

Layla 6th August 2019

Layla also explains how the group facilitates friendships:

"I suppose in a group like this where people get to know each other first, it can be easier to make friends because people already know each other a little bit. It's a bit easier than other places perhaps."

Layla 22nd October 2019

The group also provides the opportunity to keep the mind busy and try something new, for example card making, and has a structured routine of eating lunch together, often followed by a seated exercise class. This structure seems to provide participants with comfort in knowing what will happen next and allow them to relax. For Sal, coming to the group makes him feel happy, he particularly enjoys drawing whilst at the group:

"Oh happy, yeah, draw something till 1 o'clock, and after the girl come to do exercise."

Sal 23rd July 2019

The importance of Sofeena Aslam, the community worker who runs the group cannot be underestimated as participants highlighted the importance of being able to build a sustained and trusting relationship with her. Many of the participants we spoke to emphasised the relationship they have with project workers as key to both their early and continued engagement with the project. This is exemplified by one of our participants, Sal, who said:

"I get [a] call to make sure I'm coming. She said maybe I'm [forgetting], I said no, I like coming. So already I come in half an hour before everybody else."

Sal 23rd July 2019

Here, Sal speaks of the importance of the project worker calling him before each social café to check if he is coming. In this exchange he feels welcomed and cared for and is made to feel part of the group, even arriving early. Later in the interview Sal returns to the care he receives from the project workers and, in particular, the phone call before each social café, demonstrating that these very ordinary, everyday occurrences are very much valued by project participants:

"Always asking 'Want tea, want tea?' Oh yeah, it's very nice, honestly. She phoned me this morning, she said 'Are you coming down?' I said 'Yes…that day when I come, I have it on the calendar."

Sal 23rd July 2019

Participants also felt they could trust Sofeena with their financial concerns. They were often able to approach her when they would not feel comfortable in more a formal environment. These are often complex issues that cannot be solved quickly highlighting the need for continuity and ongoing support for this community. Participants felt 'looked after' by Sofeena and able to ask her for financial advice. One of our interviewees, Layla, describes how Sofeena will help her apply for pension credit:

"I like to take them out for pension because before you could pass the time, but when you grow old, you need money more because friends won't be here…. I asked Sofeena and [s]he helped me because I get the pension credit…"

Layla 6th August 2019

The social café provides a social opportunity in the Burngreave area, which participants reported does not have many similar ventures. This again reflects the intersection between potential social isolation and wider societal socio-economic deprivation. It is clearly an important event in the lives of the participants we spoke to, who value the continuity and regularity of the group. They also value the relationship

Sal's story: financial advice at the social café

Sal was born in 1939 in Yemen. His childhood in Yemen was marked by hardship:

"Before in the Yemen, before 1950 it's very hard. There's no electric, no hospital, no anything…. So no school, no hospital, no anything else, no medication, no nothing. When I'm seven years old I fell down in mountain, it was my knee, and after my aunt get some grass and make it in my hand, but there was nothing."

He was part of the British army in Yemen and came to the UK and started working in British Steel in Rotherham in 1955, retiring in 1999. He felt his prospects would be better if he came to the UK:

"I can't get job there [Yemen], I can't stay there, but I know there is nothing in Yemen….I lived in Sheffield all the time since I'm coming from Yemen, I didn't go anywhere, only in Sheffield all the time, in this area all the time since when I come."

Sal is the oldest in his family, and he has two widowed sisters still living in Yemen. He also has two sons, and a large extended family, with many grandchildren and great grandchildren all living in Yemen.

"Grandchildren, 24….And more than 35, nearly 40 great grandkids"

Sal's family remain in Yemen and he continues to support them, a situation exacerbated by ongoing conflict in the region:

"[There is] no money to pay them, no government or nothing. Fighting, everybody keep fighting....Yes, it's a war now, especially Iran, they come in and sell the gas to people in North Yemen and it give them big power..."

Sal lives alone in Sheffield. He is in contact with his family, over the phone and online, receiving pictures of his grandchildren and great grandchildren. He continues to provide for them financially:

"That's right, yeah, all the time, when I get spare money I send it to my kids, family, because they don't get no money from government, anything, pension credit, no, anything, nobody can afford it...They need me for money, but each time I save a little bit, I've got some pension scheme."

"Honestly, I try to do anything, but if I give this month some, little bit, but my 2 sisters all the time, send them about £20 each..."

Photo courtesy of Jeremy Abrahams: Outside the social café

Sal's GP referred him to the A Better Life project. He now attends the group every fortnight and has received support to manage his water bills and other aspects of his finances. As well as an opportunity to get out the house and a chance to socialise the social café is important to Sal because he knows there is somewhere that he can take the any letters and bills that arrive.

"Bring it, yeah, like water rates before, he says he want me £150 and so-and-so, so this month they sent me another water bill, £47.17, so I bring that with me, so I want to show that to make sure with them."

Sal has multiple chronic health concerns, but the group is easy for him to get to, he enjoys the exercise class, and doing some drawing whilst he's there. There is also a social element, that is important to Sal, and he has made some friends at the group:

"Because when you meet different people, you know, laughing, talking, you pass the time…"

Talking about his friends:

"Yeah, I got one, American lady didn't come, one Pakistani, she come today, come and sit down with me, draw and talk, drink tea, but today she don't come."

For Sal, the social café is an important space to confide in workers about his financial concerns, and also to be part of something that is not available to him otherwise.

"I like to do something different…I like to [keep] busy."

1:1 Financial advice: a case study

The A Better Life project also includes a 1:1 financial advice stream. This study only spoke to one person about the impact the 1:1 financial advice had on their lives. It is therefore hard to draw wide conclusions about overall impact of this arm of the project. From speaking to one interviewee it is clear that the 1:1 financial advice was highly valued and had reached a family in a very desperate situation who had struggled to engage with other financial services. As with the social café building a trusting consistent relationship with the 1:1 worker was crucial to the perceived impact of the project, as was being heard and feeling cared for.

Kawa first met the 1:1 worker through shared language, and the importance of face to face communication:

"Yeah, because when we went there they couldn't understand what we're talking about and then we were short of money we couldn't go back because they said come back on this day. We'll give you another appointment. But then we said no, we can't leave. Then they said there's a person here that speaks Kurdish and then so..."

"I think it was something from God that happened that day and our problems were a lot and there was a lot to discuss. That telephone interpreting wasn't something that could provide and could sort that situation but when you get to talk to that person in face-to-face it's so different."

Kawa 22nd August 2019

Building a trusting relationship with the 1:1 worker was highly valued by Kawa and his wife:

"He [the 1:1 worker] will explain and clarify what he's doing, step-by-step, and he will do whatever he told us formally as well, so he will send us the paperwork in English... Emotionally helping us a lot and the feedback he's given is very helpful."

"When [the 1:1 worker] asks them for anything, he will say, "I have to send to that organisation or that office, I don't know the outcome, we just have to wait for the reply." So, he wouldn't say, "100%, you will get this," so he says, "I don't know, all we can do is apply and wait for the outcome and then I can give you the feedback." For example, because some of the months is missing, the payment for the children's benefit is missing, so he said, "I will try to backdate it, but I can't guarantee they will accept the backdate because I am doing everything legally, so we have to do it formally."

Kawa 26th July 2019

In this case study, the 1:1 support the participant received helped him to become more financially secure at a time when he and his family were struggling immensely. With multiple difficulties accessing more usual Citizens Advice Bureau services, including poor health and difficulties with language, the 1:1 service was able to provide a more flexible and responsive route to financial advice. We cannot be certain of the extent to which improved financial security allowed a better quality of life over a prolonged period, and what happened after the 1:1 service ceased, particularly in the context of ongoing climate of insecurity for the most vulnerable. It is however clear that for Kawa the input of the 1:1 service was crucial for him, without it he explained:

"I would have said at least beg for money of other people so my children can eat that day."

Kawa 26th August 2019

Maximising the impact of A Better Life: growing its role

The A Better Life project is clearly valued by the participants involved in it. The key question for the A Better Life social café is how to build this group and embed it into the community. The relationships forged at the group are meaningful to the participants and some extend beyond its boundaries, an important consideration for the sustainability of these relationships. The social café is a highly appreciated resource for those who access it and it is important to consider whether there is value in attempting to expand the group's numbers. Numbers are not always critical. Being able to provide a high quality service to a few people who can rely on it and having the time and space to develop close and trusting relationships between participants and project workers is probably more effective than having a large group where not all needs can be met.

However, there may be still room to build the capacity of the group and bring more people into what seems to be a beneficial environment. In discussion with SOAR it is hoped that running a 'cooking on a budget' class may bring some newcomers into the group. It may be worth thinking about the pathways into the group, and whether these can be facilitated or enhanced by working with other key people in the community where possible. Reflecting on the support people need before attending the group is also crucial, for example befriending opportunities. It is worth considering how the group may develop and change over time, for example are there particular roles that longstanding members of the group can take on to facilitate its running?

For participants in the 1:1 stream it may be important to think about what happens after the 1:1 work has ended, particularly when people may have multiple vulnerabilities, including financial concerns, family dependency and health problems. This may be in the form of gradually reducing contacts, review periods or opportunities to re-access the service within a specified time period. Building links between SOAR and the CAB will be important to facilitate appropriate transitions in and out of CAB services, to understand more about the impact of having a dedicated CAB worker for over 50s and how this can be continued in the future.

10. Conclusion

From the study we have seen the importance of social networks and connections to older people, for both friendship and support and reassurance. These networks may be harder to develop and sustain in older age and a sense of isolation and loneliness may be particularly acute in communities more deeply affected by marginalisation and deprivation. The study has also considered the ongoing responsibilities, financial, emotional and practical that are part of older peoples' lives, contrasting with dominant ideas of older people as 'a burden'. We have also seen older age as a time of changing roles and an opportunity to find a (new) place in the community.

The participants' experiences of Start Up and A Better Life were overwhelmingly positive. Both the projects are environments in which friendships can be built and sustained, with interviewees from both projects giving examples of where friendships started through the project have continued beyond the project. These relationships are highly valued by our interviewees. Our study demonstrates that both projects have the potential to build social capital and social resources. This is often reliant on having key individuals who work to develop and sustain environments in which this can happen, for example community workers at A Better Life and through the hubs in the Start Up project.

The participants in our study highlighted the importance of developing a trusting relationship with the project worker as key to the success of the project. This includes everyday minutiae such as phone calls to remind participants about the social cafe and being offered a cup of tea. For Start Up beneficiaries being able to develop an informal relationship where Kate attends Start Up groups and has a coffee with beneficiaries was very much valued. This reiterates the importance of developing project models that allow time to be spent on building meaningful relationships with individuals and being able to respond flexibly to their needs.

Both projects also offer valued experiences to participants, for example Start Up provides opportunities for developing knowledge and skills and building a new role and place in the community. The A Better Life social café provides a social opportunity in the Burngreave area, which participants reported does not have many similar ventures. It is an important event in

the lives of the participants we spoke to, who value the continuity and regularity of the group. They also value the relationship they have been able to build with Sofeena, who they are able to trust with financial concerns, letters and bills. The social café provides an environment in which people feel cared for, the importance of which cannot be underestimated.

Suggestions have been made about how each project could potentially be maximised. At the heart of many of these recommendations is the working relationship between Age Better and project delivery partners. Greater collaboration between Age Better and delivery partners may help to create projects that work at a local scale and also fully maximise Age Better values to achieve the aims of Age Better. This would bring together expertise from working with local communities and a deeper understanding of Age Better and may aid the visibility of Age Better. This could include, for example, developing and refining projects collaboratively and working closely on how projects are continuously reviewed, modified and evaluated. Few of our interviewees knew of Age Better, and delivery partners also commented on the limited contact between different Age Better projects. Working more collaboratively may also help build a more cohesive, visible and overarching Age Better in Sheffield narrative, which may in turn enhance the legacy of Age Better.

11. Thanks

Our thanks go to everyone who gave up their time to speak to us. We very much appreciate it, and know it is not always easy. Thanks also go to the Start Up and A Better Life for supporting the study.

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Thanks

Our thanks go to everyone who gave up their time to speak to us. We very much appreciate it, and know it is not always easy. Thanks also go to the Start Up and A Better Life for supporting the study.

For more details of the study please visit:
www.agebettersheff.co.uk/what-were-learning