

AGE BETTER
IN SHEFFIELD

We Are Makers

2018–2019



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 We Are Makers project which was delivered by Ignite Imaginations, including the outcomes achieved and the lessons learned.

This report has been compiled following interviews with the director and an employee of Ignite Imaginations. It also draws on case studies from participants and employees.



The proposal

Sheffield has a culture of making, and the initial proposal for We Are Makers was to find and celebrate (through photography exhibitions) the people who make up a community and the local assets that they create (such as community groups) with a view to strengthening connections and increasing confidence through use of the arts and to take an asset based approach to improving communities.

The localities

Burngreave

Burngreave is a hyper diverse ward, much of which experiences high levels of multiple disadvantage. Whilst the area has many assets, and there are strong and supportive communities with a great deal of social capital, there are high levels of crime, much of the public space is poorly maintained, and there are high levels of poverty. The coproduction sessions demonstrated that, for many residents, it is these characteristics that dominate.

Firth Park

Neighbouring Burngreave, Firth Park is a ward which is comprised of a number of very different neighbourhoods. Projects were carried out in the Firth Park neighbourhood of Longley which is predominantly White British with high levels of multiple deprivation. The project worked with two neighbouring Tenants and Residents Associations (TARAs) which did not have a positive working relationship at the start of the project, as well as in Page Hall with men of Pakistani heritage.

The seed funding stage

The seed funding stage took place in Burngreave ward and involved the project manager reaching out to the community through a wide range of existing community organisations, having a presence at local events, speaking to people in the streets and their homes and running group sessions. Much of the coproduction was carried out with Somali women from a local community group, with the most rewarding coproduction carried out on a one to one basis, often in people's homes. Ignite Imaginations found group sessions tended to be much more challenging with participants either turning up late, only staying for sections of a session and sometimes being antagonistic. One group session in particular was very challenging as the mapping activity (creating a treasure map of the ward) was perceived by some participants as 'childish', and the facilitators found it difficult to encourage positivity about the community or about the funding.

During the seed funding stage it became clear that the original idea of celebrating the 'makers and stars' wasn't going to work as while residents were able to identify people who were central to making community activity happen, the people approached were reluctant to be put 'in the limelight.' People often expressed that they didn't want to do activities, they just wanted an opportunity to meet others and chat, but being aware of the robust evidence base for improving wellbeing through trying new activities and creativity, Ignite Imaginations persevered and identified interests with a view to setting up groups and trips aligned to these interests.

Four projects were carried out as part of We Are Makers. This report introduces each project briefly and considers successes, challenges and learning together.

The projects

Burngreave community

A number of different projects were trialled including weekly art and craft sessions, gardening sessions and day trips to tourist destinations requested by the participants or suggested to them.

Regular groups were mainly attended by Pakistani women recruited through a local coffee morning who, whilst already attending the coffee morning, were generally very isolated due to language barriers, with a broader mix of participants attending the day trips (including some families). Participants were recruited separately for each group or event depending on interest.

This project demonstrated the challenges that can be experienced in delivering projects with grass roots community groups, and great tenacity was shown by the project manager in seeking to overcome a range of challenges.

The seed funding phase was carried out in partnership with an organisation in Burngreave with a view to the year long funded project also being carried out with the same organisation and participants, but when funding was received, the partnership fell apart.



Firth Park community

In Firth Park ward, Ignite Imaginations worked with two Tenants and Residents Associations (TARAs) which had a history of conflict and division, as well as a local community organisation in Page Hall. Trips were organised in line with the interests of participants

A trip to the seaside was organised by Ignite Imaginations after identifying the interests of the participants, with people from the TARA reaching participants through knocking on the doors of people who they had identified as not having much contact with others.

Later in the year there were also weekly groups organised in different communities around the interests of residents: ceramics classes, photography and a social group for women, with local people being supported to run the classes as far as possible where the project manager was able to find someone in the local community with the relevant skills. The TARA (the TARA had a suit of computers which weren't being used so they proposed lessons – this required a facilitator to be brought in).



Artists in residence in care homes

Ignite Imaginations funded five artists, for 16 hours each to act as artists in residence at five different care homes for people living with dementia. The aim of the project was to give the residents an experience of art and creativity.

These projects were well received and care homes were welcoming.

Artists ran sessions approximately six times at each home during the course of the project and this regular presence was important in building trust and familiarity, with people gradually becoming more involved over time, with men particularly taking longer to engage with the project but benefiting and enjoying it given time. One man's journey was described, with him initially being in the room for the first few sessions, paying more attention in subsequent sessions and coming to look at what was going on, and by the final session he worked with the artist to create a piece of art.

The artists observed that even participants experiencing severe dementia were able to connect with the artist and other participants through the activity, touching each other's hands and sharing equipment.

Other participants were able to verbally express the benefits that they found from taking part in the activities.

'The men, they were very slow [at the weaving activity], but actually they could do it and one of the men, at the end of the activity, said "I don't believe it, I've gone a whole hour and not had a cigarette.'

Helen Artist in Residence

Community Chest

Ignite Imaginations created a micro-grant fund which could be applied for by anyone in Burngreave ward to deliver a small project that would reach people over 50 who were likely to experience loneliness and isolation.

A group of women over fifty were involved in developing the grant fund, producing the posters and information and choosing the successful applicants.

Ten grants were made with the potential to reach approximately 170 people in local community groups and care homes. Local people and organisations were invited to apply for the grants with successful applications including activities such as yoga, day trips to sessions to learn about crafts and animal therapy.

At the date of writing, grants had been awarded but not spent.



Successes

Although it is difficult to reliably evidence impact on loneliness and isolation, all the activities were enjoyed by participants and participants were observed connecting with each other, with many reporting increased confidence after experiencing new activities.

Three participants who delivered activities through the project progressed onto receive support from the Start Up project to deliver their activities for a longer period.

The group created at Firvale Community Centre have continued to meet and went on a self-organised trip to the Peak District recently, with future trips and activities planned.

The two TARAs have continued to work together with residents going on further trips not funded by Age Better in Sheffield.

Following the change of approach after the seed funding stage, this project ended up with a much stronger focus on community development than Ignite Imagination's usual work which involves delivering art projects within existing groups with coproduction limited to the participants contribution to art projects planned by the artists themselves. This was a challenge for the team but has given them the confidence to do more broadly coproduced work since.

Ignite Imaginations have increased the amount of coproduction that they use within their projects and in funding bids.

Challenges

Gaining trust in a local area is challenging for an outside organisation.

Despite the availability of funding to deliver the groups and Ignite Imaginations having previously worked in the area, the project manager found it very difficult to engage with grass roots community groups which seemed suspicious of an outside organisation. This is particularly challenging where previous community development and regeneration initiatives which consulted with local people but did not deliver have led to distrust and frustration.

Small, community level organisations lack capacity to try new things: resourcing is key.

The organisations being volunteer led on very small budgets, often lacked the capacity to manage the increased demand of being involved with new projects. Ignite Imaginations felt that the suspicion may have been due to the amount of funding that was channelled through the ward without ever really changing anything; it is also likely that without additional funding for the group, there was no capacity to support new activity.

Community organisations were often run by willing and committed volunteers but faced a high level of day to day challenge. This made it difficult to embrace new activities or the increased demands of evaluation. Volatile relationships, language barriers and financial struggles (one group was served with an eviction notice during the project) all contributed to the challenges faced by community groups in delivering services.

Impacts of school holidays and family and community life can make it difficult to build up momentum. Many organisations in the area close over school holiday periods and religious celebrations. Attendees and volunteers often have childcare responsibilities for children or grandchildren, and school holidays often see people traveling for long periods to visit relatives in other countries. One lunch group sourced food from a local school so closed during the holidays as they no longer had access to food. A trend seemed to be that an initiative might happen for a while but then restarting after a break often meant starting again almost from scratch and enthusiasm and energy would have waned.

Coproduced services are not necessarily transferrable beyond the immediate context. Initially the project manager tried a range of groups including craft and gardening groups, all of which responded to interests and ideas which had been identified through earlier coproduction. An attempted gardening project demonstrated the extent to which even coproduced services may not be transferable even across seemingly similar groups within a local area. A gardening group was established after coproduction during the seed funding stage, but the local organisation commissioned only had availability on a Friday. The group of Somali women who had been involved in the coproduction had agreed a time based around prayer times at the local mosque, but when a new partner community group was engaged with from a community which prayed at a different mosque, they realised that the prayer times were not the same for the different mosques, and the new group felt that Friday wouldn't work at all due to family demands, and the group didn't establish.

Low confidence and risk aversion made it difficult to encourage people to share new found skills.

An art and craft group was very much enjoyed by the women during the time that it ran. Conscious that the project was reaching women who were already engaging with groups at some level, even if only for an hour or two a week, they made up kits that would allow attendees to practice making cards at the group and then take away a kit which they could share with a more isolated neighbour, friend or relative and help them to make a card which could then be sent or given to someone else. They found that attendees were very reluctant to take the kits and said that they didn't have the confidence to help other people. There was also a reluctance to approach other people in their homes.

Realising that food was a powerful way to bring people together, another idea to encourage people to cook food and share meals with more isolated neighbours initially had some traction but concerns around health and safety risks and difficulties in obtaining training in food hygiene that could be delivered in Urdu meant that this element of the project was also unsuccessful.

As participants often had dementia and lacked capacity to consent to evaluation, and were often engaged on an ad hoc basis rather than taking part in regular activity, there was little data gathered about the lasting impact of the project on loneliness and isolation.

Key learning

Communal projects and meals brought people together effectively.

Working on shared art works enabled women with no common language to work together on projects and build connections as it was possible for participants to have a physical connection (as pictured) and to feel pride. Meals gave people the opportunity to experience and share the food of different cultures, even when meals were not officially shared.

Shared goals such as day trips can inspire people to engage and spark future activity. After exploring the options of groups, the project manager worked with the women at the coffee morning to identify day trips. These were well-received, with trips that allowed people to get out of Sheffield being particularly popular.

Throughout the project, involving participants in joint projects where they worked together to create shared pieces of work rather than working on individual pieces increased the potential for connection.

Building trust and familiarity is vital for people to engage in projects, particularly men. This takes time and so one-off or very short interventions in particular are unlikely to reach men.

Subsidised but not free trips worked well for participants as well as Ignite Imaginations. Despite high levels of deprivation, £5 for a ticket including travel and food allowed participants to feel that they were contributing rather than receiving charity, while accessing activities that would normally be beyond their means. The amount was also enough that once a place was paid for the participants felt committed and seats were not left unused.

In care homes, carers are key to enabling people to engage in activities and would benefit from training in how to involve residents with the activities. Carers often had limited time or interest in the creative activities, and would take people straight past the activity without comment, or in other cases might engage with activity because they were interested themselves but provide little support to the person they were caring for to become involved, or would do the activity for the person rather than encouraging them to become involved.

Ward boundaries are not ideal geographies to work across, particularly in areas of hyperdiversity and deprivations. The natural communities that people live their lives within are often very small, and people from one part of a ward were often unwilling or unable to travel to other parts of a ward to attend activities, and for a single project worker working part time to build relationships and networks across a whole ward and try to recruit participants was very challenging.

Small community groups provide valuable opportunities for people to meet and socialise but may struggle with the increased administration of a project such as Ageing Better without additional resources.

Rigid and administration-heavy projects don't sit comfortably with the informal culture of small community groups.

Recommendations for future projects

- The wide range of very brief interventions, particularly those working in care homes with people with dementia and with people who are not literate in English, made it very difficult to evidence impact on loneliness and isolation, especially combined with a purely quantitative evaluation methodology. Future models which are seeking to evidence impact on loneliness and isolation should work more consistently with a group of participants and include qualitative evaluation.
- Future projects may be better delivered at a neighbourhood level rather than ward level, with a team rather than lone workers.
- Future projects in carer homes might benefit from working first with carers and other front line staff to increase their interest and skills in supporting people to engage in activities.
- Partnerships with other community organisations should be properly resourced to enable the full engagement of the groups.

Age Better in Sheffield

43-47 Wellington Street

Sheffield

S1 4HF

www.agebettersheff.co.uk