



PEOPLE'S HEALTH TRUST - ACTIVE COMMUNITIES CASE STUDY

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THIRD
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PROJECT

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Third Age Project

Introduction

This case study explores how the Third Age Project was developed, its approach, what it delivered and what was achieved, and forms part of the evaluation of the Active Communities Programme managed by People's Health Trust. The report draws on interviews with the project team and participants, observation of the group in session and the monitoring information submitted as part of the programme's six monthly review cycle.

About the project

Third Age was established as a membership organisation 12 years ago, aiming to serve the needs of those aged 60 years or older. It was first set up to serve the immediate neighbourhood of West Euston but

now attracts people from all over the London Borough of Camden.

Third Age first received funding from the Trust in September 2013; totalling £30,536 over two years in order to support their peer befriending work, build partnerships and sustainability, extend their existing work by introducing new activities or expand where necessary.

"It helped give us a focus and develop an action plan that was realistic so we abandoned some things and started some new things based on what our members were doing." (Project lead)

The project's 400 'active' members take part in a variety of activities. Volunteers from within the membership are also recruited, trained and supported to act as 'peer

befrienders'. Beneficiaries take part in a mixture of group and one-to-one sessions which include exercise, arts and crafts, singing, yoga, English lessons and days out.

Main findings

- With many of Third Age's members facing social or emotional isolation at home, the project has served as a valuable means for them to create social links and ties with a diverse community, bringing people from different ethnic groups and religious backgrounds together.
- Third Age has helped participants exercise collective control at all levels. There is evidence of collective control through conversations and suggestions made by beneficiaries to members of staff. There is also a more structured process for beneficiaries to engage and make their views heard in the form of an elected older people's forum. Furthermore, beneficiaries have exercised

focused control by campaigning to prevent a large number of homes in their area from being demolished due to the planned HS2 railway line.

- ➔ The wide range of activities on offer has helped beneficiaries to learn new skills as well as improve their physical and mental health.
- ➔ The number of members and activities has been steadily rising reflecting the project's success. However, this has created challenges in terms of the project's capacity to accommodate this demand and resulted in a waiting list for potential members from outside the borough being closed.



Who is involved?

The project aims to engage people who are affected by issues related to ageing as well as those over 60 who have a physical or mental health condition. The beneficiaries come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds; the largest ethnic group is those of Bangladeshi origin, who make up roughly 15% of the project's membership. Other ethnic groups include Chinese, Filipino, Latin American, Caribbean, Pakistani and White British. Most beneficiaries live alone, are on means tested benefits, have a long-term health condition and speak English as a second language. According to the Project Lead, a large number are

living with anxiety or depression, and are experiencing social isolation, with 79% stating their reason for joining was to 'make new friends'.

Third Age has a full-time Project Manager, who has overall responsibility for the running and organisation of the project's activities, as well as another paid member of staff, who provides support to the Project Manager.

In recent times, the volunteer base has taken a more prominent role, particularly in helping fellow beneficiaries to develop their English language skills. These volunteers typically come from within Third Age's membership, creating additional opportunities for collective control for more engaged beneficiaries who take up volunteering. Volunteers commented that the additional engagement provides them with more of a say in how the project is run particularly in the form of informal or ad-hoc conversations.

The project has a number of partners including British Land, West Euston Time Bank, the Local GP practice and Mental Health Trust. British Land is a corporate partner which has put capital funding into the organisation to help improve the community facilities that it offers. They also have a 'Community Volunteering Day' where their staff volunteer to organise and run various activities for Third Age's members. West Euston Time Bank is a local organisation with beneficiaries of all ages and has conducted a number of joint activities with Third Age, as well as providing volunteer staff to help run some activities, such as table tennis coaching.

These partnerships have helped the project increase its capacity to

provide a greater variety and frequency of activities. Making links with local partners has also helped the beneficiaries to engage with a wider variety of people, creating new social links and ties and ensuring that decisions are well informed.



What opportunities does the project offer?

The project includes a variety of activities designed to improve physical and mental wellbeing, including chair-based exercise, dancing, singing, table tennis, crafts, a lunch club, English language lessons and days out.

One of the first things Third Age did following the funding award was to form an older people's forum, elected from the membership. Its role has been to work with a local outreach worker to organise open day events and provide an opportunity for older people and others to meet. This forum has acted as a recruitment tool to attract new members and to generate ideas for activities. It continued to meet every month throughout the duration of the funding and still exists to this day, representing a formal structured process for the community to exercise collective control.

"We discuss what is good, what needs to be changed and we organise outings like trips to the coast. We talk and there is always a member of staff there to take down our ideas and the following month we can see how that idea worked." (Volunteer)

As well as the forum, the project's members have a suggestion box and hold an AGM (annual general meeting) where the general direction of the project and its activities is discussed by members. However, the most common means of having a say are informal, with members approaching staff with suggestions and criticism. Beneficiaries also spoke of the open nature of the project staff and feeling 'free' to make any suggestion at any time. Third Age therefore uses collective control on multiple levels; at a more formal level through elected representatives and volunteers and through more ad-hoc or informal processes within the membership and community as a whole.

"They sometimes tell me what to do and sometimes I do what I want but I always get a say. I am very happy." (Volunteer)

Although the prevailing view among project staff and members was that the project has positively engaged with the local community, there were still some problems. It was felt there could have been more 'door knocking' at the start to ensure everyone in the local community was aware of the project's presence. As part of the funding application, the project was required to focus on those aged over the age of 60. The project lead and staff believed that lowering this threshold to the age of 50 would have enabled a larger number of people to get involved.

What has the project achieved?

Third Age now has 534 members, of whom approximately 400 attend activities regularly. This number tends to fluctuate over the year, with the number of active members rising during the summer and falling to

about 250 during the winter. Members are, however, required to renew their membership each year and overall numbers have been rising by between 10 and 20% every year.



The prevailing view was that the project has successfully reached the individuals and groups it sought to engage. Although there is a little disappointment at the low numbers of men who have engaged, this group had not been specifically identified as a separate target group.

Third Age beneficiaries spoke of a variety of motivations for getting involved in the project. These included meeting new people and making new friends, being able to sit down and talk, wanting to get physically and mentally active and wanting to go to a safe place where they were not alone. This fits into the core aim of helping communities to build greater social links and ties.

Its own monitoring and evaluation process involves recording numbers with regards to its membership and their attendance at activities. Members are asked to complete a form on joining the project. The form asks for demographic information as well as their reasons for joining. This exercise has enabled Third Age to identify 'making new friends' as one of the key motivations for joining the project. Third Age also conducts annual surveys with their membership; these results are analysed and written up into a report

and used to ensure the project reflects the needs and wishes of its membership.

Following an activity, such as a chair-based exercise session, members are also asked to complete an evaluation form which asks them about improvements in their personal independence, their general sense of wellbeing and their confidence.

"Half our members have joined since the start of this project. We ask them if they belong to any other club and the vast majority of them don't. These are the people we want to engage with." (Project staff)

The project's monitoring process includes keeping a record of volunteers. The latest numbers show that, out of 400 active members, 64 consider themselves to be a volunteer. These volunteers engage in a variety of activities:

"If you look at the 64 you can see things like...we have two bingo callers, two other people who do the teas and washing up at the bingo sessions...we've got different roles related to delivering different activities." (Project staff)

Some unacknowledged volunteering may also take place as there is a fairly 'informal' culture at most of Third Age's activities. This may mean that beneficiaries are helping set up an activity or clear up following an activity but may not be officially recognised as a volunteer. If the staff feel that a particular beneficiary shows potential to take on a role of more responsibility, they are encouraged to do so. An example of this can be seen in the volunteer interpreters:

"There's a point where we sit down and ask them but that is difficult...thinking about our volunteer interpreters, we can fully understand

they don't want to make unspecified commitments at their age but that's not what we're doing. We're asking them to take on a role while they are here and to feedback to us." (Project staff)



Volunteering, more so than simply participating, requires a further time commitment. The project lead commented that members were initially reluctant to take on greater responsibility:

"You're talking about people who have never volunteered before and their experience might be that volunteering is about nosing into other people's business and interfering in other people's lives or do-gooders." (Project staff)

However, once they did volunteer, they have found it to be beneficial. This is reflected in the project's design where volunteers receive direct and indirect benefits through training, additional support and acknowledgement, as well as getting more of the activities that they want as they are able to have more of a say in the project's direction, supporting the development of an ad-hoc process of collective control. Eventually it took off fairly rapidly:

"I had free time and wanted to keep busy. I came here and really enjoyed it so I volunteered." (Volunteer)

Volunteers also spoke of wanting to 'give something back' to the local community and, in particular, the centre where the Third Age project is based:

"My kids used to come here and it really helped them having a facility

like this. They are grown up now but I wanted to give something back to the area." (Volunteer)

The project lead and staff hoped that the volunteers feel they are getting a 'reward' out of the experience. It was felt that volunteers feel 'more of a part' of events and activities and get a sense of 'ownership' of the activity. This engagement, according to the project lead, is vital for its success:

"Without our volunteers we would simply shut down tomorrow. We couldn't operate without them." (Project staff)

The project staff felt that, essentially, the project objective is to make people happier and that to be happier meant to have more friends and to be better connected. Anecdotally, it was felt that the project has made people happier. The project's beneficiaries spoke very positively about the impact that Third Age has had on their lives. The following themes repeatedly emerged:

- Beneficiaries felt that the project has enabled them to do something different and, as a result, learn new skills (this ranged from learning English to learning a specific skill, such as pottery) and increase their confidence.
- Beneficiaries felt that the project has helped them to keep their mind active, and improved their mental health.
- Beneficiaries felt that the project has helped them to improve their physical health and to stay physically active. This included maintaining a healthy diet (as a result of information provided by the project as well as attending the lunch club).

The project lead and staff felt that the community has seen a clear benefit from the presence of the Third Age project and that this benefit has extended beyond the members or participants in the project's activities:

"I think we've put older people on the map...if you go to local schools, the kids talk about going to our Christmas pantomime. We've made connections in a way that they never existed before." (Project staff)

The project staff spoke of previous inter-generational tensions, with older members of the community apprehensive about young people and their behaviour. Third Age's partnership with West Euston Time Bank has helped to reduce these tensions and reinforce mixing of older people with other age groups.

Similarly, project staff felt that the project has helped bring people from different communities together and enabled mixing between people who would not have otherwise met with each other.



"When we first started we had Somali only classes, Bengali only activities because that was the only way to engage with them. Now, that has been abandoned...there is no need for it and English is the shared language." (Project staff)

This view was reinforced by the beneficiaries themselves. Improved social links and ties repeatedly emerged as a theme in discussions with beneficiaries. Beneficiaries spoke about having better

connections with neighbours and making new friends:

"I've lived on this estate all my life and I never knew any of these people until I came here." (Beneficiary)

These improved social links and ties have led to increased camaraderie and helped members to build a support network. Many beneficiaries repeatedly described this as 'like a family':

"It is like a family. I didn't know anyone before but now when I'm out and about, everyone says hello." (Beneficiary)

Project staff felt that the beneficiaries have ultimate control.

"We have to be very accountable because we need people to be involved in constructive, positive ways. I would say that the programme we have...we have an elected committee which pours over the programme every month." (Project staff)

Although it is not always possible to meet their demands (the project lead commented, for example, that a Zumba activity would not be safe for older people), members are asked if there is any additional activity they would like to see at Third Age. Where possible, and with sufficient demand, this is implemented. Similarly, popular activities such as the coach/day trips are decided in a democratic way, through a ballot.

The project lead and staff agreed that the volume of work undertaken by the organisation has increased significantly.

"We're doing probably three times as much as we did before...so we have to start thinking about whether we're doing too much." (Project staff)



What has worked well?

➔ The health club: The project staff mentioned the health club was a particularly successful activity. Although male and female sessions are separate, the club is particularly sociable with different ethnicities and groups mixing together. The club has hundreds of attendees and is particularly popular. Similarly, chair-based exercise is a popular activity which attracts a broad mix of members.

➔ Offering different ways for beneficiaries to engage with collective control: Although the term 'collective control' was not always understood by project staff or beneficiaries, beneficiaries spoke of feeling more like they are part of a community, with the project helping them to have ownership of this community. The greater social links and ties have created a situation where they are able to collectively make a stand. This can be seen as an example of the project encouraging focused collective control, taking action together with the ultimate goal of protecting their community. An example of this can be seen in the HS2 project, as current plans would involve knocking down a large number of flats on the estate. Although the beneficiaries were not confident that they would be able to stop the demolition of their homes, they felt they were in a better

position to collectively take action and make their voices heard.

What are the challenges and how have these been overcome?

The main challenges the project has faced have been as follows:

➔ Building capacity: The project lead commented that one of the challenges for the organisation is to ensure that all volunteers and participants are looked after and have their needs met. This is difficult given the increasing number of members and volunteers. While project staff and volunteers spoke positively about reaching more members of the community and running more activities, this has also posed some challenges for Third Age. As a result, Third Age has had to close a waiting list of potential members from outside the London Borough of Camden.

"We are doing a lot of work, to the point where we are oversubscribed. The issue may be that we are doing too much." (Project staff)

➔ Location: The biggest difficulty for the project, however, has been that the high rise nature of the estate in which the project is based made it difficult to engage with the whole community:

"How do you engage with people living 23 stories in the sky." (Project staff)

➔ Engaging some ethnic groups: As mentioned earlier, some Bengali men are also reluctant to engage with the project. The project has evolved a range of venues in order to deal with this.

"The Bengali men said they wanted free gym classes so we provide that...but there's physical challenges as well with main roads and people living up in the air." (Project staff)

➤ The project has, occasionally, experienced some tension between different ethnic groups. Furthermore, some of the men involved have complained about feeling harassed by the women, some of whom preferred activities to remain as 'female only'. Such issues have always been immediately dealt with by the project staff.

➤ Engaging male participants: In hindsight, it was felt that there needed to be more men engaging with the project. The membership has always been predominantly female with the project lead commenting that men, particularly those of Bangladeshi origin, have been difficult to engage. There is currently only one man on the project's committee. Project staff felt that one way to do this would be through having more 'male focused' activities but it was felt that this would have prevented a wider engagement with the community and so was not pursued extensively.

➤ Local context: For those within Camden, there are also contextual factors that have proved challenging for the project. Camden contains high levels of income inequality; the borough contains some of the most expensive properties in the country but also experiences high levels of disadvantage. Project staff have had requests from people from the more affluent areas wishing to engage with the project, either as participants or as volunteers. As one of the explicit aims of Third Age is to improve social links and ties for those facing issues related to ageing, with isolation being disproportionately apparent in the less affluent areas the project lead felt it was important to focus on these communities.

➤ Demonstrating impact: The project lead and staff felt that it is not currently possible for them to quantitatively attribute any increase or decrease in wellbeing entirely down to the project itself. Third Age is currently in the process of developing a 'wellbeing form' which would enable them to look at change over time by comparing results using the newly devised

measures on an ongoing basis. However, their current evaluation procedures do not tell the full story:

"At the moment we've been doing something for over a year and its problematic asking about how they felt and then six months later for them to complete the same questionnaire. There are mixed results...it's as much to do with them understanding the process because in terms of the interviews and in terms of anecdotal information we have captured, people say they are better and engaged but the survey doesn't necessarily tell you that." (Project staff)

➤ It was felt that there is a 'mismatch' between the qualitative data and anecdotal evidence that they generate through their regular interviews and informal conversations with the membership and the data from their annual membership survey. The project lead felt it would therefore require a significant investment to generate a questionnaire that could accurately ascertain whether any improvements in wellbeing are due to the project.

The future

With the funding from the Trust now at an end, Third Age is continuing to engage with the local community and conduct its activities. The project is continuously looking for further sources of funding to ensure that it has the capacity to withstand the demand that has grown over the last couple of years. The project lead commented that volunteers will play a more prominent role in the running of Third Age.

