Leicester Ageing Together (LAT)

LAT Learning:

Community Connectors – Close Encounters

December 2018

About Leicester Ageing Together (LAT)

Part of the national Ageing Better Programme, Leicester Ageing Together (LAT) partnership is in its final year of a four year, £5 million programme to reduce social isolation amongst people over 50 living in Leicester. Working in conjunction with older people, the City Council and Health partners, our local programme consists of 23 projects delivered in five wards of the city that involved 17 voluntary sector delivery partners.

LAT has successfully reached over 5500 older people so far, nearly half of whom are aged 80+. The programme has recruited over 1,300 volunteers, as well as funding over £1.5 million of local jobs. We are working with people with higher levels of loneliness and poor wellbeing compared to local and national norms. We know that people's wellbeing has improved and loneliness has reduced following engagement with Leicester Ageing Together.

We have ambitions that Leicester Ageing Together will be locally relevant and nationally significant.

Ageing Better is a Big Lottery Fund programme that aims to develop creative ways for people aged 50 and over to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat loneliness and social isolation.

A Connected Society, the government's strategy for tackling loneliness published in October 2018 signals an increasing role for community connectors and social prescribing. An independent evaluation of social prescribing through LAT has recently been produced by the Institute of Mental Health, University of Nottingham. This report finds that social prescribing in Leicester has reached and engaged a group of older, frail vulnerable people and a greater proportion of individuals of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background.

About this report

This report highlights early learning from a key strand of the Leicester Ageing Together Community Connectors initiative ***Close Encounters***. The simple aim of Close Encounters was to help create a shared space to encourage neighbours to look out for one another. The results are powerful stories of trust-building and community empowerment.

LAT approach

According to Deborah 'Debs' Harris, Community Connector, "Tragically, the idea for ***Close Encounters*** came from local news about people on the estate who had died alone in their bungalows, and whose bodies hadn't been found until a few days after. People expressed sadness about living, and dying, alone. We wanted to create a relaxed outdoor Pop-Up café space where neighbours could get to know each other, and hopefully look out for each other."

'We have heard that people really care about the place where they live. Young and old have a passion for their neighbourhood, town, city. And they need spaces where they can meet – can be, can celebrate, can mourn.'

[The Story of Our Times: shifting power, bridging divides, transforming society, Civil Society Futures](#)

Asset Based Community Development, (ABCD), is an approach based on the principle of identifying and mobilising individual and community 'assets', rather than focusing on problems and needs (i.e. 'deficits').

What we did

Debs explained "Using an ABCD approach we made contacts through our Pop-Up café in the local community centre, and identified two cul-de-sacs to test our approach. Each of our contacts acted as a 'Close Host' and was involved in the co-production of the Pop-Up cafe events. About a week before the event, we sent out personalised hand-written invitations to all households in the cul-de-sac. On the day, we came with gazebos, deck chairs, cream-teas and sun umbrellas to support the host of the Pop-Up café. We played board games, and shared information on local services around the area. It's important to take services out to people, and not just expect people to come to services. At the end of the session - we left people to it - they'd brought their own chairs, and they carried on playing dominoes."

Who Came?

Attendance at the events was high, and this success is attributed to the trust built up between Community Connectors and the Close Hosts. The personal touch of receiving hand-written invitations helped the neighbours feel valued – that their presence mattered. Information was gathered on the reasons why residents didn't attend.

Cul-de-sac 1	Cul-de-sac 2
• 20 Bungalows received an invitation • 8 Residents (4 male and 4 female) and 1 child attended; 6 residents work full-time so didn't attend, 4 residents were waiting in for deliveries/family members, 3 residents had gone out for the day.	• 26 Bungalows received an invitation. 14 residents attended the Pop-Up Café. • Some knew each other, one did a lot for the communal space (mowed grass) • 1 resident said that they do not socialise so much in groups but has family to go out with.

> *'The most effective answer to the challenge of loneliness is the simple decision of families, friends, faith groups and communities to include each other and to be open to new social connections.'*
> **A connected society: a strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change**
> Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, October 2018

What did people say about Close Encounters?

Community Connectors gathered feedback from participants at the events, which was overwhelmingly positive. The events also gave an opportunity for residents to seek help about local services, for example the resident with damp in their house was supported to report this to the local council.

Measuring Impact

With memories of the long, hot summer fading, the Community Connectors spoke to a 'Close Host' six months on and heard that neighbours are now connecting more with each other. The Host found that hosting the Pop-Up Café was a positive experience and is pleased that they now pull together more as a collective community. "We used to wave at each other, but now there are more connections. We know what to talk about. We've arranged a Christmas meal out together!" explained the Close Host.

Other indicators of positive impact include:

✓ The Community Connectors referred one of the residents to a course, and this positive experience has led to the setting up of a local Family History Group based in a local church

✓ A lively and creative residents' Poetry Group has been featured in the LAT newsletter

✓ Residents are reporting the lessening of tensions and improved relationships between neighbours

✓ A 'top-tips' guide for being a 'Close Host' has been distributed to all residents in the cul-de-sac to encourage someone new to develop the confidence to take on the leadership and coordination role next time.

Next steps for Close Encounters

Debs outlined the next steps for the Community Connectors. "Pop-Up cafés make sense in the summer when the weather's fine, but we need to adapt the idea for the damp, dark winter months. We had the idea of a mobile soup kitchen. We talked to the local church about hosting it, and whether their volunteers would coordinate soup production. They were very supportive of the idea. Then we talked to the RVS about helping out with a small grant towards catering equipment, which could be left at the Church for local community groups to access beyond the life of the LAT Programme. Another local community organisation, the Peace Centre, are really keen to help out with food via their Foodbank. We've involved local residents in all this planning, so it is really well supported. It's a simple model with a big impact!"

Learning from what works

LAT has commissioned *Lotus Management Consultancy* to independently evaluate the work of the LAT Community Connectors and help identify the strengths and areas for further development of this approach. An evaluation report will be available mid-2019.

Community Connector Models

The national **Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better Programme** defines Community Connector projects as *"Any mechanism that works to identify isolated people over 50 and then works with them to help them transition from isolated to less isolated through person-centred structured support. This includes community navigators, social prescribing and approaches that involve people overcoming a specific barrier, for example, mental health."*

Community Connector Models, Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better: Learning Report No.2 – Community Connectors, p.2

LAT Learning: Community Connectors – Close Encounters, Dec 2018

All three Community Connectors (2.5 full time equivalent posts) were seconded from LAT Partner organisations in March 2018, more than half-way through the 4-year funded programme, and came equipped with experience of asset based community development approaches, knowledge of local communities, and an understanding of LAT ethos and values.

Ageing Better Learning Report 2 – Community Connectors is available to download from https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/global-content/programmes/england/fulfilling-lives-ageing-better

Nationally, the **Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better** programme describes Community Connector models based on the level of intensity of support (see Figure 1). LAT Community Connectors follow a low-intensity model shaped by local need through 'test and learn' approaches. The Community Connectors are strengthening local community networks (e.g. linking care home activities coordinators to local community provision), facilitating skills development (helping small groups write funding applications), and brokering relationships with partners to improve efficiency and effectiveness of services (e.g. RVS for

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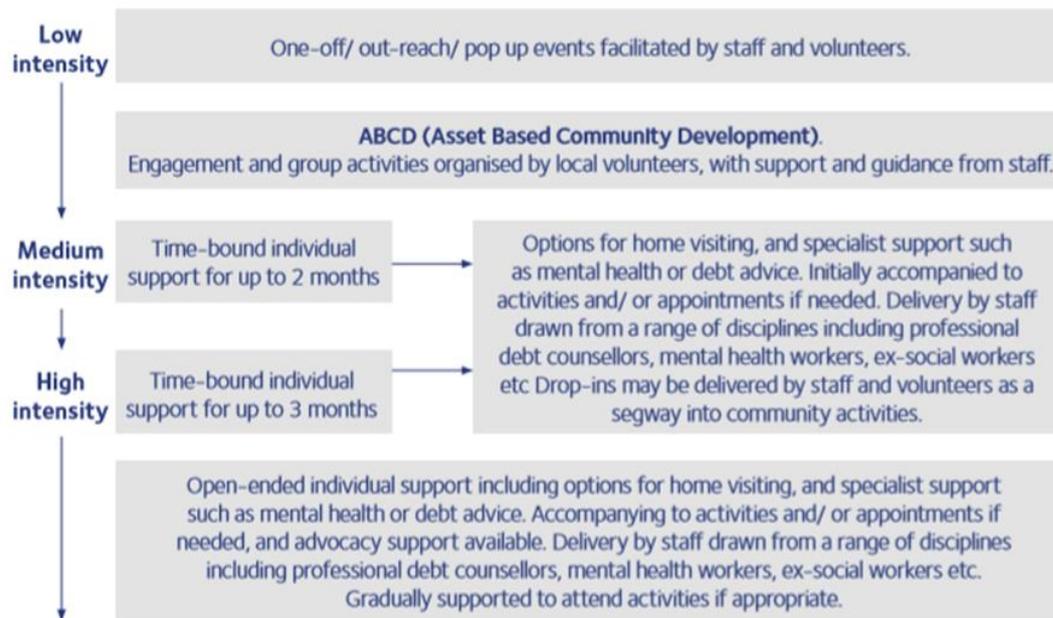microfinance, Age UK for access to minibuses, and the Housing Department for repairs).

Figure 1 Community Connector Models, Fulfilling Lives Ageing Better: Learning Report No.2 – Community Connectors p.16

What now?

To find out more about Leicester Ageing Together (LAT) or to get involved:

1.Visit our website https://www.leicesterageingtogether.org.uk/ where you can find out about other LAT learning and future events

2.Send us your own information and learning from your delivery in this area and we will add it to our learning portal

3. Start a conversation and share your views online

https://twitter.com/LeicesterAT

https://www.facebook.com/LeicesterAgeingTogether/