Thriving Communities Trafford: Executive Summary

Thriving Communities Trafford was a 12-month social prescribing project which ran in north Trafford. The project had three aims:

- To trial the roll-out of the Elemental referral system to community groups, to allow patient referrals & ongoing measurement of health outcome data.

- To develop a series of project activities, designed to engage patients particularly at risk from and impacted by Covid-19.

- To design a training module / toolkit for community groups, to ensure they can provide additional support and signposting to participants referred via social prescribing.

Between July 2021 and March 2022, eight different activities were delivered or developed by project delivery partners. In summary, across the eight projects:

- 159 activity sessions were delivered in total
- 122 project participants engaged with projects
- Over 50% of participants attended sessions regularly
- 7 volunteers were involved, contributing 70 hours volunteer hours
- 3 link workers / social prescribers were engaged with project partners

Project findings & conclusions

The positive impact of community projects

Our project has shown the beneficial impact that community projects can have on individuals' wellbeing. This positive impact was evident across all eight projects, through the feedback of the participants themselves and through the observations of linkworkers.

For some participants, such the participants joining String of Hearts' music-making sessions, the impact on participants' mental health has been significant:

> *'Keeps me going as I am lonely so seeing different people gives me something to do and it has made me happier and made me feel a lot better.'*

> *'From the minute I walked into the group I felt loved and accepted and that has taught me that that is how I should feel always in my life.'*

> *'When you first start you are sat with strangers but by end of it you feel like you belong and are a part of something.'*

> — Participants, String of Hearts music sessions

Participants valued the opportunity to meet people, to talk with others, and to have a reason to get out of the house and take part in an activity.

> *'I've gained a lot... Realising I'm not the only one and realising the struggles other people also have. Being able to discuss things and put different perspectives on things. I've learnt so much'*

> - Participant, Carers peer-support group, Stretford Public Hall

> *'This was a fantastic course. It was great learning a new skill and I think it's really positively impacted my wellbeing... and I've met loads of my neighbours.'*

> — Participant, Creative Connections, OT Creative Space

For others, project activity also had an impact on physical health, as well as mental wellbeing. Participants in the Be Bolder project, which aimed to build confidence and encourage participants to exercise, reported that even their short, six-week programme of activity had started to help them get fit.

> *'I have started to feel really energetic since starting this. It is good to have some time for me. Thank you for your time and motivation, you certainly have made me make time to do exercise.'*

> *'I have loved meeting new people which I haven't done for a long time. I love having a purpose - to be as fit as I can. I would never have gone to a gym alone. Before this, I felt I had no purpose, my life had changed so dramatically.'*

– Participants, Be Bolder

Referrals & the value of relationship building

The most successful projects were those where delivery partners spent time speaking to and meeting individual participants first, allowing participants to build a relationship with the delivery partner and to feel confident about attending the project activity. This personal contact was recognised by participants as an important factor in their joining and continuing with community activities.

Social prescribers as trusted intermediaries

Participants reported that they trusted their social prescriber and that meant they felt confident taking their advice to join a new group. Linkworkers also played an important role in signposting to activities which participants would not have known about otherwise.

Several community groups identified the importance of linkworker visits to the community projects, as part of the referral process. These visits allowed the social prescribers to get a better understanding of the nature of the community activity being delivered, making it easier for them to describe and refer to projects. It is important for link workers and community groups to ensure a clear, shared understanding of who should and should not be referred to the group.

The timing & frequency of activities

Participants valued regular timeslots for activities. This was particularly important for participants who found it difficult to commit to regular sessions due to personal commitments (eg caring responsibilities) or due to poor mental health. It was also important for sessions to be relaxed and informal, so participants did not feel pressured to attend or guilty if they could not attend.

A fixed length programme (or a project with a defined outcome) encouraged participants to start, and continue coming, rather than putting it off. Having progression routes after the end of an activity is also important. This can include delivery partners introducing participants to other activities or groups.

Communication between delivery partners & social prescribers

Good communication between delivery partners and social prescribers was an important feature of the most successful projects, enabling partners to monitor attendance and follow-up non-attendance when appropriate. Social prescribers also valued 'feedback' calls from project partners, which gave community groups the opportunity to provide feedback on participants.

Practical barriers to engagement

Delivery partners identified a range of practical barriers which can prevent or put off people from engaging with community activities:

Marketing & information. Older participants reported that they often found it difficult to find information about local activities.

Transport & parking. For many participants, particularly older people, a lack of affordable transport – or concerns about transport and access – were often a barrier to taking part in activities.

Environmental conditions. For older participants, concerns about poor weather and local environmental conditions (eg poor lighting, fallen leaves, icy conditions) were also a barrier to participation.

Training & professional development

We identified three levels of mental health training which delivery partners found useful when delivering social prescribing projects:

Suicide prevention training - a short, online course – developed by Zero Suicide Alliance – is freely available to anyone[1].

Making Every Contact Count (MECC) - online E-learning module, developed by Health Education England[2].

Mental Health First Aider training - an internationally recognised course which will qualifies those who complete it as a Mental Health First Aider.

Coaching skills are also useful when working with participants who have been socially prescribed – for example, listening skills, the ability to help people find their own solutions, and being able to steer conversations to positive conclusions. Group leaders / coordinators needed to be able to respond sensitively and to steer discussion away from difficult topics, responding positively and with care. It is also important that the staff who are leading group activities have sufficient support and supervision.

Using Elemental & ONS4 wellbeing data

One of the aims of our project was to trial the roll-out of Elemental as a software referral tool, to support social prescribing across North Trafford. Across our eight projects, two community partners were able to successfully install and use Elemental to receive referrals; three groups were able to use it but chose not to use it for referrals; and three groups experienced problems trying to get the software set up and in use.

If Elemental is to be rolled out more widely across Trafford, it is suggested that 'Elemental champions' should be trained and available to support community groups to adopt the software. Many of the problems that project partners encountered related to technical difficulties and a lack of accessible technical support. Our project suggests that the collection of quantitative data (eg ONS4 survey data) is more effectively collected by linkworkers than by those delivering the projects.

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[1] https://shiningalightonsuicide.org.uk/learn-to-save-a-life/
[2] https://www.makingeverycontactcount.co.uk/training/e-learning/