

Introduction

Something special happens every second Monday of the month at the Astral Park Sports and Community Centre in Leighton Buzzard. If you didn't venture inside, you might miss it. Situated in a large open space in a residential area, this sports and community centre hosts the increasingly popular Jazz Up Your Life, a community dance event for anyone in the community, of all different backgrounds and ages, including people who live in residential care.

Organised as part of the Big Lottery funded Time to Connect (TTC) project, Community Action Bedfordshire, Leighton Linslade Timebank, Leighton Linslade Town Council and Swing Dance MK come together supported by local time bank members and businesses, to host an afternoon of toe tapping, hip swinging, shoulder shimmying, wheelchair spinning, fun or enthusiastic singing with a cup of tea and cream covered scone.

Through TTC, care home staff are finding out about what residents enjoy or are interested in and then are supporting them to pursue these interests through inclusive opportunities that connect them to their community. This includes opportunities where the residents are also able to contribute in different ways to their community for example through time banks. Timebanking UK's website explains:

“Timebanking is a way of spending one hour of time helping someone out and earning one time credit in return, which can be spent on receiving an hour of someone else's time.”

In Leighton Linslade this had mainly been based on one to one exchanges, such as dog walking, lift sharing, reiki or yoga. Jazz Up Your Life has brought something different.

What has happened?

The event has been running since June 2019 but work started earlier in the New Year when staff at the Leighton Linlade Timebank (LLTB) first heard about the funding opportunity and aims of the project (now in Phase 2) from Timebanking UK. LLTB has total of 40 members, 20 of which are regularly active. Prior to this project they didn't have strong connections with care homes so that was their first job – to identify and contact local care homes, specifically the home's activity co-ordinators to see if they would be interested in taking part. The staff soon learnt that this is easier said than done, with only two of the twelve they contacted getting back early on, it was easy to see that this would take time. Furthermore, initial responses queried '**what did the care homes/individuals need to give back?**'. This has highlighted the importance of time banks building relationships and trust with staff and residents to help them understand what this was all about. Once they had invested this time, they piloted the concept with time bank members to see if it could work and from this experience the Jazz Up Your Life community dance was started and has been growing ever since.

What difference has it made?

Addressing issues of loneliness and isolation and building confidence are both key outcomes for people in residential care settings, through this project.

Confidence is something that care home staff have noticed has grown for those who attend, confidence to go out, getting into a minibus and more prepared to try something new. One member of care home staff explains:

"I see people that are very quiet, very introvert(ed) come to something like this with music and dancing and people are happy. They respond to that lift in mood, so I then see those people maybe from grumpy, unhappy, withdrawn, they come out to something like this and it's like a light switch has been flickedand they're prepared to go and meet new people which they wouldn't otherwise do and by the time they go home they will be so tired but so happy."

The project is also about the connections and relationships we make. Care home staff have explained that husbands and wives are reliving their youth, going on 'dates' and telling stories of days gone by. The spouse not living in a care home will arrange for taxis for family members to transport them so that they can both go every month because they enjoy it so much. Spouses are seen in a different light at the dance, away from the care home setting. People are reconnecting with old friends and acquaintances and for people who used to dance, they are enjoying being able to dance again, be it seated, in a wheelchair or up on their feet with a volunteer. A member of care home staff recalled how one lady with dementia who is not good on her feet, was supported to dance.

Indeed, it's not just the residents of care homes and their families who are benefiting from the monthly dance. For time bank members, aside from accruing time credits, Jazz Up Your Life, has introduced them to new friends, provided opportunities to chat to older people with fantastic life experiences and provided opportunities to dance outside of this event. Care home staff (even those people who don't go along) hearing the residents talk about the event and seeing the benefits is in turn having a positive impact on them. In some cases care home staff offer and are attending the dance in their own time. Staff from the local supermarket have also joined in as part of the time bank so whilst supporting the event and donating the monthly raffle prize, they can get support from time bank members to help with other local fundraising activities for local charities.

What difference has it made? (continued)

Outside of the dance, other parts of care home life for residents have been 'jazzed up'. For one care home, staff have become more excited by opportunities to do things with residents, rather than be reticent about what could go wrong. For example, they now have residents who make tea for people at tea time, before they would sit in a chair and wait to be served. They also have residents who will go into the kitchen with a cook on a Sunday and make sandwiches for everyone so they start to feel a useful part of the household. Jazz Up Your life has been part of a culture change journey for one home over the year, which has focused on how can they can get people more independent. One gentleman who used to be a pilot and he said he wanted to fly again, has had a flying experience. They wondered how they were going to make that happen but rather than think no it's not possible, staff asked what would it take to make that happen? They found a flying school that specifically provides experiences and lessons for people who are physically disabled, so he went and had his experience and wants to go regularly. This is something that the care home manager said wouldn't have happened last year.

Another example is of three ladies who wanted to have regular horse riding lessons. Last year they suggest that they would have responded by bringing some miniature ponies in to the home to have a pony party. This year they asked themselves what would it take to make that happen? As a result, they have connected with a Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) riding school, completed a risk assessment and now the three ladies, have a friendship group and go every month. Another care home, through working with the time bank co-ordinators, are looking at the home becoming a time bank venue; so they will set up a knitting group and gardening group for time bank members to join. They are also exploring links with schools, with the role of the residents being to share their knowledge.

Why does it work?

There are many reasons for its success. Care home staff have spoken about the atmosphere being amazing, the team being so warm, remembering the residents from previous months. Others spoke about the how well organised and structured it is, where the cost was excellent and catering was good. Knowing that they are in a safe place and that they can have a manageable staff to resident ratio was also identified as being a key factor in why it works well. Providing transport for some care homes has also been key; both in terms of making it affordable but also because the bus that is provided has staff that are patient and understanding with their residents. Sadly however, with limited space in the minibus for wheelchair users, and therefore the need for others to be mobile or able to transfer into a wheelchair, only a very small number of residents can go each month. This leaves many disappointed and care homes needing to employ a rota system to ensure everyone who wants to go, can. Availability of care home staff to support the different needs of residents is also something that can limit the number of people who can attend.

This community dance has become the date in the diary that care home residents look forward to, that give them a purpose. There's little doubt then that for all those residents on the bus that are singing all the way there and all the way back, this experience is truly jazzing up their lives.

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