

Introduction

Monday afternoons are a much-anticipated highlight of the week for the residents of Cheviot Gardens, an extra care housing development in South London. This is the day when Paxton Green Time Bank (PGTB) come along to spend time with residents for an afternoon of games, activities, laughter, tea and chat as part of the Time to Connect (TTC) project, an initiative funded through the Big Lottery. F, a co-ordinator at PGTB, coordinates and facilitates the sessions, with the help of local time bank members. The group agree together what they want to do, so there's always something enjoyable for everyone, whether it's about keeping the brain or the body active, trying out a new craft or rediscovering an old hobby. Everyone takes part and contributes, including people who are physically very frail or who have dementia. But the sessions are about so much more than passing the time by playing games or trying activities – they have been the starting point for new friendships, improved confidence (for residents and time bank members) and much better links between residents and the local community.

What has happened?

The regular sessions have continued for three years, with a core group of older people remaining involved since the start, and others welcomed into the group over time. Quite early, people decided that they would like to go out together, but this took a long time to organise, primarily because of sickness or other reasons why the older people were reluctant to leave the service on the appointed day. Over time, though, the residents felt more confident about going out. The first excursion took place almost a year after the group had started meeting, but now outings take place every month.

The Cheviot Gardens sessions involve a huge mix of activities, including crafts, art, flower arrangement, meditation, movement workshops, and memory games. Outings have included going to pubs and restaurants, picnics and shows, as well as visits to exhibitions and galleries, in particular the local gallery, Dulwich Picture Gallery.

Although F has played a hugely important role in supporting the group and in introducing creative and fun things to do, which residents really value, gradually they have done more of the organisation themselves, for example contacting each other about sessions.

While the sessions and excursions at Cheviot Gardens have gone from strength to strength, F has also been working with a smaller number of residents of a second service, Conrad Court. This has involved more one to one work, and the results have also been very positive, as described on the next page.

What has happened? (continued)

More recently, after seeing for themselves what a difference the Time to Connect and PGTB sessions are making to residents, Cheviot Gardens have laid on extra sessions that are using a similar approach. A member of staff has been taking part in the Monday afternoon activities, learning about what works for the residents and with their help, using this knowledge to support a group on Thursday afternoons. She had already been trained in the Time to Connect tools and techniques at the very beginning of the project, but had had few opportunities to apply these.

What difference has it made?

The sessions at Cheviot Gardens have made a real difference to the people involved, including people and organisations in the wider community.

For the residents of Cheviot Gardens, the time bank sessions have created a sense of optimism and something to look forward to. As E, a 98 year old woman said, ***'I'm an old lady and we look forward to this, it keeps us going.'*** Many older people spoke about how much they enjoyed having fun activities that brought them together. F also comment that from her perspective, ***'A core number of residents now seem much happier in their life and are looking forward to our fun sessions.'***

The mix of activities included in the sessions means that they are also a good way of keeping physically and mentally active. Not only are quizzes and games great fun (and very competitive), but residents also saw them as having an impact on their dexterity and on keeping their brains sharp – ***'it keeps your memory going'***.

As well as helping residents to stay active, the sessions also give them opportunities to learn new skills and to try out making things and to be creative, sometimes for the first time in many decades. One older woman, D, said that ***'during a lifetime of raising children and working we didn't have the time to do these things. We didn't even know we could do them'***.

F describes the experience of P, from Conrad Court:

'One of my most successful achievements has been the media coverage resulting from our action with P, resident of Conrad Court. P wished to write the story of his life, from a child in foster homes to a great Para Olympian athlete. I connected P with A, a PGTB member and journalist, who spent hours listening to P and wrote his book, very soon to be self published. Using this story, the Guardian published an article on the work of PGTB towards the Time to Connect project. A film was also released on Youtube.'

Over time, the older people who are involved in the sessions have become more confident and engaged. For example, some older people initially dropped in for five minutes to watch what was going on (no doubt attracted by the sounds of people enjoying themselves), but after several months, stayed for the whole afternoon. In some cases, older people who had observed several sessions, over time started taking part actively in activities, and interacting with others when they had previously remained silent.

What difference has it made? (continued)

Very importantly, Time to Connect has been a launchpad for new friendships and connections. Residents told us that sessions meant that they left their rooms, where many spent a lot of time alone, to socialise and mix with others. S and I, two older women, said ***'I've had enough of being on my own in my past. Now I have all these people... I'm just one of the crowd' and (if it didn't exist) 'I'd be less motivated to get going and mix with people.'***

People have made new friends, sometimes with other residents, when they find they have shared interests or a similar background. New residents have felt welcomed by the group, and it has helped them meet people and settle into their new home. Friendships have also grown between time bank members and residents. Some time bank members are themselves struggling with isolation and mental health difficulties:

'I live on my own and I know what (the residents) are going through – the loneliness and the boredom.'

This means that people are able to support each other, with residents offering much appreciated friendship and support to time bank members, too. The sessions also give time bank members something to look forward to and a positive way of spending an afternoon, as one timebank member commented, ***'It gets your brain working, instead of thinking negative things. It's a pleasure to come here.'***

Time to Connect has touched people and organisations beyond those who are directly involved, from the pubs and cafes who now host meals for the group, to arts organisations. For example, the relationship between the project and the local art gallery has grown over time. As a gallery staff member said, ***'it fits very well with us as an organisation (as we want to reach) people who are potentially socially isolated, but we don't have the capacity to run a group.'*** The connection with Time to Connect has brought mutual benefits, for both the gallery, and also Cheviot Gardens residents: ***'it's an opportunity to make a connection with a new place, a new person and new art.'***

Why has it worked?

The positive outcomes that older people are experiencing have relied on the creativity, resourcefulness and patience of the time bank co-ordinator. Progress has been helped enormously from patient, sensitive encouragement from F – ***'We had a session themed on the Olympics, and R (an older man with dementia) came. He wanted to leave, but I said if you win (an event) I'll give you my sandwich. He won, so I did.'*** The wide range of activities and games that the group takes part in means that everyone has a chance to shine and to find things that they are good at.

F highlights the importance of investing in relationships and building trust, both with residents and with the care home. This can be a long, slow process: ***'Connecting older people with the outside world has only been made possible after a long period of observation and after their trust was won.'***

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