



Contact the Elderly

Reaching Isolated Older People

Results of a project to evaluate alternative methods of service delivery and support to isolated and lonely older people



www.contact-the-elderly.org.uk

Registered charity no. 244681

Supported by
 **The National Lottery**[®]
through the Big Lottery Fund





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"I don't think people realise how lonely and isolated these older people feel and just a few hours one Sunday a month can make a huge difference."

a volunteer

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Opening Statement

Over 40 years ago back in Marylebone, I could see how many of my older neighbours very rarely received any visitors, and due to their age and frailty, found it difficult to get out on their own. With a group of friends I approached Marylebone Welfare Association which referred a group of older people from the local area whom we agreed to take out for tea one Sunday a month.

And so began Contact the Elderly, which today has grown from that one small group to now over 320 groups located across mainland Britain from Penzance to Inverness and Holyhead to Norwich.

Our strength is based upon a loyal network of volunteers who have been, and will continue to be, the essential foundation of our work.

We need to heighten awareness of what we offer. We need more hosts and drivers; funding to secure essential regional staff; and to attract partners to exploit the opportunities we have identified.

I am grateful that the Big Lottery Fund has given us the opportunity to carry out the important work which is summarised within this report. We are determined to take this forward and play our part in treating the cancer of loneliness which is devastating the spirit of older people and depriving them of the will that is vital to morale and physical well-being.

On behalf of myself and the Trustees, I would like to thank our Director, Roderick Sime and his team, especially Marie Holdt, the Project Manager; John Rhodes and fellow members of the Steering Group for their work and guidance and Baroness Neuberger for her kind support. I also thank the many individuals and organisations who have given their time and expertise to help make this project happen.

Trevor Lyttleton MBE, Founder and Chairman

Foreword

I have been struck over the years by the sheer simplicity of Contact the Elderly's basic concept – of monthly tea parties for older people, bringing people together, developing friendships and support networks – and thereby attempting to reduce loneliness and isolation. So simple and so effective.

The evidence is clear that loneliness and isolation amongst older people is increasing. Help the Aged's *Spotlight on Older People* in the UK 2007 showed that the percentage of over 65s who said that they are often or always lonely was increasing dramatically. It had risen from 8% in 2006 to a worrying 13% in 2007. The reasons for this are complex, to do with changing family relationships, people living at greater distances from their relatives, and often an altogether less strong desire to be the mainstay of frail older relatives. So Contact the Elderly's basic regular outings and tea parties can provide considerable relief.

The question now arises about how that concept can be shared with others, and how local organisations – of all sorts, with people from every background and every faith and none – can play a major part. For some, tea parties may be a somewhat foreign concept, whilst sharing of another simple meal at lunchtime or in the evening might seem more normal. For others, festival meals may provide a way forward – if at the end of fasting in Ramadan, for instance, Christmas lunch, breaking the fast for Jews after the Day of Atonement, and so on. So Contact the Elderly's new approach to working with others, and trying out different approaches on a local basis, is to be hugely welcomed.

But it also gives people in local communities real opportunities for volunteering on their own patch. For most older people, the best thing is to stay near to home, but have volunteers taking them out for a treat, visiting them, and providing basic support when needed. I very much hope that this considerable expansion of Contact the Elderly's work demonstrates that a simple concept can provide real solutions to complex problems – and that it also encourages new people – including many older people themselves – to volunteer to share, to support, and re-establish social networks in their areas.

Baroness Neuberger DBE



The monthly get-togethers have a positive impact upon general health and well-being.

Executive Summary

Contact the Elderly is a national charity focussed on tackling one of the greatest challenges facing society – loneliness and isolation amongst our rapidly ageing population.

A three year project, funded by the Big Lottery Fund, has enabled Contact the Elderly to test and develop different models for setting up social groups for older people. Our objective has been to see how we can expand the reach of our work. We have achieved this through working with other organisations and developing new ways of supporting and training our dispersed regional team.

KEY FINDINGS

- Research undertaken by the project provided strong evidence that private, social get-togethers are effective in both reducing loneliness and isolation and also have a positive impact upon general health and well-being
 - The benefits extend well beyond the one-Sunday-a-month gathering with the long term nature of membership of the groups making them an integral part of a member's life. The increased confidence which comes from membership can lead to other social opportunities being taken up
 - There is substantial volunteer commitment. Over 40% of our drivers and hosts have been with groups for over 5 years
- With differing levels of support from Contact the Elderly, other voluntary and community organisations can successfully deliver Contact the Elderly's model of private social get-togethers
 - Organisations with a body of close-knit members as potential volunteers, such as faith communities, can be very receptive and we have successfully established new groups with such organisations
 - For other organisations it can involve more commitment of resources from both the organisation and Contact the Elderly
 - Although it was not possible to establish company groups within the project, we have been able to identify other ways, including marketing advice and fundraising initiatives in which companies can provide us with significant help

- Older people living in rural communities can be effectively served by Contact the Elderly groups. Reaching out to these communities is however a particular challenge
 - Traditional groups can work, but in sparsely populated areas volunteers can be difficult to find. Distances to travel can also be a problem. The initial period may require additional funding
 - Working with other organisations with their local presence and knowledge facilitates the early start up of groups
- Older people from different BME communities can be supported by integrating with existing services or by working closely with community-specific organisations to deliver a model of social get-together relevant to that community
 - We successfully established two new groups as pilots with a community organisation
 - A way forward has to be developed with each specific community, responding to both need and culture
- We successfully trialled telephone groups with meetings hosted by a Contact the Elderly volunteer. Although not a substitute for face-to-face contact, these groups can:
 - help, especially when the issue is of loneliness amongst older people living with their family
 - provide a useful way of social support whilst a face-to-face group is being developed
- The project underlined the importance of our regional teams in realising the full potential of our work. It provided our team with an unprecedented opportunity to develop new ways of working, to share new ideas and best practice, and to operate more effectively in their communities. It has enabled us to:
 - create new materials for volunteer recruitment and referrers
 - build strengthened support for volunteers running existing groups
 - provide new support structures for staff which has delivered more effective individual and team working

This project has made an immensely important contribution to our work. After more than 40 years experience in developing groups nationwide, we know that our simple regular friendship links benefit isolated older people and help to keep them living independently and out of hospital. Importantly, this project has enabled us to focus on how we can reach more older people in a wider range of circumstances.

Volunteering is the essential foundation of our work. This project has shown us what can be achieved, and we are determined to build on it.

“I'm on my own 24 hours a day, except for the milkman. It's no exaggeration – the Contact gatherings are the one bright light in my life – it's fantastic.”
an older member

Introduction

For the purpose of this report, all references to 'older people' refer to people aged 75 and over.

Contact the Elderly offers a unique service by organising monthly Sunday afternoon teas. Volunteer-led private hospitality is provided within a family environment. It helps to address the emotional needs of older people who wish to remain in their own home, but whose diminished mobility makes it impossible for them to maintain regular social contact. Through over 320 groups across the country, we provide a regular and vital friendship link to nearly 3000 older people.

We are only too aware that the number of existing groups is often insufficient to cope with the ever increasing need and demand. Yet our development is not just restricted by organisational and fundraising constraints, but also by the significant challenge of recruiting and retaining a high number of volunteers to deliver our existing levels of service.

The Proposition

The purpose of this Big Lottery funded project was to test and develop support mechanisms that would help us decide how in the future we could best reach out and contribute to helping the most isolated members of our older population. The project also included the development and evaluation of new support structures and material for our dispersed regional team.

A number of alternative 'models' were established which could be customised to respond to and meet the needs of people living in our changing cultural communities.

The models were focussed around:

- Local service providers and not for profit organisations
- Rural communities
- BME communities
- Faith based organisations
- The corporate sector

“Almost half of those aged 75 and over are living alone, and nearly 140,000 have gone a full month in the last year without speaking to any family or neighbours.”

(ICM Christmas survey for Help the Aged October 2007)

Key Objectives

As a result of this process, our objectives were to:

- Help reduce the social isolation of frail older people, including those from the BME communities, through our increased awareness of their cultural and other needs and tailor our services accordingly
- Help increase their mental and physical well-being, help promote independence and integration within the community
- Source new volunteers by increasing the capacity for community and corporate groups to reach out and meet the needs of older people
- Disseminate the project's logic to other agencies and organisations concerned with older people's welfare, process and findings to gain greater dialogue and actions for the future
- Establish more Contact the Elderly style groups by harnessing the resources of other organisations

Funding and Resources

The Big Lottery Fund enabled the appointment of a small project team to develop and manage the programme which commenced in November 2004. Existing regional and head office staff provided additional support.

A Steering Group was established to oversee the project and input into the design, development and evaluation of all the activities.

Evaluation and Monitoring

In addition to internal measurement of performance, PHD Research was appointed as the external assessor. They provided overall evaluation of the effectiveness, sustainability and replicability of the different pilot models of delivery and the new support structure.

This report summarises the findings of this project and the lessons learned, which will act as the cornerstone for future delivery of our own services. We also present the outcomes to serve as a learning tool for other agencies and social welfare based organisations who deliver services to older people within their communities.

We provide vital friendship links to nearly 3000 older people.



The Impact and Benefits of Group Activity

Having used the same simple concept of Sunday afternoon tea parties for over 40 years, independent research (PHD Research) was undertaken to establish the attitudes and expectations from our members and volunteers. We also wanted to measure the impact that being a member of a group had upon health and well-being.

Overall, satisfaction with the monthly tea concept is very high. Most people were happy with the distance to the hosts' homes, the group size (8-10) and the 'tea and a chat' formula. A Sunday afternoon is the most popular time, being highlighted as a particularly lonely day of the week for older people living alone. There are very few befriending schemes available at weekends, hence the popularity and uniqueness of our service. The research provided strong evidence that group activities are not only effective in reducing loneliness and isolation, but have a positive impact upon general health and well-being.

GENERAL BENEFITS

- 60% felt less lonely
- 51% felt more part of their community
- 65% said they had made new friends
- 82% had something to look forward to

HEALTH BENEFITS

- 50% said they feel their general health has improved
- 26% said they see a doctor less often
- 75% said they generally feel more optimistic and cheerful as a result of being a member of a group

The health benefits shown above should be seen in the context of increasing age, when there may be an expectation of deterioration in health.

The feeling of optimism and cheerfulness has given many of our members the added confidence to go out more. 54% said that as a direct result of membership to their local group they have now joined another activity during the week.

Satisfaction amongst our loyal and dedicated volunteers was also high, which was mirrored in the length of time the average volunteer stays with us. 17% have been with us between 5 to 10 years, whilst 26% have been with us for over 10 years. Of those who had volunteered for us for over 10 years, half had been involved for more than 20 years.

The health benefits have also been recognised by health professionals and those working for voluntary organisations.

“Knowing I can refer some clients on to the group, once we’ve completed a piece of work and their mood and self esteem have improved, can be a real protective factor in their ongoing psychological well-being and quality of life. These friendship groups are particularly relevant as social isolation can be such a risk factor for depression. Contact the Elderly has been a real lifeline for some people I have worked with.”

Michelle Hamill, clinical psychologist.

This research proved that our groups make a substantial difference, they are needed, and help reduce loneliness and social isolation.





Piloting the New Models

The pilot groups have been evaluated throughout the project with two principal objectives:

- 1 To assess the experiences of those involved in setting up and running the groups
- 2 To measure members' satisfaction with the groups

Community Groups

Contact the Elderly is committed to extending the number of older people it can help and thus we must both set up as many new groups as resources allow and sustain existing groups. Setting up new groups requires significant focus and time of our staff. This pilot was based on the concept of our developing a free franchise package to enable other community organisations, or committed individuals, to take on the challenge and create a new group within their own community.

A member of our project team provided initial support and training based upon a new 'Community Step by Step Guide' produced specifically for the project.

Four new groups were established in:

- Alton, with support from the Lions and Alton Community Association
- Taunton, with support from Taunton Social Services and 'Taunton Churches Together'
- Haringey, in partnership with Haringay United Church
- Balham, in partnership with Ascension Balham Hill

Considerable time was spent in Alton and Taunton to find partner organisations. Despite having some presence in the area, awareness of Contact the Elderly was low. We were grateful for the hard work put in by the Alton local press, Alton Lions and Alton Community Association to publicise the project and engage the interest of the local community. At Taunton, Social Services had picked up on the benefits of the Contact the Elderly concept and were determined to find a partner for the group, securing a volunteer coordinator from 'Care Direct'.

Although they still required focussed time and attention, the Haringey and Balham groups required less resources because they already had the desire to set up 'non religious' social activity for the older people within their communities. They also had volunteers ready to get involved. Finding the most isolated older people and working with referrers was not as easy as they had anticipated, but was resolved once we provided additional advice and support.

CHALLENGES

- It was more difficult than anticipated to find organisations that had the resources to set up a group
- It proved extremely time consuming for us to actively go out and find potential partners
- We were too optimistic in believing we could leave an organisation to set up a group with little support from Contact the Elderly. In all four instances, there had to be considerable on-going involvement to support group coordinators and work with referrers

KEY OBSERVATIONS

- In most cases, more input from Contact the Elderly will be required than was envisaged at the start of the project
- A significant increase in general awareness of Contact the Elderly is needed to gain maximum potential for the 'Community Franchise' model
- Partner organisations can be provided with an opportunity to help alleviate the loneliness felt by older people in their local community by using their existing resources plus the additional support from our project team
- Once a partner organisation is found, it is important to identify how their existing resources can be utilised, and agree the level of support required from the Contact the Elderly team
- It was clear that with an agreed tailored approach and a good working relationship with the partner organisation, a group can be set up successfully
- The concept can work well when there is a community organisation that has the volunteers and resources ready to implement a group

Our regional team is already taking this model forward across the UK.





“I felt that I had come out of a dark tunnel into the light. Before I joined Contact, I thought that my life had ended – and now it's started again!”

an older member

Friendship/Rural Groups

Elsie lives alone and has no family nearby. Isolated in a small rural community, she takes her car and drives to the nearest town where she spends the day on the benches in a shopping centre. She speaks to those people who take a rest on the bench. This is the only social interaction she has. Due to her frailty she won't be able to use her car much longer, and she will be truly isolated at home.

This was the scenario when Elsie was referred to us. She now enjoys the regular monthly outings with her new group and is slowly getting to know people and feeling part of the community she once belonged to.

In rural areas where the proportion of older people is generally much higher, there is a genuine need for more services that provide social interaction for those most isolated.

Our experience of working in the Highlands and North Wales highlighted that, for geographically dispersed populations, our traditional model of hosting teas in private homes has proved problematic. This is due to the significant distances often entailed to reach these homes.

The 'Friendship Group' model is based upon individual members meeting together in a community facility, 'hosted' by the group's volunteer coordinator. Possibly lacking the personal atmosphere of a private home, it does at least ensure that the barriers of geographical isolation do not prevent a regular, social, non-institutional gathering from occurring, with all the benefits that that entails.

Three groups have been established:

- Tynedale, Northumberland
- Darlington with '50 Plus Age Concern'
- Rothbury, Northumberland

Due to the closer proximity of a number of smaller villages, the Tynedale Group was developed as a hybrid of the traditional Contact the Elderly format. The group meets regularly in a host's home, alternating with visits to hotels and tea rooms in the area. Good local knowledge by the project worker meant volunteer hosts and drivers were recruited relatively easily.

A Friendship Group was set up in partnership with '50 Plus Age Concern' in Darlington who were interested in maximising the use of their facilities during the weekend.

In the small community of Rothbury, initial difficulties finding volunteers led us to hire a minibus and venues to start the group. The interest this group has created has encouraged volunteers to come forward and we are slowly replacing paid venues with volunteer hosts.

CHALLENGES

- Setting up traditional Contact the Elderly groups in rural areas is more difficult because of the distances volunteers have to travel
- Smaller rural communities offer limited awareness raising opportunities
- Once the key person to help establish a group had been found, additional funding may be required to start up the project for venue and minibus hire

KEY OBSERVATIONS

- Initiatives for older people who have become isolated with age are needed and welcomed in small, rural communities
- Local knowledge is essential, provided either by the regional Contact the Elderly Development Officer or a respected member of the local community, willing and committed to setting up new initiatives
- More volunteers will come forward to help once a group is established, enabling more older people to participate
- Older isolated people often require a lot of encouragement to leave home and join in group activity, due to lack of familiarity and confidence within a social group setting. This can be overcome through preparation work including face-to-face contact both before and after the outings
- Working with partner organisations is vital to the success of establishing new groups in rural communities. They can help provide the local resources, contacts and expertise to support areas with a sparse population



“The lunch is the only social activity they go to. For them it is a big social event and they would like to go more often.”

a volunteer

BME/Faith Based Communities

Our aim was to explore how we can be more open towards people from different faiths and cultures and provide a flexible response to the needs of communities.

The concept for this pilot was based in the belief that with a carefully focused approach, existing faith-based and BME community groups would be interested in working with us. The idea was not necessarily to deliver new groups based on our traditional concept, but to discover with different organisations – and informed by our own concept of bringing people together – how to develop groups that were designed to meet their specific cultural and community needs.

Our project took place in the West Midlands where there is a significant minority ethnic population. Research identified that local groups such as Rotary and Lions were willing to provide drivers and hosts, but the main difficulty was finding potential older members. Contact with social services and groups providing services to older people produced little positive response. Eventually, we identified that many older people were not so isolated in that they may be living with their families, but still wanted contact with the ‘outside world’. Many would not come forward to talk about their isolation for fear of alienating their families.

Two groups were established:

- Sant Nirankari Mandal, Wednesbury
- Sant Nirankari Mandal, Leicester

Sant Nirankari Mandal is a faith based organisation. The Wednesbury group members being predominantly from the Punjabi community and the Leicester group the Hindu Gujarati community.

Volunteers were already collecting older members from their homes every Sunday so that they could attend the Centres for faith meetings. Following discussions with the volunteers, it was agreed that a development of this would be to follow the meeting with a lunch for the older members. This would be a beneficial addition to the service the Centres already offered older people.

The lunches have become very popular, and other visitors to the Centres also participate in the social interaction.

CHALLENGES

- We had to be flexible and open to suggestions in order to overcome cultural differences. The older people, who are often reliant on their families, were afraid of upsetting their families if they said they were feeling lonely
- There were sometimes different messages from community leaders and social workers about whether loneliness amongst older people was an issue

KEY OBSERVATIONS

- For many communities literature is not the main form of communication. People often prefer to have face-to-face contact. We have, however, looked at our promotional material and made sure it is more open and inviting to people who do not have English as their first language
- From culture awareness sessions, our staff have become more sensitive to different issues and how we can best tackle them. We are now able to better understand the concerns people from different cultures sometimes experience. We have been able to reassure anyone who would like to attend a Contact the Elderly group either as a member or a volunteer that they will be welcomed on the same terms as everyone else
- Partner organisations were open to the idea of developing projects which centered around the concept that older people often experience isolation due to the barriers experienced of living in a foreign country
- The approach to each community needs to be completely open without preconceptions
- From the projects we set up there was a very high satisfaction rate amongst the members and volunteers involved



We are now able to better understand the issues people from different cultures sometimes experience.

Telephone Groups

We identified a need to explore other ways in which Contact the Elderly can alleviate the isolation and loneliness of older people living alone in areas where we do not have any groups, or our groups are fully subscribed, or in cases where language can be a barrier.

An entirely new concept for Contact the Elderly, using teleconferencing technology, was to link up four or five older 'guests' with a telephone 'host' and have a chat on a regular basis.

Two telephone groups were set up:

- West Midlands, linking a group of isolated Asian women together
- Newham and Tower Hamlets

The Community Resource Team in Hackney, run by the London Borough of Hackney, provided us with some inspirational advice. This was based on their nine years of experience successfully running telephone groups for lonely older people in their borough.

REACHING THE BME COMMUNITY

Many older people were interested in more social contact, but were restricted either by location or ability to leave their homes. The telephone group was particularly successful in linking older Asian women together. They felt they could "be themselves" and were not imposing on someone else's hospitality. A key to this success was an enthusiastic and committed host who ensured all participants were included and drawn into the conversation.

One member is a widow with 2 sons whom she seldom sees. She has no friends in the area and had become very depressed. She would not talk to anyone and was literally starving herself. She saw a health visitor once a week. The telephone group gave her tremendous support, asking her how she had been, what she had eaten and generally nurturing her within the group. During the last year she is eating and talking a lot more and her voice has become clearer and stronger from her initial whisper when she first joined the group.

Positive interest has been expressed from other cultural groups, opening up the possibility of some form of social group in the future.

At Newham and Tower Hamlets, a telephone 'holding' group was established to link volunteers and older people together whilst waiting for their new monthly Sunday tea group to be organised. It was an ideal medium for both sides to become better acquainted and kept everyone enthusiastic and motivated whilst waiting to join the more traditionally run Contact the Elderly group.

"They feel they can be themselves. It doesn't matter how they look and they are not imposing on someone's hospitality so they don't feel they are a burden."

an observer/translator

CHALLENGES

- To run as an additional service a member of staff will be needed to support the volunteers and older people
- To set up a scheme like this and offer the service at no charge to the older people, additional funding will be required. The cost of 30 minutes meeting for four members and a volunteer host is £20

KEY OBSERVATIONS

- The level of satisfaction amongst the members has been high. The telephone group concept allows them to have a form of social contact in an undemanding way. Members feel comfortable because they are in their own environment and there is no need to make any effort to 'dress up'
- Using the telephone group as a preliminary activity before the face-to-face group started, was a good way to offer some social interaction to the older people. It also gave us a way of involving volunteers at an earlier stage
- Although more likely to be as an additional service to offer members, telephone befriending also seems appropriate for geographically dispersed populations or for individuals facing significant mobility problems
- No special equipment is required. The older members simply wait for a call from the teleconference provider who connects them to the group where the host is already waiting
- The West Midlands initiative proved that by being open and flexible we can work in partnership with other local organisations and together help reduce loneliness amongst some elder BME communities
- The telephone groups are highly successful in enabling an organisation to support a larger number of older people using less volunteers



The level of satisfaction amongst members has been high.

“Working with Contact the Elderly was a great experience for me. I found sharing my knowledge and experience really rewarding – especially when some of the ideas we came up with were implemented. I would recommend the experience to anyone thinking about it.”

Catherine from BSKyB

Corporate Groups

Based on the Community Group model, the idea was to create more groups by working with companies who would either help older people in their local area or set up a group specifically to support retired employees who may have become socially isolated.

A group, set up by a London based company, provided a core group of volunteers to collect older people from their local area for monthly social get-togethers. They invited the group of members to come to their offices so other employees were able to drop by for a cup of tea and a chat with the members. It was very popular for all concerned.

Based upon this success, we approached a number of companies to discuss the possibility of replicating similar groups with them.

Whilst all the companies were very positive about the aims and objectives of the project we were unable to commit any of them to setting up an internal group. Many companies encourage their employees to work with charities through ‘team challenges’. Unfortunately, it had proved difficult to fit in to this opportunity as our tea parties are usually on Sundays and companies are generally looking for weekday team activities.

Some contacts suggested that there could be nervousness about the level of the ongoing commitment that running a group would entail, and that a company could not guarantee to provide.

This feedback gave us the opportunity to assess how we could be more creative and open about how companies can be involved. We wanted to develop partnerships where both sides gained from the experience. As a result a number of new initiatives were set up.

- A corporate team reviewed our promotional literature and helped produce new material appropriate to use within companies. We also asked for their input on how best to promote our volunteering opportunities to employees
- One firm of accountants looked at how we can work with universities, how to target specific business sectors, which companies to approach and how to go about it
- Helping recruit runners for the British 10k race in London

In January 2008 we launched our ‘Company of the Year’ awards which have been given in recognition to a small number of specially selected corporate partners who have made a valuable contribution to the effectiveness of our work.

CHALLENGES

- Despite encouragement and cooperation from most of the companies approached, we were unable to set up any new in-house groups. It proved difficult to fit in with national companies CSR agendas, whereas at a local level we found more success with companies that had greater autonomy as to which charities they could support

KEY OBSERVATIONS

- By using the skills and knowledge of corporate employees, we looked at our own marketing activities and learnt how to develop new ways of approaching and interacting with companies in the future
- It is important to set clear objectives of what both sides want from the partnership
- Although initially disappointed that our original pilot had not proved replicable, we have gained by finding new and positive ways of developing corporate partnerships and become more assured in our approach to companies
- By creating the 'Company of the Year' award we can ensure we work effectively with a number of companies





Developing an Effective Support Structure

In addition to assessing alternative methods of service delivery, we recognised the need to develop and strengthen our own regional structure in order to help reduce the number of socially isolated older people.

We wanted to provide effective support to Development Officers so they could provide increased service delivery without increasing resources proportionately. We focussed on three key priorities:

- Strengthening the support structure for the home-based Development Officers
- Making existing groups more self-sufficient
- Working closer with referrers to identify older people who are socially isolated and who would benefit from our groups

Strengthening the Development Officer Network

From 1965 to 1985 the number of Contact the Elderly groups had risen to 189. But ten years later this number had fallen to 153. A further downturn was avoided by the appointment of our first two part-time Development Officers. As more groups were launched, so an increasing number of regionally based Development Officer posts were created and there are now a total of sixteen located across the country.

Prior to the Franchise Project, the Development Officers worked largely on their own with support from the Director who was based at the head office in London.

The importance of the Development Officers was evident, but to further increase the number of Contact the Elderly groups nationwide, stronger team working leading to the spread of the most effective practice was needed.

SUPPORT NETWORKS

The first step was to set up support networks which were headed by the two most experienced Development Officers. The networks now run quarterly area meetings giving Development Officers the opportunity to meet with fellow colleagues and discuss specific issues they encounter within their own areas.

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Two day residential training conferences for all staff have been organised. We have been able to focus on issues in greater detail, provide external training and share skills.

NEW SUPPORT MATERIAL

A new Handbook includes detailed sections on how to support existing groups and set up new groups, plus other information to enable Development Officers to carry out their role successfully.

Each new Development Officer is assigned a 'buddy mentor' and attends one of the Support Network Meetings.

Literature to encourage new volunteers has also been revised, and several new items have been produced, including posters, postcard flyers, and a short DVD which is aimed at newly recruited volunteers and potential volunteers.

THE KNOWLEDGE BASE

An intranet has been created called the Knowledge Base. In addition to many general resources, the Knowledge Base has an easily searched database containing ideas, hints and tips gathered from all members of the Development Team over the years, which is constantly being refreshed and developed.

TOOLKITS

The experience gained from working with all the pilot projects has been collated into a series of toolkits available to the Development Officers. They contain tried and tested ideas they can adopt and use.

This new support structure has given the Development Officers a sense of working within a team, even though they are geographically scattered and based at home.

Our volunteers are very important to us, and we have to work harder to thank and value them.



Supporting Volunteers

The research conducted by PHD Research showed that our volunteers, in general, feel well supported by their Development Officer and Group Coordinator. Each group has a volunteer Group Coordinator who makes sure the group runs smoothly and organises the monthly outings. Some volunteers, however, did indicate they would be interested in receiving more training and advice in certain aspects of their role.

It was identified that additional written materials were required to help support the volunteers in their various roles. As a result we have produced:

- a **Group Coordinators File** covering the various aspects of being a Group Coordinator. It is sent to all new Coordinators and to existing Coordinators when appropriate
- the existing **Volunteer Handbook** was rewritten to ensure it was up to date, with a separate version for volunteer hosts
- a **Fundraising Guide** – this gives volunteers ideas of how to raise money for their local group as well as for Contact the Elderly at a national level
- **updated material** to support volunteers in giving presentations
- a **new promotional film** to recruit volunteers

The new materials help volunteers who would like to get more involved and use their own particular skills and local knowledge. Supporting and utilising the talents of enthusiastic volunteers leads to a better experience for volunteers and frees up the Development Officer's time to be more proactive in developing and setting up new groups.

Our volunteers are our lifeblood, and we know we have to work harder to thank and to value them properly. Various awards are given out at our Annual General Meeting, and we plan to hold more regular volunteer evenings, giving an opportunity to both thank our volunteers and listen to their views and needs.

Closer Working Relationships with Referrers

Those most isolated, and most in need of social interaction, are also the hardest to find. It is vital therefore, that we work closely with potential 'referrers' such as social services, other charities, and local welfare groups, to encourage referrals and promote Contact the Elderly to their own older client group.

We undertook a research survey with our referrers and found that whilst there is awareness and understanding of Contact the Elderly, this awareness is somewhat 'back of mind' rather than 'front of mind'.

The challenge for us has been, and continues to be, to raise our profile amongst referrers at all levels within their organisations, especially those who have volunteers who are in regular contact with older people.

A number of key actions will be undertaken to help communicate to referrers, at both national and local level, of Contact the Elderly's work in their area. These include publicity material and more invitations to local monthly get-togethers. In this way we aim to bring the service to life.

The challenge for us is to raise our profile amongst referrers.



CHALLENGES

- For any organisation it is essential to ensure support literature is up to date. With limited finance and resources this can be a challenge
- To raise our profile amongst referrers at all levels within their organisations

KEY OBSERVATIONS

- The new support structure has enabled staff to feel part of a team. The evaluation showed a positive attitude amongst staff and a sense they are being better supported to carry out their role
- The 'buddying' system for Development Officers reduces the learning curve for new staff, allowing them to work more effectively from the outset
- The new support documentation and intranet enables everyone to share their knowledge
- The value of face-to-face staff meetings to discuss issues, share ideas and provide training, is paramount in creating and developing supportive relationships
- It is important to constantly review the support literature for our volunteers to match their needs and to help groups to be more involved and self-sufficient where appropriate and desired
- By improving our communication systems and raising our profile we can encourage and motivate referrals both at national and grass root level to better support those older people who are most isolated

It is important to involve everyone in the consultation process to produce the best material possible and to take forward ideas that are useful. The positive input from staff, volunteers and referrers has enabled us to improve our support systems and produce quality material which is genuinely needed.

Conclusion

Ready for the future

Through the evaluation of our existing work, we established that our social get-togethers are very effective. They have proven health and well-being benefits and are what our older members and volunteers want from the Charity.

Regular evaluation in the future will help ensure our members, volunteers and referrers continue to contribute to the ongoing development and quality of our services.

Being ready for growth, the organisation can support its regional staff, who in turn can support and develop more groups more effectively. New strategies will enable us to work with different communities and work in partnership with other organisations to create new groups – particularly as the service, which Contact the Elderly facilitates, becomes better known.

We have learned new ways of working with different communities and organisations. If we can remain flexible in our approach – as we have been in this project – then we can continue to use the methods developed whilst setting up the piloted models.

The telephone groups demonstrated how to reach people we were previously unable to support. It is an opportunity for us to consider in the future.

We aim to strengthen and extend our regional support team to cover all Government Office Regions and move to the stage where we can offer a place in a Contact the Elderly Group to anyone who wants it. However, this will only be achieved by securing significant additional funding.

We will continue to work in partnerships with local companies, government and organisations to create more Contact the Elderly groups and we welcome new partners to help ensure more lonely older people have something to look forward to.

Valuing and caring for older people within our communities should be the responsibility of each and every one of us. The more we can work together, the more we can do to help combat the loneliness and isolation that no older person should experience.



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