

Reading Cultural Commissioning Programme 2020/21



Introduction

Age UK Berkshire and The Museum of English Rural Life worked in partnership to deliver a storytelling project focused on celebrating the life histories of Reading's older population. The project aimed to reach out to older lonely/ socially isolated Reading residents.

The project focused on the importance of sharing stories and the power of conversation to establish links, foster communities and empower the storyteller, valuing their voice and experiences. Age UK research suggests 16% of the over 65s often feel invisible or ignored. Loneliness can happen at all stages of life and often begins when people lose significant relationships or the opportunities to engage in the community. Central to the project have been the resources from the heritage collections of The MERL which have been used to inspire and stimulate participants to share their own stories. The project aimed to celebrate the role that all of us have to tell stories and to better understand the benefit that can bring on improving quality of life.

Project objectives

- To empower older people in a participatory heritage community programme
- To connect older people facing social isolation and loneliness with communities, heritage and voluntary services improving their overall health and wellbeing.
- To promote a step change in organisations through collaborative working to improve practice, better supporting, engaging and inspiring communities.

Our initial approach prior to Covid

The plan was to adopt The MERL's 'ladder of engagement' approach to delivery, offering flexibility to enable both larger groups and smaller groups to share their stories as well as one to one conversations (based on the Age UK Berkshire befriending model and the Younger People with Dementia mentor model). Methods were to include photos, art, music, craft activities and chatty cafes as ways participants could share their stories.

- Engage with many diverse groups- including BAME groups, The Older People's Working Group, over 50's groups in areas of high deprivation, carers groups, exercise and singing groups, care homes as well as housebound individuals.
- Encourage participants to get involved in local activities that are of interest to them e.g. should an individual talk about their love for art; seek to research details of any local art classes and put them in touch.
- Develop an intergenerational and legacy to the project by working with local schools and guiding groups to create community programmes such as theatre production or Pen Pal schemes drawing on the memories that are collected using the project.
- Capture subjects from the story telling that could shape cultural and arts projects in the future. Work with key groups including the Whitley Researchers and The Rising Sun's Arts Centre Older People's Champions to document and highlight these gaps.

Challenges

Due to the COVID pandemic, the project had to make significant changes in the way it was going to be delivered. Most of the older people that the project was targeted at fitted into the Shielding/ Clinically Extremely vulnerable category and as such were not able to leave their homes. The national lockdown in March halted all planned group, face to face and volunteer activities. In addition the project officer was furloughed. We had to realign the focus to concentrate only on virtual small group and one to one activity. Due to restrictions, we also had less opportunity to utilise the volunteer groups from each organisation as planned. After initial furlough, the project officer role was reinstated and their time reallocated to delivering the some of the online activities filling a gap left by the volunteers who had been recruited for the face to face programme.

A second and third lockdown meant we were no longer able to work with Leighton Park School. Although the life stories cannot be used in current curriculum, they have been archived and there are plans for the MERL engagement team to follow up with a project in 21/22 academic year.

The plans to create an exhibition of the life stories in MERL have had to be postponed along with hosting a tea party event for participants to celebrate their life stories.

Digital Engagement

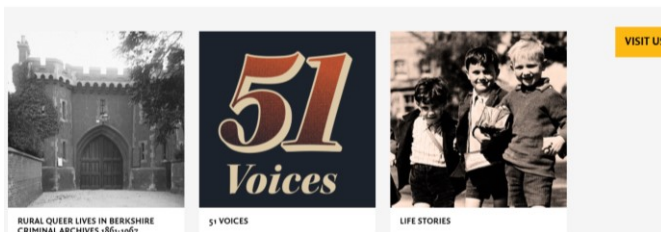
Due to the COVID pandemic, the project had to make significant changes in the way it was going to be delivered. Those whom we had hoped would attend our programme of activities were now shielding. The project shifted focus to supporting those who had to online capability. Reaching out to Older People's group network, we asked for volunteers who may be willing participate. One to one online sessions were organising linking with individuals in their own home and in the care home environment to capture their stories. We implemented a monthly virtual coffee morning advertised to the Age UK Berkshire community following on from Older People's Day in October. We also worked in partnership

with YPWD to establish best practice methods for transitioning memory making workshops online. In each of these activities, we integrated the photos from The MERL collections to promote stimulating, interactive discussion. Since taking part in these events, individuals and their care support have reported an increase in confidence using technology outside of the sessions.

We were able to gather a collection of the stories and curate them into an online exhibition hosted by The Museum of English Rural Life. <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/explore/online-exhibitions/life-stories/> By displaying a selection of the stories online, we are sharing them with a wider audience and hopefully building the appetite for more.



Browse past displays from the Museum and exhibitions exclusive to our website.
We are constantly adding new exhibitions throughout the year, so check back regularly to discover more about English rural life and our collections!



Evaluation

The project initially set out to understand the impact of adopting arts and culture methods on a social issue like isolation in the older population. It also wanted to investigate the overall effect on the health and wellbeing of the participants and connectedness to the broader Reading community. The monitoring and evaluation of the programme has drawn on the approaches and methodologies used by the project partnerships.

- Reflective partnership sessions with Age UK, YPWD and MERL staff and volunteers to critique the life stories method, analysing the benefits, impact and challenges of the approach.
- Debrief sessions to gather feedback on the effectiveness of approaches and Identify adaptations for future use.
- Interviews with participants and volunteers to gain insight into their experience as an end user.
- Interviews care home staff to assess the value of the life story approach within a care home setting going forward.

The following reports were used to inform the evaluation approach

- Age UK: The impact of COVID-19 to date on older people's mental and physical health
- Support the Reading Borough Council Health & Well-being strategy
- Cultural Champions project; creating an Older People's Cultural Champions Team for Reading- the Ageing Well Pilot Jan 2020

The key themes common across these reports identified loss of confidence, low mood or depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, loneliness and lack of access to activities. Using Age UK Berkshire's extensive network, we were able to reach out directly to individuals. This project offered a safe environment where participants felt confident to share their stories without judgement or fear of failure. The events have been interactive allowing participants to engage at whatever level they feel comfortable. Participants have felt uplifted and recounting good memories and 'knowing my life matters'. Connecting with new people has been invigorating and offered 'something positive to do'. It has also fostered a feeling of connectedness in the groups- 'it seems like we all have similar stories, I like that we think alike.' Participants have gained a personal sense of accomplishment remembering their life long achievements, what they went through and what obstacles they have overcome.

The restrictions placed on the project during covid-19 severely impacted the evaluation framework which had been planned and as a result methods had to be scaled back to observations, feedback and reflective partnership sessions. In addition, with limited resources and access, the project was unable to explore the full range of research questions which had originally been set out. Despite this, it was noted that participants and support staff reported the value the programme had during the lockdown period and that integration of the arts and culture approach gave it a unique point of difference which contributed to a positive engagement rate.

Attendance

Total attendance for all events from 1 October 2020 – 31 January 2021 = 174

Detailed data derived from one to one sessions, Making Memories programme and virtual café

34.2% Male, 67.7% Female

89.5% White British, 5.25 % Black Caribbean, 5.2 % Asian

7.9% Aged 60-64, 21% Aged 65-69, 21% Aged 70-74, 13.2% Aged 75-79,

18.4% Aged 80-84, 18.4% Aged 85+

Engagement rate: 50% attended all events, 10.5% attended two or more events, 39.5% attended one event

Data reinforces the need to encourage more BAME participation and that attachment rates are stronger when participants are offered small group activity or one to one sessions. This confirms that this type of approach lends itself to home visits and small groups in care home or charity environment. Despite concerns over online delivery methods, this has shown to be successful.

Feedback

Feedback from participants has been very positive and that fact that they have requested more events and sessions demonstrates an appetite for more of this type of work. Care staff and support workers have been very supportive of this work during lockdown. This project is laying the base of future funding and activities in the area. The legacy of the project is demonstrating techniques and approaches which can be adapted to a range of health care settings for the older generation.

Participants

'It's been a chance to be listened to, particularly during lockdown. I've missed being out and meeting people so working on the project has been interesting and has helped fill the gap when I couldn't get out. It came at just the right time for me also as it was close to the first anniversary of the death of my husband. We were together for 57 years and it's been a huge loss. Being part of the project gave me something to distract myself with at a particularly difficult time.'

I have "met" more people in depth than at the live Older People's Day.

'I'd like to thank everyone for this morning - I wasn't sure quite how it would be but it was very good, reassuring and motivating'

'You hosted it well and everyone seemed appreciative of getting together.'

'I thoroughly enjoyed yesterday's Zoom meeting and look forward to further ones. It is so important to keep up social contact with others during this Covid nightmare'

'The discussions were interesting and informative. People were willing to share experiences, related quite well with each other. Thoroughly enjoyable experience. Looking forward to participating in another one soon.'

'She is so easy to talk to and today delivered some archive photos, the format of the next five talks and other bits and pieces, which was a really nice surprise.'

'We love the quiz, having an activity at the start of our coffee morning and that it's themed.'

As I am self-isolating it's so nice to meet people online and be able to chat. I enjoy sharing memories and it's good to be talking with a group of people who have similar memories, it's interesting.'

'I attend a number of these type of online events and yours is different, I like the difference with the mix of Age UK and the Museum and although I'm 68 now, I like to think this sort of event will still be available to me in years to come.'

'I like that everyone gets a chance to speak and share their story, that doesn't happen on other online events and you invite everyone to join in, even the quiet ones and I think that's a great format.'

'It's been a great pleasure putting pen to paper and writing poetry for the project. I've always had a love of history and have written poetry from the age of 10 years old. It's been an amazing experience for me to combine my interests of history and poetry. This project has really brought me great joy and reward as I've been able to laugh and share with my Dad who recalls many happy memories with his friends at The Majestic Club in Reading.'

Family members

'It really made him think about the past, he loved the two of us chatting through old memories. It took him a little while to get going but he really came alive and the stories flowed after that. Such a difference to talking about health care appointments and medication.'

'I do congratulate you and your team as you managed to create a really happy chatty atmosphere which is so hard to do on zoom meetings. My mother loved it too despite her distrust of technology! 'Mary Riall Berkshire High Sheriff

Volunteer

'I have lived here 30 years and I have learned new things about Reading from doing this project. My basic interest in history means this sort of project always interests me. Hearing about past events, these are the sort of links that make the whole thing interesting. I like reading obscure biographies of people who aren't well known but have led interesting lives. This fits in exactly to the sort of thing I am interested in, little snippets that fascinate me. I'm happy to listen to these stories – suits me down to the ground. It encourages you to think about your own story and writing it down.'

Care Home

'The residents who have been able to have a chat with you enjoyed the experience. They were happy to share their stories. They were glad someone was interested in what they had to say about their lives. We really appreciate your interest and time in cultivating our beloved resident's stories.' Austin Care Home Activities support.

Making Memories Workshops

'What works for our guys is being diverse, not focused one on subject, with the use of pictures, it really taps into their older memories, it might not be connected to the actual photo itself but it's something that sparks of an experience or memory of their own. One of the clients in particular really loved it and was hugely disappointed when it finished – 'Why can't we just carry on all the time?' YPWD Support staff

Charity Partner

The opportunity to participate in the 'Life Stories' project has been an absolute privilege. As a small charity supporting those with dementia in younger life we work hard to broaden awareness of our work and this life-limiting disease. Collaborative projects such as this one enable us to not only broaden the number of people that hear about our charity, but it gives those that use our services an chance to participate in meaningful and enjoyable activities and to continue to help them to live well with their dementia. The fact that this project contributes beyond the boundaries of the charity into the local community gives everyone using our services a real sense of purpose. Clearly as a result of the pandemic this set of sessions have given our service users something different and unique to do in what has been a very challenging and isolating year for them. Mark Hainy, Charity Director, Younger People with Dementia

Arts & Heritage Partner

Our 2020/21 Cultural Commissioning project, Life Stories, aimed to take us into a closer, in depth relationship with two providers of services and activities for older people; Age UK Berkshire and Younger People with Dementia. This time we were embedding a member of The MERL's staff into the Age UK Berkshire's office and organisation. One of our objectives in pursuing this was to broaden the programme of activity across more of Reading. Despite all the problems and delays caused by the pandemic we have been able to make some of those deeper connections. Rather than offer activities to a much larger group of users, we necessarily focused on smaller numbers but have been able to devise a popular programme that has involved celebrating and gathering life stories and making good use of these stories in exhibitions, coffee mornings and other pandemic "get togethers". We have also been able to link this work to other project funded initiatives in the area such as Reading Borough Council's High Street Heritage Action Zone. Isabel Hughes, Associate Director Museum of English Rural Life

Key Successes

The key outcome from this has been the engagement level from the participants in multiple settings. Even though it was a virtual series, the events offered opportunities for connection and relationship building between members. The emphasis was very much based on a person-centred approach to ensure relevance and maximise opportunities for engagement. This was particularly significant in the operating context of a pandemic which has restricted activity and social engagement for participants over the year. Sessions were designed to last an hour but frequently went beyond that as participants were so engaged in the subject matter and conversation. When gathering feedback from the virtual café group, we asked them what kept them coming back each month. They highlighted the fact that it was the combination of Age UK network and the MERL collections resources & expertise which made it

different and more interactive 'not just a talking shop -Seeing the old pictures of Reading I have not seen or been aware of have made it special.'

- Demonstrated that in lockdown restrictions the project plan was flexible and robust enough to be adapted to changing conditions and that the techniques could be modified to fit new settings.
- Although the project was not able to reach some of the most isolated in their own homes, feedback from participants/stakeholders indicate the situation would have been much worse had the project not delivered this type of support during Covid.
- Adapting Older People's day format broaden the scope of the event to enable older people to express and share their feelings about the pandemic and lockdown through arts and cultural means, giving them the opportunity to be more creative.
- Collected a range of stories using 1:1 one off sessions, 6 -week programme, 4-week small group programme and monthly large group events using online technology. Shown proof of concept in multiple settings with a variety of participants
- OPWG virtual Christmas event was attended by a different group of people to those who attended the face to face events. The online version is reaching a previously untapped audience.
- Participant feedback indicates that taking part in the life stories project has increased the quality of discussions they are having with family and friends.
- Strong communication links across the partnership groups based on underlying shared values on approaches and techniques enabled the project to adapt effectively to shifting priorities brought about by Covid.
- Realtime story telling training has upskilled 7 volunteers for future projects.
- Royal Berkshire Hospital care crew training has upskilled 3 staff on reminiscence for future Elderly ward activities.
- Engaged Leighton Park School laying foundation for future intergenerational activities.

Conclusions

The benefits of the project for those who have taken part are clear to see based on the outputs, key successes and feedback. Adapting the activities from face to face to online technology has been more effective than we expected. Many of the older generation have embraced the online opportunities and it has built their confidence in using the tools, enabling them to make new connections and broaden their experience. The scale and scope of the partnerships have expanded as a result of the project, allowing us to bring on-board new partners and raised awareness of the work to a broader audience. Lockdown restrictions have shown that even in a crisis the methods are relevant and valuable for community engagement. The restrictions meant that we were unable to reach some of the most socially isolated older people in the community who have no access smart phones or computers and digital exclusion remains a challenge.

It has clearly illustrated the value of collaborating with local community groups to build partnerships aimed at tackling social isolation of older people, bringing together the combined expertise of heritage, healthcare professionals and voluntary organisations to refine best practices.

We need to see this programme delivered in normal times; face to face and online when we can get people out of isolation, meeting up in groups participating in creative activities that link to telling their story.

We feel this is a starting point from which to build a case for further funding support.