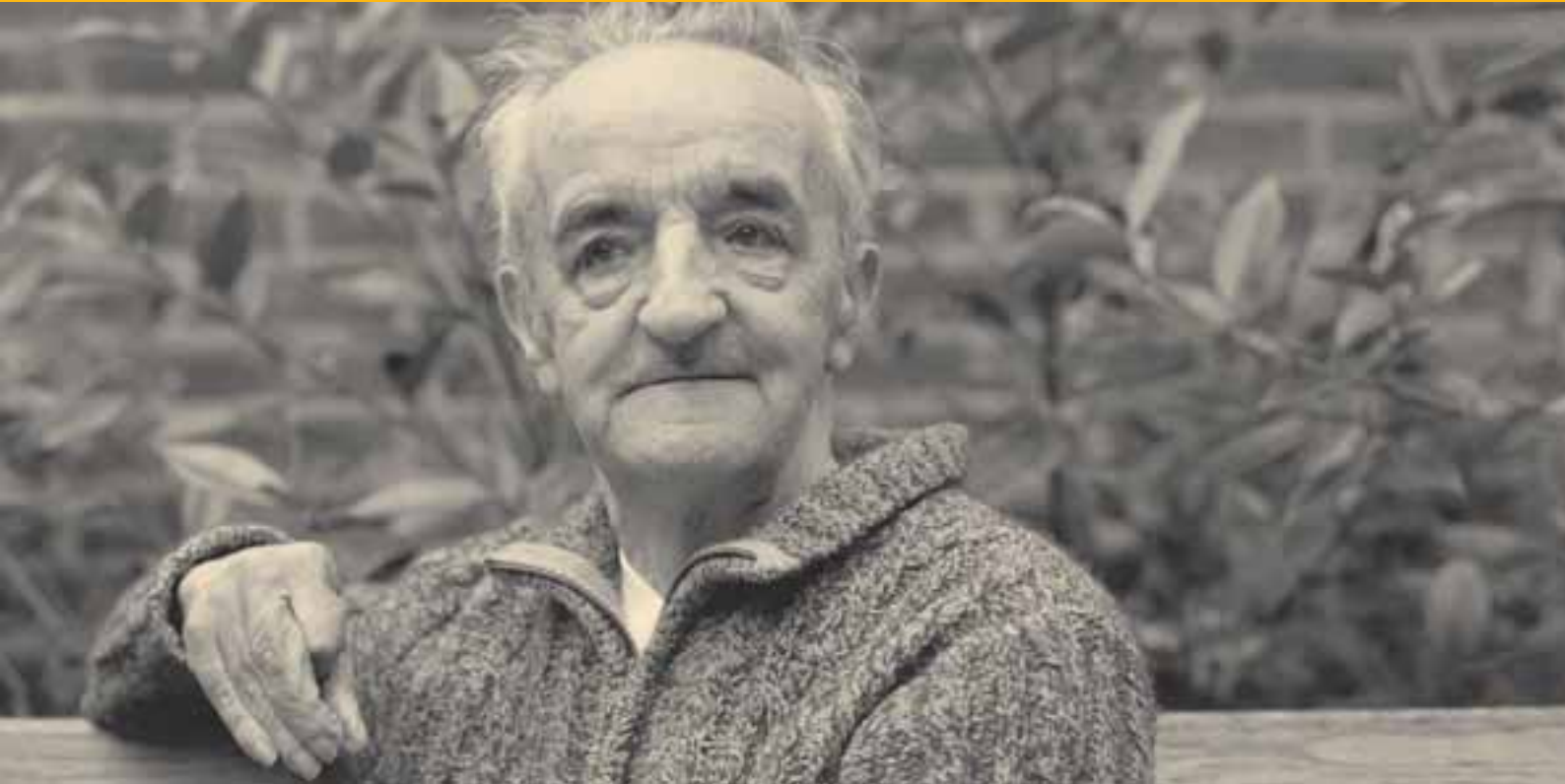


Live Choices



Helping older homeless people engage in meaningful occupation in the community

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meaningful occupation in the community**

Kim Willcock

Help the Aged

2006

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Executive summary



Live Choices was an innovative 'meaningful occupation' service in East London for people aged 50 and over who had experienced homelessness or who were isolated. The project supported people who wished to engage in meaningful occupation and get involved in the local community. The project aimed to provide opportunities for social contact within the wider community and help older people to build confidence and skills.

The Live Choices project demonstrated that homeless and formerly homeless older people can, with support, develop new interests, establish new social relationships and engage in regular meaningful occupation in the community.

The project also demonstrated how older homeless people can be meaningfully involved in service development and evaluation. Older people were involved throughout the process of planning and developing the project. The project was set up in direct response to feedback from homeless and former homeless older people interviewed for an earlier study in London. The issues raised by older people were incorporated into the service specification and subsequent project design. Service users were consulted throughout the development of the project and many of the project activities were set up in

response to suggestions made by clients. The views of older people were central to the current study and evaluation of the project.

Services provided

The project offered a holistic service response to clients' meaningful occupation needs.

The service provided:

- a thorough needs assessment to ascertain needs and abilities, goals and ambitions and advice on ways of achieving goals;
- a gateway into housing, health and support services to overcome barriers to engaging in activities;
- a range of group activities to promote the development of supportive social networks and build confidence and skills;
- one-to-one emotional support to help clients engage in activities;
- information about local events, resources and grants and assistance with finding suitable transport;
- encouragement to move on to activities in the community and continued support to help people stay engaged in an activity.

Findings

- The project successfully helped homeless and formerly homeless older people to access and sustain engagement in regular meaningful occupation in the community.
- During the monitored period 66 referrals were made to the project. Of these, 51 people received regular support.
- The project was effective in overcoming some of the barriers that prevent older homeless people from engaging in activities by linking clients into health and support services and working in partnership with community projects.
- Clients were enthusiastic about their involvement in activities, committed to the groups, and became motivated to attend regularly. There was a low attrition rate once clients had engaged with the service.
- Through their involvement in the project, clients became involved in a wide range of activities, including training and educational courses, arts projects and creative activities and courses.
- A number of clients moved on to activities within the wider community, moving away from reliance on homelessness provision, with continued support. Some started accessing older persons' resources, community projects and further education colleges. A number of clients enrolled on university and college courses and some clients became involved in regular volunteering. Some clients began accessing community resources independently, sometimes for the first time in many years.
- Regular engagement in meaningful activities benefited older homeless people in many ways. Reported benefits included improved skills, reduced social isolation, increased confidence, improved motivation and, in some cases, cutting down on drinking.
- Through their involvement in the project, many clients accessed other services including resettlement and tenancy

sustainment services, alcohol agencies and social services.

Lessons learnt

Reaching isolated older people

- Initial referrals were slow and took time to build up.
- It was important to spend time forming links with a wide range of agencies to establish sources of referral to the project, sources of support for clients as well as resources to which clients could be referred.
- Proactive outreach was essential to reach the more severely isolated older people and to engage with potential clients.
- Once the service was established, word of mouth attracted new clients.

Making activities and resources accessible to older people

- The Live Choices project was thoroughly researched and planned before it started. Partnerships were formed with other agencies to make services more accessible to older clients.
- Projects need to address issues of accessibility, including locality, cultural diversity, language and literacy.
- It is essential to provide assistance with finding suitable transport for older clients, especially for those with mobility problems.
- Information about free or subsidised activities should be offered, together with assistance with benefit applications to help overcome financial barriers.

Encouraging community involvement

- Services need to consider ways of bridging the gap between the homeless life and a life integrated into the community.
- Holding group activities in community facilities, outside of homelessness provision, may help to facilitate integration into the community.

- The project successfully supported older clients in accessing community facilities.
- Integrating into existing groups within the older persons' sector was more challenging, though there were examples of successful partnership working.
- It is important to provide support to the community organisations to which clients are referred, as they may lack confidence or expertise in working with homeless people.

The need for support and encouragement

- Many older homeless people lack confidence, and are depressed and poorly motivated. Heavy drinking can make it difficult for clients to sustain engagement in an activity, and memory problems can account for non-attendance on the part of some clients.
- Older homeless people need support and encouragement to access activities and services and may initially need someone to accompany them to a new activity

Sustaining engagement in activity

- It can take time for older homeless people to engage in meaningful occupation. There is need for continued support and a flexible approach to accommodate the needs of older clients. Some clients, for example, disengaged from the service and returned at a later date to participate in an activity on a regular basis.
- One of the main issues arising during the course of the project's development was finding ways to provide the necessary long-term support to sustain engagement in a community activity.
- The potential role for volunteers and peer-to-peer support in supporting access to meaningful occupation needs further exploration.

Report structure

- Chapter 1 describes the background to the project.
- Chapter 2 provides a detailed description of the project, and an in-depth account of its development.
- Chapter 3 considers outcomes for users from the perspective of staff involved in the project and the older people who used the service.
- Chapter 4 discusses issues arising during the course of developing the project and lessons learnt.

1 The rationale for 'Live Choices'



This report describes an evaluative study of an innovative 'meaningful occupation' project for older homeless people.

It is widely acknowledged that meaningful occupation is crucial to the successful resettlement of homeless people, both to build skills and confidence and to combat the isolation and boredom that can cause people to return to the street.

Many homelessness organisations have developed a range of opportunities for meaningful occupation to help develop the skills that homeless people need to live independently and become integrated into the local community. However, such schemes tend to be vocational in nature and more appropriate to the needs of younger homeless people. There have been few initiatives of this kind targeting older homeless people.

Initial objectives

A prime objective of the Help the Aged older homelessness programme was to promote the successful resettlement and long-term welfare of older homeless people. The Charity was also interested in supporting work that prevents homelessness among socially isolated groups.

With this in mind, Help the Aged developed a number of initiatives with the aim of ensuring older people are given access to services that will help them maintain their accommodation and enable them to live as independently as possible.

Specifically, Help the Aged wanted to develop a new project providing meaningful occupation and basic skills training for older people who have experienced homelessness, or who are isolated. Offering access to a wide range of activities, the aim of the project would be the successful resettlement and integration of homeless and ex-homeless older people into the local community.

The intention was to develop a service geared to the needs of those with little prospect or intention of gaining paid employment due to age and/or poor health. At the same time, however, the service would provide a gateway to employment training opportunities wherever this was appropriate.

Importantly, the project specification was based on direct feedback from homeless and former homeless older people. A research study¹ in London explored the views of older homeless people on their circumstances and needs. The

1 Willcock, K (2004) *Journeys Out of Loneliness: the views of older homeless people*. London: Help the Aged

study included interviews with 160 homeless and former homeless older people. The older people interviewed for this study highlighted the importance of being meaningfully occupied for health and well-being, for reducing social isolation, building social skills and improving self-esteem. Many of the older people interviewed had not accessed activities provided by homelessness services or in the wider community. The study identified some of the barriers to accessing activities and facilities and explored ways of enabling older people to gain access.

The research findings informed a draft project specification, which was developed within a steering group of service users, the researcher and homelessness project workers. Further consultation with older homeless people was undertaken by a user survey and group discussions were facilitated by a service user. The project specification was further developed by Help the Aged and subsequently sent out to local provider agencies.

During the process of developing the project specification Help the Aged consulted with a number of local provider agencies who worked with homeless people in East London, to discuss how best to develop the project. All the agencies had experience in the development and delivery of training and other activities for homeless people.

The consultation reviewed existing education and training resources available to homeless people and the range of local agencies promoting work on basic skills training, education and meaningful occupation. It was agreed that the project should not duplicate existing provision. Rather than directly providing activities, the project should enable older people to access existing resources available in the community. The project would encourage older people to move on from homelessness provision and support them to access mainstream facilities and community services.

Getting started

It was agreed that the best way forward would be a partnership between a number of agencies.

Among the partner agencies were a range of resources that could be better utilised by older people, including various activities and training programmes. In addition, many other activities were available in the wider community, including those delivered by older persons' services and at community facilities. Should gaps be identified, collaborative work with other agencies would set up new activities for older people or adapt existing provision to make it more accessible to older clients.

It was decided that an advisory group of partnership agencies should be set up to support and guide the project, and to facilitate joint working between agencies, though having no management responsibility for the project.

It was agreed that the project should have two distinct phases:

- **identifying the needs** of potential clients and matching these against the resources available across partnership agencies; mapping out suitable provision, identifying gaps and planning the logistics of clients using services
- **proactively engaging** with clients to help them identify and gain access to activities and courses that met their needs, and assisting them in the initial stages of using the service and ensuring that the appropriate activities were available to them.

Resources and service specification

It was proposed that a meaningful occupation worker be appointed to map local resources that older people could access and to develop the project.

Following the consultation exercise, Help the Aged redrafted a costed project specification (table 1) and following feedback from partner agencies the project specification was finalised and put out to tender to local agencies.

Funding (£100,000) was secured from Help the Aged and Zurich Financial Services (UKISA) Limited Community Trust to cover the costs of the project for a three-year period. St Botolph's Project (sbp) was successful in its bid to deliver the project.

Table 1 Service specification for the meaningful occupation project

The successful bidder was required to provide a service that met the following service specifications:

- **assess need**
 assess the need of potential clients to identify suitable activities and schemes in the local area. The options offered by the project were to be tailored to the individual needs of clients. The project would also assess the specific needs of black and minority ethnic older people and older women to ensure that they had equal access to the services developed and promoted by the project
- **map local services**
 map out training, courses and other activities locally available to meet the assessed needs of homeless and socially isolated older people in east London (Tower Hamlets and Hackney). This would involve looking at activities that could potentially be made available to the client group from existing resources
- **develop local services**
 identify gaps in current service provision and facilitate the development of new services and provision designed for the client group. The project could act in an advisory capacity to local agencies in developing and resourcing new activities designed for older people
- **be proactive**
 make regular contact with homeless and ex-homeless older people through homelessness services and support them in engaging with the project. Outreach contact with the client group would be a crucial element of the project
- **advocate**
 negotiate and facilitate access to training, courses, and other activities for older people. The project would seek to extend existing services to accommodate the needs of older people, which would involve negotiating with local statutory and voluntary agencies to make their services more accessible to the client group
- **support clients**
 provide ongoing support to clients to ensure they were able to engage successfully in the project activities. This could include attending courses with clients where necessary until they had the confidence to attend independently. The project would also liaise with support services to ensure that clients had the ability to engage in activities over the long term
- **arrange transport**
 ensure that clients had the necessary means to travel to activities. This could include subsidising public transport fares as well as providing other options for clients with specific mobility problems
- **promote the service**
 promote the service to local homelessness agencies and others working with homeless or socially isolated older people. Part of the challenge of the project would be to find ways of making contact with, and disseminating information to, the client group. The project would seek to ensure that as many of the target group as possible were aware of the meaningful occupation service
- **recruit volunteers**
 recruit and train volunteers to help to deliver the service. The involvement of volunteers would be an important element of the project in helping older people to engage with the local community
- **monitor and evaluate**
 provide annual targets for the number of clients to be assisted by the project and for those who successfully gained access to activities

 ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place for monitoring and evaluating the project

- **appoint a project co-ordinator**
employ a dedicated project co-ordinator to implement the project. This should be a new post, externally advertised
- **consult locally**
work in consultation and partnership with

local homelessness agencies. Work with an advisory group made up of the relevant local agencies. The success of the project would depend on consultation and clear lines of communication with participating agencies.

Project delivery

St Botolph's Project (sbp) had worked with single homeless people in the City and East End of London for over 40 years. The organisation worked particularly with those who are hardest to reach and long-term rough sleepers. Sbp delivered a wide range of services from initial contact and outreach to resettlement and tenancy sustainment. The organisation's services to homeless people included welfare advice, training and education and support for those resettled in the community.

The organisation had a strong track record in providing training and educational programmes to homeless people. Sbp ran several structured programmes aimed at developing basic and vocational skills. These included Steps, a pre-tenancy training programme which delivered training in life skills and literacy and numeracy, and Tracks, a slightly more in-depth course developing independent life skills and basic skills (IT, literacy and numeracy). Pathways delivered a focused intensive-training programme for homeless clients, to develop the skills and confidence necessary to enter the workplace or further education.

Sbp also had experience providing skills training specifically to older homeless people. The organisation had previously worked with Help the Aged to develop a training project for older people, called the 'Moving On' project. This was a small group-based training project which aimed to help older homeless people to develop life skills that would enable them to live as independently as possible.

It was envisaged that the new project would complement existing services. The organisation was part of the Off the Streets Partnership, a group of homelessness charities co-ordinating

training for homeless people in London. Through its role as lead agent in the east, sbp would be mapping service provision and establishing networks of providers in the area, and co-ordinating the training provision to homeless people in East London. It was felt that the Live Choices project would fit very well with this work and that each would enhance the other.

The Live Choices project was located within the organisation's Tenancy Sustainment Services with four TST workers in place. It would also have the support of the sbp advice workers, the mentoring co-ordinator and links to the training and education co-ordinator.

Regrettably, in March 2004, the St Botolph's Project went into liquidation. After the closure of sbp there was a period of uncertainty concerning the future of Live Choices. The project's weekly café group continued to run, providing some consistency and reassurance for the clients affected by the closure while the search was under way to find a new organisation to take on the project.

Help the Aged brokered the takeover of the meaningful occupation project (Live Choices) by **Thames Reach Bondway** for the final year of the three-year pilot. Thames Reach Bondway (TRB) is a London-based organisation that provides services to help rough sleepers until they are settled in permanent homes. Thames Reach was established in 1984 to work directly with rough sleepers on the streets of central London. Bondway was set up in 1978 to provide shelter and services for long-term rough sleepers. The two agencies merged in October 2001 and TRB now provides over 600 bed spaces for rough sleepers at various stages of the resettlement process.

Thames Reach Bondway had a strong track record in delivering meaningful occupation and training to homeless people. The organisation runs a number of meaningful occupation projects so a network of support was available, and the transition to TRB went smoothly. The project continued as before, without the need for any change.

Aims of the study

The study's aims are to:

- evaluate outcomes for users from the perspectives of older people and frontline workers;
- explore the benefits of activity for homeless, former homeless and isolated older people; and
- identify barriers to accessing activities and facilities and how these can be overcome.

Methods

The research employed a wide range of methods, including:

- semi-structured interviews and small-group discussions with older people;
- a structured questionnaire;
- informal discussions with project staff;
- participation in project steering groups;
- data from the project's own monitoring systems; and
- documentary sources (project literature, staff reports of work, meeting minutes).

Chapters 2 and 4 draw heavily on documentary sources of information supplied by the project, including the co-ordinator's reports.

A questionnaire was used to collect basic background information about service user characteristics, reasons for referral and clients' goals. These were completed by the project co-ordinator with each client (36 were completed altogether).

For the interviews, clients were contacted through the project co-ordinator. The co-ordinator sent out letters to all Live Choices clients with information about the research and a returnable tear-off slip. Many people returned the slips or said they would be happy to take part. Over one-third of the project's clients participated in an interview or small-group discussion.

Three small-group discussions were held with three people in each group (nine people in total). One-to-one interviews were carried out with four clients who had not engaged in the project's group activities but who received one-to-one support. Altogether, 13 clients were interviewed for the study, 11 men and two women. A few of the clients interviewed had been involved with the project for just a few weeks or more, but most of the clients interviewed had been using the service for a year or longer.

2 Developing the project



This chapter describes the project and its development in more detail.

Summary

Live Choices was a meaningful occupation service for people aged 50 or over who had experienced homelessness or who were isolated. The service was available to people who lived or used services in East London (Tower Hamlets and Hackney).

Jointly funded by Help the Aged and Zurich Financial Services Community Trust, the service was managed by sbp (St Botolph's Project) for two years. Following the closure of sbp in March 2004, the project was taken over by Thames Reach Bondway.

Intended as a stepping stone away from homelessness provision, the service aimed to build the necessary confidence and skills to enable older people to access services and facilities in the community, in accordance with each individual's aspirations and capabilities.

The service provided access to a wide range of activities, including social, leisure and educational activities and volunteering opportunities. Older people were offered continued support to engage in activities of their choice. An individual

needs-led approach allowed clients to pursue individual goals. The service provided information and advice as well as practical and emotional support, to enable people to engage in meaningful occupation in the community.

Project aims and objectives

The project supported people wishing to engage in meaningful occupation, get involved in the local community, volunteer and learn new skills. The main target for the project was to sustain involvement in regular community activities independently.

The project aims were to:

- provide basic skills training for people of 50 and over who had been homeless or who were isolated within the local community;
- provide opportunities for social contact within the wider community, facilitate social interaction and the development of supportive social networks;
- help older people build confidence and skills to enable them to move on to accessing resources and services in the wider community; and

- facilitate community involvement and social inclusion for isolated older people.

In order to achieve these aims the project aimed to meet the following objectives:

- offer one-to-one motivational support for isolated clients;
- work towards identifying meaningful occupation goals;
- provide information about community resources;
- plan with clients the steps and support required for them to achieve their goals;
- provide practical assistance in accessing community transport or grant funding to pursue meaningful occupation goals;
- provide emotional support to enable clients to access community resources; and
- offer additional support in the form of a meaningful occupation volunteer or mentor, to enable clients to build confidence and sustain their chosen activity.

Services provided

Live Choices provided a range of services to isolated older people:

- one-to-one support, encouragement and advocacy;
- help in identifying goals and steps needed to achieve them;
- information about local events, resources and grants;
- assistance in finding suitable transport and limited financial assistance with travel to and from activities; and
- group social activities including a weekly café morning, a newsletter group, a cinema club, classic film club and day trips during the summer.

The co-ordinator provided one-to-one emotional support to clients, to assist them in engaging in activities and accessing community resources. Clients could access support every

weekday between 9.30am and 5.30pm. Volunteer or mentoring support could also be provided outside these hours e.g. to attend an evening class.

Outcome measures

A series of milestones was established to monitor progress towards achieving the target of sustained involvement in a regular activity in the community. These were:

1. Client agrees to referral/self-refers
2. Client meets project co-ordinator
3. Client engages with project
4. Client continues to engage and agrees action plan
5. Client engages in an activity of choice
6. Client engages in regular community activity (with support)
7. Client sustains involvement in regular community activities.

Target group

The service targeted older people who:

- had experienced homelessness or were isolated and may have been at risk of homelessness or had housing needs;
- may have had alcohol, mental health or substance misuse support needs; and
- were not actively engaging in any activity and needed information, support or encouragement to access community facilities and to pursue specific meaningful occupation goals.

Staffing

The project was staffed by a full-time co-ordinator with the support of multi-agency workers and volunteers. For the first two years of the project the co-ordinator post was based in the Tenancy Sustainment Team (TST) at St Botolph's Project and line-managed by the Tenancy Sustainment Manager. The post holder

had responsibility for supervising, training and supporting volunteers placed within the project.

After the transition to Thames Reach Bondway (TRB), the Live Choices project was based at TRB head office, located within Community and Support Services (CSS), the umbrella for meaningful occupation services, and line-managed by the CSS manager. No other TRB staff were involved in the project. The project operated in east London and TRB did not have any other projects in those London boroughs.

Role of the Live Choices co-ordinator

The role of the co-ordinator was to help homeless and isolated older people gain access to activities and courses designed to promote

their well-being and enable them to participate in the local community.

The co-ordinator's tasks included:

- mapping and assessing the suitability of local service provision;
- assessing the individual needs of the client and determining their suitability for specific activities;
- where appropriate, accompanying clients to activities until they were confident enough to attend alone; and
- identifying gaps and advocating for particular activities to meet the needs of service users.

A more detailed description of the co-ordinator's role can be found in table 2.

Table 2 The role of the meaningful occupation co-ordinator

The post holder was to develop, manage and deliver sbp's Meaningful Occupation Project for the homeless, ex-homeless and socially isolated older people. The service was to facilitate older people gaining access to a range of training and educational activities designed to help them participate in the local community. The post holder and volunteers were to support and enable service users to gain access to a wide range of activities to ensure an optimum level of independent living in their accommodation, seeking thereby to promote their enjoyment of a good quality of life.

Main duties

1. To work with appropriate sbp clients and those of other organisations to assess their meaningful occupation needs.
2. To identify gaps in current provision and facilitate the development of new services and provision designed for this client group.
3. To publicise, promote and develop meaningful contacts with agencies providing employment, training, education and day care activities targeted specifically at homeless, ex-homeless and socially isolated older people.
4. To explore opportunities for the development of innovative training projects focusing on the needs of potential clients, including the specific needs of black and minority older people and older women to identify suitable activities and equal access to schemes in the local areas.
5. To continue to make regular contact with homeless and ex-homeless older people through homelessness services to encourage and support them to engage with the project.
6. To negotiate with local statutory and voluntary agencies to make their services more accessible and flexible to the client group.
7. To work in consultation and ensure a good working partnership with local agencies via an advisory group.
8. To investigate all options available to ensure that all clients have access to the project's activities, in particular those with specific mobility problems.
9. To liaise with the volunteer co-ordinator and the mentoring co-ordinator to recruit and train volunteers to help deliver the meaningful occupation service.

- 10. To assess potential volunteers and service users who have been referred or who have referred themselves to the scheme and to facilitate introductions with the volunteer mentors.
- 11. To give guidance, assistance and supervision to volunteer mentors who will be providing long-term non-professional support to older people, enabling them to develop a range of positive support within their local community and ensuring that they have the ability to engage in activities over the long term.
- 12. To provide training and advice for all sbp and partnership agency staff in the area of meaningful occupation.
- 13. To monitor, evaluate and review the quality, effectiveness and success of services delivered to clients.
- 14. To be responsible for the fulfilment of the scheme’s targets, while focusing on assisting each service user to achieve the most positive outcome possible.
- 15. To undertake direct client work through the use of a needs assessment, onward referral, reviews and handover to the appropriate link worker.

Volunteers

The role of volunteers attached to the project was to assist the meaningful occupation co-ordinator in delivering the Live Choices service, supporting clients both practically and emotionally to pursue their meaningful occupation goals. Volunteers worked with the Meaningful Occupation Co-ordinator and

Tenancy Sustainment Service workers to facilitate clients’ engagement in community activities and development of support networks. A training programme, facilitated by the project co-ordinator, was developed for volunteers.

A detailed role description was designed (see table 3).

Table 3 The role of the meaningful occupation volunteer

Main tasks

- To provide practical and emotional support to help clients achieve their meaningful occupation goals.
- To work with an agreed action plan.
- To support clients in accessing leisure, training and other local community resources.
- To liaise with the meaningful occupation co-ordinator concerning the client’s changing needs and other issues.
- To feed back to the meaningful occupation co-ordinator/TSS if concerns arise regarding a client’s well-being and ability to cope in their tenancy.
- To attend appointments/classes/community resources with the client.

- To research local resources.
- To abide by sbp’s policies while acting as a volunteer.
- To complete and return feedback after each visit.
- To visit service users on a weekly/fortnightly basis in their home or at a local resource to provide short-term (up to six months’) support concerning specific meaningful occupation action points.

Involvement

- A minimum time commitment of two hours per fortnight is required.

Support and supervision

- Support for this role will be provided by the Live Choices co-ordinator. All volunteers

are supported individually through regular support sessions. In addition, volunteers are encouraged to attend a support group meeting held every month.

Selection

- Volunteers are selected through an application/interview process. Two references are required and all potential volunteers are required to provide a form of photo identity.

Training

- Volunteers receive induction and training as part of the volunteer recruitment process.

- All volunteers must attend an induction before commencing work. The induction will include aspects of the volunteer role and relevant policies and procedures of sbp.
- There is a rolling programme of training which is optional. However, there is an expectation that volunteers will attend training that is relevant to their role.
- If appropriate external training is identified which will support the volunteer role, limited financial resources are available for this purpose.

Involvement of other agencies

A key aspect of the initiative was partnership working. Most of the Live Choices activities were developed in partnership with other agencies in Tower Hamlets and Hackney, making use of existing resources and avoiding the duplication of provision. The project had the use of a wide range of resources provided by local organisations including personnel, volunteers, transport, facilities, room space and equipment. The meaningful occupation co-ordinator worked with support workers and TST workers to encourage clients to attend activities.

Participating organisations included homelessness agencies, alcohol services, older person's services and community organisations, among them Providence Row Charity, City & Hackney Alcohol Project (Crossroads Centre) and the Sundial Centre, a community resource for people over the age of 55.

Protocols were established with other agencies which covered how referrals would be made, and who would take responsibility in the event of a crisis. Management at sbp felt that in order for the project to work effectively the project should not provide crisis support, and clients referred from another service would need to retain their current key worker so that responsibility for the client would not be passed on to the meaningful occupation co-ordinator. However, if an individual was referred, or self-referred, to the service and

had no existing support, he or she could be referred to sbp's Tenancy Sustainment Team.

Advisory group

An advisory group was convened with representatives from local voluntary sector agencies, including homelessness, older person's and alcohol services. The aim of the group was to support the development of the project and to try to make facilities more accessible to the target group. The group ran for the first year of the project and meetings were held quarterly with four to eight members attending.

User consultation

Live Choices offered opportunities for clients to get actively involved in the development of the project. The co-ordinator regularly consulted clients about the development of the service. Clients were also asked to complete feedback surveys about the service, asking them about the benefits of the service and for suggestions for any improvements they would like to see.

Early development

The early stages of developing the new project involved:

- assessing client need and mapping existing services to find out what was available within the local community;

- establishing links with other organisations that might have wished to refer clients to the project;
- publicising the project;
- working with each individual organisation to assess its clients and ascertain its needs;
- establishing a steering group and referral protocols; and
- undertaking proactive outreach to identify isolated older people and engaging with potential clients.

Mapping services and networking

The East End of London has a number of training and education programmes aimed at homeless people and the long-term unemployed, provided by local voluntary organisations and community colleges, among others.

The initial focus of the meaningful occupation project was the mapping of resources offering opportunities relevant to the older homeless and socially isolated client group in the boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Hackney. The co-ordinator's task was to identify what was available and accessible to the client group and identify any gaps. It was important to identify resources that were suitable for older people and were also capable of working with homeless people with complex needs.

This process continued throughout the first three years of the project. Visits were arranged to key resources and links established with service providers to facilitate easier access for clients interested in using the services. The mapping exercise included agencies providing a service to homeless people, older persons' resources and community projects.

Publicity and promotional work

Consideration was given to how to make the service attractive to older people and accessible to the target group. Leaflets were designed to promote the service and distributed locally. The leaflets contained simple, clear information and used pictures and imagery as literacy aids to depict different activities, to help people with

low literacy levels. Before printing the leaflet, the co-ordinator showed it to homeless people at a homeless centre and received a positive response.

The publicity leaflets were distributed to local homeless agencies along with referral forms, criteria and client self-referral forms. The leaflets had service contact details and reply slips with the sbp freepost address, so clients could write or call to make enquiries.

The first edition of the project's newsletter, *Live Voices*, was widely distributed in order to generate further interest in the service. Articles were also written for local magazines such as that produced by Homeless Link.

The co-ordinator promoted the service widely, including making visits to relevant facilities and giving talks about the project to relevant groups such as at the Homeless Link Meaningful Occupation Forum.

Proactive outreach

It is widely acknowledged that older homeless people can be hard to engage with and often lack confidence and motivation. As such, they may be unlikely to self-refer to a service. The co-ordinator needed to undertake intensive work with older people to encourage them to engage with the service. Reaching the most severely isolated older people, e.g. those who are not in contact with services, was likely to pose a particular problem.

Proactive outreach work was undertaken to try to locate and engage with isolated older people. Monthly meaningful occupation sessions were held at various centres to engage older clients. Sessions were held at the ACC, Crossroads and Crisis. Regular monthly outreach sessions were established at sbp's Aldgate Advice Centre and the Dellow Centre. Several clients accessed the service directly through these sessions.

The co-ordinator made numerous visits to local voluntary and statutory agencies to make contacts with staff and with clients. Meetings were held with key personnel in local agencies to discuss the Live Choices project and potential opportunities for joint working. These visits

served to promote the project and to identify organisations as sources of referral to the project.

This work targeted homelessness organisations where there were known to be high numbers of older homeless people, and older persons' services which were in contact with isolated older people. These included the Sundial Centre, local Age Concern groups and small voluntary organisations such as Friends and Neighbours, which carries out home visits to isolated older people, and Anchor Staying Put, which provides low-cost maintenance services and support to older clients. Local homelessness organisations included Aldgate Advice Café, the Dunlow Centre and the Dellow Centre.

The co-ordinator also visited specialist alcohol services including Crossroads, where work is carried out with older people who have alcohol problems and have experienced homelessness.

Referrals to the project

It was believed that it would be five months before the project would be open to external referrals. It had been agreed that during the first few months of the project the service would be provided to Sbp's existing clients, contacted through the Tenancy Sustainment Team. A high proportion of clients supported by the TST were aged over 50.

Once the project was established, referrals were accepted from other agencies. Older people were recruited to the project via proactive outreach, self-referral and referral from other agencies.

Clients could complete a self-referral form, stating what they might be interested in and where they would like to meet the co-ordinator. The self-referral forms were very short and did not request too much information, in order that they were not too intrusive or off-putting. A more thorough assessment was carried out once the client had engaged with the service.

Where clients received support key workers were required to complete a more detailed

referral concerning the client's health and lifestyle support needs.

Stages of engagement

Engagement with the project could progress through a number of stages. Firstly, the co-ordinator engaged with potential users on a one-to-one basis to build trust, to ascertain the client's interests and goals, undertake a needs assessment and establish initial engagement with the project. The client could access one of the project's group activities to build confidence and skills or engage in one-to-one activity with the co-ordinator or a volunteer. Clients were then supported in the accessing of activities and resources in the wider community, provided with continued support to sustain their involvement in activity, and progress was monitored.

First contact

People could access the project by contacting the project co-ordinator on weekdays from 10am to 5pm or by returning a referral form. After a client was referred or self-referred to the project the co-ordinator would arrange to meet him or her within two weeks of receiving the referral.

Potential clients could meet the Live Choices co-ordinator to discuss their interests, goals and support needs for meaningful occupation. The co-ordinator would offer advice on services providing activities, volunteering opportunities, training and so on, which would facilitate the achievement of these goals.

After the initial, introductory meeting the co-ordinator would offer a follow-up meeting to further discuss the client's interests and plan the next steps.

Potential clients who had not engaged with the service after agreeing to referral were added to the Live Choices mailing list and kept informed of the project's activities.

Action plan

Where goals arose, action would be agreed or advice offered and a follow-up appointment arranged. If a client identified specific meaningful occupation goals an action plan would be agreed and reviewed on an agreed date.

The action plan would take into consideration the kind of support that would enable the client to access the activities of their choice. This could take the form of a meaningful occupation volunteer (short-term support), a mentor (longer-term support), transport costs or assistance in obtaining a grant.

Addressing immediate needs

Once the client had engaged with the project a thorough assessment of needs could be undertaken. The meaningful occupation co-ordinator would work with older people to ensure they were linked into health and support services, mental health and alcohol services, and resettlement and tenancy sustainment services.

Sometimes immediate needs (e.g. homelessness, poor physical health, heavy drinking) needed to be addressed before a client was ready to engage in a regular activity. In some instances a client may have been referred to an appropriate support agency for support and then referred back to the project at a later date.

One-to-one support

The service offered individual support to enable clients to pursue their interests and goals and regular meetings to discuss progress and offer encouragement.

At first, support could be focused on helping a client to engage with the project. Where clients lacked motivation to engage in activities the service could work in a motivational capacity and offer support to enable clients to build self-esteem and engage the client in one-to-one social activities. The co-ordinator supported clients in accessing activities and facilities in the community, providing company for isolated clients attending an activity or service for the first time.

The project co-ordinator undertook one-to-one work with up to ten people at any one time. The co-ordinator maintained contact with clients on a monthly basis, and also provided advice and support to staff at community facilities. Where a client required more frequent contact fortnightly meetings took place.

To encourage their continued engagement in activities, the project planned to recruit volunteers to the project, to provide sustained support to older people once they had become more settled and were linked into other support services.

Group activities

Regular social activities and outings were organised, to provide an informal and non-threatening context within which older people could engage in the project and meet with other users. The size of groups was monitored as staff were concerned that if a group became too large vulnerable clients might not receive the attention they needed.

Live Choices provided a range of group activities to promote the development of supportive social networks and build confidence and social skills.

A snapshot of the groups running at one particular point in time could have shown:

- a weekly café morning, run in partnership with the Dellow Centre, which attracted on average 12 clients each week;
- a newsletter group, where clients shared local knowledge and participated in the production of a community newsletter, *Live Voices*;
- a cinema club that met monthly at a local cinema, attracting on average 10 clients each month;
- a classic film club, run in association with the Shoreditch drop-in centre;
- various day trips during the summer, attracting from six to 15 clients.

Café morning

The Live Choices café morning ran every Wednesday from 10am to 12 noon at the Dellow Centre, a hostel and drop-in facility managed by Providence Row Charity. Tea, coffee and snacks were provided and regular activities included bingo, quiz games, cards and in due course the screening of classic movies.

Attendance ranged from six to 15 clients each week, with an average of a dozen. The weekly group was open to hostel residents and isolated older people in the wider community. The group aimed to facilitate social interaction, build confidence and skills, encourage clients to access information about community resources and promote integration.

When first set up, the group sessions were held in the main day centre space, which was noisy and distracting, especially if the group was trying to concentrate on an activity. The group then moved to the centre's art space – a quieter, smaller area, reserved for this time period and purpose, where a more relaxed atmosphere could prevail.

The group was facilitated by the co-ordinator. When the group was first set up additional support was provided by a Providence Row staff member and a volunteer.

As the group evolved, members started to see it as something they belonged to rather than something they could attend. The café mornings were planned to encourage participation, and those who attended regularly often helped with setting up and clearing away. Also, clients often brought biscuits or games to share with others in the group, even though snacks were provided and there was no expectation that this would happen. One of the regular clients assumed the role of bingo caller and quiz games promoter. The games promoted lively social interaction.

Regular discussion and information exchange took place during the café morning – for example, about local education programmes, exhibitions, volunteer fairs and other Live Choices activities. From time to time guests were invited to the café morning to talk about activities or learning opportunities. These

included a staff member from TRB's peer education scheme and representatives from volunteering projects.

Live Voices newsletter

The project's newsletter, *Live Voices*, was produced in collaboration with East End Groundswell, a local service user-led organisation for homeless and ex-homeless people.

East End Groundswell provided the use of its IT suite to run the project, which was to produce a bi-annual newsletter disseminating information about Live Choices and local services, including items of creative interest, and to distribute this locally.

An editorial group was established led by Live Choices clients and was supported by a volunteer from Groundswell. The group met for three months at a time twice a year. The planning stages, design, layout and allocation of responsibilities took place during meetings held at Crisis Skylight and the typing and computer work took place at Groundswell E1, using Groundswell's IT suite at Bethnal Green training centre.

The newsletter group was a user-led project with the editorial panel deciding the journalistic and creative content. Contributors came from within the newsletter group and other Live Choices clients. Three clients were on the editorial panel and others contributed articles, poetry and artwork.

Clients had the opportunity to use their experience, knowledge and creativity. They demonstrated commitment to the newsletter, making regular contributions and researching articles about local services and places they had visited. The client who came up with the idea for a community newsletter wrote a regular column, 'Coffee Talk'. Another contributor sent a report by postcard from Norway while undertaking a pilgrimage, and another collaborated on an article about old-style cinemas. The co-ordinator also approached other local organisations that ran writing groups

to see if older participants would be interested in contributing work.

Staff observed that the co-operative nature of the group made it a good forum to improve writing and computer skills. Enthusiasm for the project tended to increase as the newsletter developed from a discussion point into a cohesive end-product and clients felt a sense of pride in and recognition for their achievement.

The newsletter was distributed locally to day centres, libraries, health centres and other facilities. Clients involved with the editorial group took responsibility for distribution.

The newsletter was found to be an effective way of engaging older people in the project. Several people joined the coffee morning after reading the newsletter. It was also a useful way of keeping in touch with people who used the service: mailed to all Live Choices clients, it provided information about opportunities for meaningful occupation, including reviews by clients of services available in the local community.

The newsletter was found to be an effective marketing tool in increasing awareness of the project among both potential clients and local agencies.

The newsletter group achieved great success, both in producing *Live Voices* and in the individual contributions, attracting welcome attention from a number of sources. For example:

- one client took copies of the newsletter to The Sharp End (Seniors' Health and Active Retirement Project), who were so impressed that they wrote to the meaningful occupation co-ordinator asking if they could be mentioned in the next edition;
- another client took some copies to Capital A arts (established 10 years and ex-members of the SMart network), who phoned the project co-ordinator keen to collaborate on an article for the summer 2004 edition and offer their service, a programme of art workshops in London galleries, to Live Choices clients;

- the Union Chapel Project Islington also contacted the project after seeing a copy of *Live Voices* to see if any of the project's clients would like to contribute to an arts festival it was hosting later that year. Project workers were so impressed with the work of the artist featured in the winter 2003 edition that they asked to feature his work in their exhibition, on their website and in an article for the international publication *Raw Vision*, which champions 'outsider art'.

Cinema club

The cinema club started when a client proposed writing film reviews for the community newsletter. This group, which offers an informal and unthreatening environment in which clients can meet socially, appeals to clients who find socialising difficult as watching a film with others offers a shared topic of conversation. Several clients who attended had not been to the cinema for 15 years or more.

The cinema club ran at a local cinema every four to six weeks and attracted on average nine clients. All films were chosen by clients, either by taking it in turns to request a film in advance or by a vote on the day. The Classic Film group emerged as an offshoot of this initiative.

Classic Film group

The Classic Film group, a later development of the Live Choices group, was widely requested. The group was run in association with the Shoreditch Drop-In centre. The group met between 1 and 4pm, which allowed time for the screening of a classic film, with refreshments and discussion afterwards. Attendance for the first screenings varied from one to three people, though wider interest was expressed. When planning the group, Live Choices clients suggested a number of classic films they would like to watch and during the associated discussion reminisced about 'the old days'. The Shoreditch Drop-In provided volunteer support for the group and also supplied biscuits and fruit.

Summer day trips

Regular day trips were organised during the summer months and run from the café morning. All trips were planned in consultation with Live Choices clients and attracted from six to 15 clients. Trips included visits to the Science Museum's *Lord of the Rings* exhibition, Hendon Air Museum, the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green, Kew Gardens and the coast.

Accessing activities in the wider community

Live Choices offered up-to-date information about local services and events and individual support for getting involved.

The co-ordinator provided:

- assistance with finding and applying for grant funding;
- assistance with fares to and from activities; and
- help with researching training opportunities, activities of interest and local resources.

Clients were encouraged and supported in accessing an activity of their choice in the wider community, with progress geared to individuals. They were provided with continued support by the project co-ordinator to sustain their engagement in an activity and monitor progress.

Supporting referral agencies

The project was designed to support and enhance existing services. The project co-ordinator worked with providers, advocating on behalf of users in order to achieve a greater flexibility of provision and take-up of the service, and to ensure existing services were made more accessible to the client group. Some services required support to make their resources more accessible to the client group. If, for example, they were not equipped to include a potentially more chaotic client group, the project co-ordinator would attend the group with a client, offering additional support.

3 Findings



This chapter considers outcomes for users from the perspective of staff involved in the project and the older people who used the service. Data were collected by means of a structured questionnaire, small-group discussions and individual interviews with older people who had used the service. Additional sources of information include the project's own monitoring data and informal conversations with project staff.

Service users

Monitoring data was collected for the period April 2002 to October 2004.

Altogether, 66 referrals were made to the project. Of these, 51 people received regular support while 15 did not engage with the project. At the end of the monitoring period (October 2004) there were 43 clients on the project's books. Thirty-six people were engaging with support and eight were not (seven were no longer receiving support and one had died).

There was a low drop-out rate once clients engaged with the service. Very few clients failed to engage with the service after agreeing to a referral. Occasionally a client would access the service for specific information, e.g. about training options, and then disengage with the project. Some clients disengaged with the service during a crisis to return at a later date.

The total number of clients could have been higher if the project had included people with less severe problems. However, the aim of the service was to provide a service to older people who were otherwise unlikely to get involved in activities and who had high support needs.

Service user characteristics

Information is available for 36 clients who were engaged in the project as at October 2004.

Most clients (83 per cent) were male (table 4). All clients were aged 50 or over. Forty-one per cent were aged 60 or more. Most of the project's clients (92 per cent) were white. Sixty-seven per cent were white English and 25 per cent were Irish or Scottish (table 5).

Table 4 Age and sex of clients

Age	Men	Women	Total
50–59	14	5	19 (53%)
60–69	11	1	12 (33%)
70+	3	0	3 (8%)
Not known	2	0	2 (6%)
Total	30 (83%)	6 (17%)	36

Table 5 Ethnic group of clients

	Number of people	%
Black	2	6
White	33	92
Mixed	1	3
Total	36	101*
*Total is not equal to 100 due to rounding up.		
English	24	67
Irish	7	19
Scottish	2	6
Welsh	0	0
Asian	0	0
African	3	8
Caribbean	0	0
Total	36	100

At the point of first contact with the project, just over one-half of the clients (56 per cent) were living in an independent tenancy. Twenty-two per cent were living in supported housing or a residential care home and 22 per cent were

staying in temporary hostels or shelters (table 6). A high proportion of clients had long histories of sleeping rough.

Table 6 Clients' current accommodation

	Number	%
Independent tenancy	20	56
Supported housing/ residential care	8	22
Hostel/shelter	8	22
Total	36	100

Many clients presented with complex needs and chronic health problems (table 7). Nineteen per cent of the clients had chronic or severe physical health problems. Forty-four per cent of clients had mental health problems or marked memory loss. Just over one-third of clients had alcohol problems. Most in this group were heavy drinkers. Three-quarters of the project's clients had either a mental illness or an alcohol problem.

Table 7 Health, disability and substance misuse

	Number of people	%
Physical illness/disability	7	19
Mental illness	16	44
Alcohol problem	13	36
Either mental health or alcohol problem	27	75
Other substance misuse	1	3

Entry route

Table 8 Entry route		
	Number of people	%
Sbp referral	16	44
Other agency referral	12	33
Self-referral	8	22
Total	36	99

Most clients (77 per cent) who came into contact with the project were referred by an agency (table 8). The majority (44 per cent) were existing sbp clients (mainly referred by the TST) and 33 per cent were referred by other agencies including local homelessness and alcohol agencies. Eight clients self-referred. Once the project was more established people began self-referring to the service, either from having read the newsletter, which was widely distributed, or from word-of-mouth.

Reasons for accessing the service

Participants were asked why they joined Live Choices, and what they hoped to achieve. This information was collected by a questionnaire completed with each client (36 were completed).

Table 9 Reasons for accessing the service		
Reason for joining	Number of people	%
Isolation/loneliness	22	61
Lack of daytime activity	17	47
Specific goal or activity	11	31
Advice/information	5	14

The main reason for accessing the project (reported by 61 per cent of clients) was social isolation or loneliness (table 9). Some clients self-isolated and were withdrawn. For example, one very isolated man had mobility problems and was fearful he would be mugged if he went out, so he was reluctant to attend day centres. He had got out of the habit of going out and talking to people and had lost confidence.

Many clients had little contact with other people and spent much of their time at home alone. In interviews, many clients said that before engaging in the project they had been isolated and inactive, spending their time ‘sitting indoors all day with nothing to do’ as one man put it.

The second most common reason (reported by 47 per cent) was a lack of daytime activity. Clients wanted to find ways of occupying their time in a more constructive way, to keep occupied, to attend regular groups and find ways of structuring their time. For some people this was linked to mental health or alcohol issues: they needed to find ways of structuring time to alleviate depression, to distract from drinking, and as a way of making social contact in a non-drinking environment.

Eleven clients (31 per cent) had a specific goal or activity in mind at the point of referral, and viewed the project as an opportunity toward achieving personal ambitions. One client, for example, was interested in publishing and selling his poetry and another wanted to develop and exhibit his artwork. Several others wanted to undertake courses at college or university. Several people joined the project with a view to volunteering and one client wanted to re-enter paid employment.

Older people contacted by the project were interested in a wide range of activities. Many clients were interested in music and the arts, painting and writing; some subsequently made contributions to the project’s newsletter. Older clients were especially interested in outings which helped to attract people to the project. Many clients, especially the hostel residents, expressed interest in ‘healthy’ activities and self-

help strategies, such as swimming, health and nutrition, and complementary therapies. Some clients subsequently became involved in researching health issues and complementary therapies for the newsletter.

Five clients said they wanted to use the service simply to get information and advice about local resources or courses available. Among them were one or two people who were interested in attending a one-off (as opposed to regular) activity such as a day trip, or wanting support to plan a holiday to visit estranged relatives.

Access to other services

Clients were referred to housing and support services, including the Contact and Assessment Team (CAT), resettlement and tenancy sustainment services, volunteer services, alcohol agencies and social services, as appropriate. Clients also received help with completing forms and making applications for benefit entitlements.

In addition they gained access to health and support services through their participation in group activities. Some clients had chronic and severe physical and mental health problems. Staff believed there were high rates of undiagnosed depression, but clients often refused to see a GP and would not ask for help. Staff involved in the project felt that social activities helped older clients to ask for support about their health and other needs. Some people while participating in the groups brought up issues in passing, including things they had not disclosed before. These were sometimes serious concerns such as the threat of being evicted from their accommodation. From their involvement in the group activities staff felt they became increasingly aware of clients' needs and problems.

Activities clients engaged in

Clients were enthusiastic and committed to the group activities, and over time became actively involved in the groups. Clients attended the group activities regularly, with weekly attendance ranging from eight to 24 (table 10).

Table 10 Activities clients engaged in

Activity	Number of people
Café morning	24
Cinema club	13
Classic Film club	3
Newsletter group	8
Social events	16
Activities in the wider community	19

The weekly café morning attracted on average 12 clients each week and the cinema club an average of 10 clients each month. Various day trips during the summer attracted between six and 15 clients. Nineteen clients moved into activities in the wider community, such as community resources for older people, women's community projects, further education colleges and universities. A number of clients enrolled on university and college courses in art, sewing, ESOL and OU degree study. Clients also accessed training and arts projects, learning how to use the internet, acting and photography.

The co-ordinator was successful in securing funding for various activities and equipment, including educational courses, an art exhibition, IT equipment to assist study, and a sewing machine.

Ms L, a 66-year-old widow and refugee, accessed Live Choices to find out about ESOL support. She had an interest in tailoring and the project obtained a grant of £150 to buy her a sewing machine to use these skills and provide her with a hobby. She is now able to sew at home.

Ms L was also given information about sewing classes with ESOL support run by a local women's community project. She decided to enroll, and as she has mobility problems her key worker supported her with a dial-a-ride application to enable her to access this project.

Ms L is very proud of the certificates she earned from her accredited sewing classes and is speaking English with more confidence.

Mr F was referred to the service because he was socially very isolated. His main interest was to go on a daytrip out of London. Live Choices introduced Mr F to a community resource for older people. He went with them on a daytrip to Margate and Canterbury. He engaged with cinema club trips too and then began attending an older person's day resource on a regular basis.

Mr G, aged 60, referred himself to the project through an outreach shift at a local homeless day centre. He hoped to do an access course for university so he could achieve his goal of studying philosophy.

Mr G engaged enthusiastically with the service and participated in a variety of Live Choices activities. He became a regular contributor to the Live Voices newsletter project and it was his suggestion to set up the cinema club trips.

Mr G was supported by the project to apply for a Crisis Changing Lives award for computer equipment to enable him to study independently for an Open University degree course. He was successful in his application and was awarded £1,100 to purchase IT equipment for the Open University course which he then undertook. This boosted his confidence. Live Choices supported him in this initiative.

Mr R, in his mid-sixties, was sleeping rough when he was first referred to the project. He wanted one-to-one support to plan activities he wished to be involved with in future and to plan the development of his artwork.

Through the intervention of Live Choices, Mr R re-established contact with his social worker. As he was concerned about using hostel accommodation for all age groups, the Live Choices co-ordinator supplied his social

worker with referral information for long-term hostel accommodation for older drinkers. His social worker subsequently referred Mr R to the hostel, which also offers a programme of meaningful occupation.

It was a while before accommodation became available. In the interim his social worker linked Mr R with a CAT (Contact and Assessment Team) worker so he could access short-term hostel accommodation for older homeless people.

For a while Mr R continued sleeping rough and drinking heavily, but with the co-ordinated support of the two support agencies and Live Choices Mr R completed a detoxification process and then transferred to a rehabilitation centre. While at the centre he began painting prolifically.

Live Choices supported Mr R's enrolment on an art course at a further education college and secured a £400 grant to buy art materials for this course. Subsequently he produced much new artwork and his confidence in his work increased.

A number of clients became involved in regular volunteering (e.g. for dog walking, art mentoring and gardening), in various settings including hospitals, day centres and community centres, a city farm, within an Age Concern handyperson project, and with other charitable organisations. Volunteering gives clients the opportunity to use their skills. One man, for example, who volunteered for Age Concern, said he enjoyed the practical nature of his volunteer role as handyperson because it used the skills he possessed prior to his head injury when he worked as a janitor.

Mr P, in his fifties, accessed support from Live Choices to find ways of structuring his time to overcome depression. He mentioned that he had an interest in gardening, so the project helped him to engage with a gardening project at a city farm. The Live Choices co-ordinator met regularly with Mr P and his mentor to co-

ordinate support. He began volunteering regularly at the farm. Mr P was also interested in participating in exercise for people over 50 and Live Choices helped him research the options.

Some clients began accessing community resources independently. One man, for example, starting going to the cinema on his own on a regular basis as an alternative to the pub. Previously he had not been to the cinema for over 26 years. The co-ordinator observed that clients learnt alternative ways of spending their time and were able to make more informed decisions about how they wanted to spend their time.

Mr N, aged 70, accessed one-to-one support from Live Choices to overcome isolation, as a result of which he used the Tube for the first time in 20 years and visited the Museum of London.

He collaborated on an article for an edition of *Live Voices* on old-style cinemas, as he had fond memories of old films and what cinema-going used to be like.

Initially he felt able to engage only with one-to-one support, but with encouragement Mr N started attending the café morning and became a regular. He also attended the Classic Film club at the Shoreditch Drop-In centre.

Health and social benefits

Both staff and service users reported social and health benefits from attendance at regular activities.

Social benefits

Clients were very isolated and often had minimal social contact.

'It's a matter of the loneliness and the isolation. That is the object of it. It's very beneficial to a lot of people, because they lead a very lonely existence, myself included. I lost my wife a few years ago. I was very depressed, no one to turn to. My hand reaches out for a bottle. I am an

alcoholic. I bottle things up – drinking releases it. Talking helps, but you have to have someone to talk to.'

'I've got no relatives. It helps to mix with people. It helps a lot of lonely people... companionship. It's a lonely existence out there if you don't know people... It's nice. It's not just biscuits and tea, it's the company. Company, that's what it's about. It's better than going over the park sitting by yourself reading the paper with nothing to do... Somewhere to go.'

Sometimes participants linked their social isolation to retirement. They referred to the difficulties they encountered following retirement, of boredom and loneliness and difficulty in keeping occupied. They said there was a need for such a project for retired people, to help them keep active and combat isolation and boredom.

They enjoyed the social contact at the café morning and the daytrips, and the opportunity these provided to meet new people and make friends.

'It's great. You make great friends, get a social life, get to know people... It cheers me up usually. Something to look forward to. I don't know what I'd do if we lost it, lost this group.'

Staff observed that clients seemed to enjoy the company of people of a similar age, to go to the cinema, or to a café, and they often reminisced together during these activities. It seemed to make bonding easier. On the other hand, they also valued the opportunity to mix with younger people – for example, when they went on daytrips.

Clients valued spending time with people of a similar age, with whom they had more in common and shared experiences.

'When you're over 50 you like to be amongst your own peers. Young people think differently, live in a different world. I can communicate with people over the age of 50 because they've had the same experiences. You can't talk to young kids about those things. They think you're barmy.'

'Over the age of 50, what do you really need? You need people of your own age group or maybe

older. It's good to listen to them. I think it's a good idea for people 50 years and over. It's really needed. People who are younger, they do different things. They've got their own lives, live it how they want to live it.'

Some said they preferred an age-specific service because they wanted a quieter and calmer environment.

'When youngsters come in, you possibly get uneasiness and liberty-taking. So many coming, like in the [Project] Centre and other places, makes it uneasy.'

'Things get out of order, teenagers mixing with OAPs. They've never seen life. I prefer to see it as it is, all at a similar level. Youngsters jump up, they're too active, banging the table. The noise!'

'When you get older you calm down, you want your own individual space. Because of the behaviour of some young people, but not all.'

Others, however, said they did not like being segregated by age. Some felt age made little difference and they valued the company of people older and younger than themselves.

'Compartmentalisation via age. Part of me would prefer a mixed age group rather than a "load of old gits". I prefer to hang out with a mixed age group. Most of my friends are younger.'

'The two hours goes very quickly. Discuss something each time. You can always learn from older people. They have lived long, had a longer life than you. You can learn from younger people too.'

Staff believed there were advantages to having age-specific services. Older people feel safe with others of a similar age and with whom they have things in common, and similar backgrounds: this helps a group to gel.

Clients increasingly became more sociable with the other group members and they made friends. Staff reported that following their involvement in the group activities, many clients became more confident in group situations and started sharing information and jokes with other group members.

This was also reported by clients who said that through their involvement in the group activities they began feeling more comfortable talking to other people.

Psychological health and well-being

Clients reported improvements in psychological health, and these benefits were also observed by the staff involved in the project.

Keeping active helped to distract from problems:

'I got serious problems. Coming here helps you to forget them. It helps people who are in poverty to forget about it for a while... Something to get out of bed for.'

Group members appeared less withdrawn, more positive and increasingly sociable. Staff also observed improvements in clients' confidence and self-esteem. This seemed to be linked to having the opportunity to use their skills and learn new skills.

Clients were proud of their achievements. Staff observed, for example, that producing artwork and making regular contributions to the newsletter boosted confidence in their skills and abilities. In interviews. Clients commented on skills they had improved since joining the project, such as writing, spelling, grammar and artwork. They also valued the opportunity to use skills they had acquired from earlier employment.

Improved motivation

Many clients lacked motivation, sometimes linked to depression or heavy drinking. The co-ordinator worked with clients to try and motivate them, increase daily activity levels and improve self-care.

'After retiring it's hard to get out and do things. And depression – it's hard to find the motivation. I wanted to go to the museum for some time, but wouldn't have gone alone. Motivation. [The co-ordinator] is good at that, motivating.'

'[The co-ordinator] sees me. Otherwise I stay at home, alone mainly, indoors all day and all night. [The co-ordinator] is trying to get me involved in things outside the flat. Get motivated.'

I'm not eating much, not hot meals. Seeing [the co-ordinator] is getting me motivated. Going out is giving me an appetite to eat. Talking to [the co-ordinator] about these things, why I need to eat proper meals. You get hints about things, like if you go for a walk you will get an appetite... I want to learn to swim. Swimming is good for the mind and spirit and body... I want to get more and more motivated. Sitting around all day is doing me no good at all. I'm getting a leisure pass. When I get that I will start going out more.'

Over time there were noticeable improvements in clients' motivation, noted by staff and clients. Clients started showing more interest in self-care and their health. They became more interested in day-to-day activities and developed new interests and hobbies independent of the project.

'I'd still be sitting about doing nothing if hadn't met [the co-ordinator]. I only started painting again since I met her... The magazine is good. Shame it can't be bigger, because of funds.'

'I've read a lot of books now. I never used to. Wednesday mornings, trips out, working on the magazine. I have to research things, and that leads on to something else, and I move on to other things, like reading and other interests.'

The participants valued the one-to-one support and advice which helped them to resolve problems and open their minds to the opportunities that were available to them.

'[The co-ordinator] was full of ideas about what to do with my life. I have a flat now. And people to talk to.'

'Problem-solving, help with benefits etc., any difficulties. Very supportive – e.g. doing forms. [The co-ordinator] is always very available if there's something I'm interested in. She does the research. [The co-ordinator] is open to new suggestions all the time, educational things etc. She helps with getting information e.g. online.'

Having someone to go with and the encouragement of staff and other group members motivated clients to get out and do things.

'There's a lot to do in London but if you don't have someone to do it with you don't do it. We all need companionship. Like going into a café and having a cup of tea. Always enjoy it much better with companionship than by oneself.'

'I stopped working in 2001... I wanted some kind of creative things to do. I became involved with the magazine project. I helped on the first two magazines. I've done various activities – trips out, the museum, exhibitions. I've a passion for aircraft. I've been on four trips. It's good. I don't go on the Tube or travelling alone. I wouldn't have gone on my own. I'm only one person and I wouldn't have done these things... It's a meaningful way to spend your time. Doing things and going places which I wouldn't have done. Getting encouragement. We always discuss things, what to do.'

Time out from drinking

Regular activity in a dry environment provides 'time out' from drinking. Since joining the project, several clients stopped or cut down on their drinking. Others managed to abstain from drinking while engaged in an activity or while on a day trip. Project staff noted that some clients discovered a range of social activities that don't involve drink whereas previously they spent their time drinking in the pub or park.

In interviews, several older people mentioned that the project had helped them to cut down on the amount of alcohol they drink. Some said that before joining the project they never went out and without it they would be likely to stay at home drinking.

'I wouldn't know what we would be doing if I wasn't doing this. I'd be alone, drinking, otherwise. Most would hit the booze if it weren't for this.'

'Got someone to turn to when things go wrong. You come for the company, you get on with people and enjoy it, play cards and bingo. Somewhere you can go. I used to sit in the park all day with a few cans. I'd otherwise be in the pub because you have companionship there, even if it is drunken. This keeps you out of the bar, and it's cheaper.'

Peer support

The clients emphasised the role of peer-to-peer support in helping them cope with loneliness and feelings of sadness. They gained support and acceptance from being part of a group and the relationships that developed, and from being with others who had had similar experiences.

'This project has meant so much to me in the past and still means so much. I can walk into the room, say "Hi" and smile. I always feel welcome. It's so important, to feel welcome... I have no family here, I don't know anyone. I saw a flyer at [project] hostel... I was depressed, putting it mildly. Seeing [the co-ordinator] was a lifeline for me. Somewhere to go, meet people, to be with people. Literally, it has been a lifeline to me. I was so depressed.'

'It's nice to talk to other people who understand, who have probably been through the same situation as oneself... Loneliness, utter loneliness, depression, despair. If you can talk to another person in the same situation it's a great help. You are not alone, which one tends to think you are.'

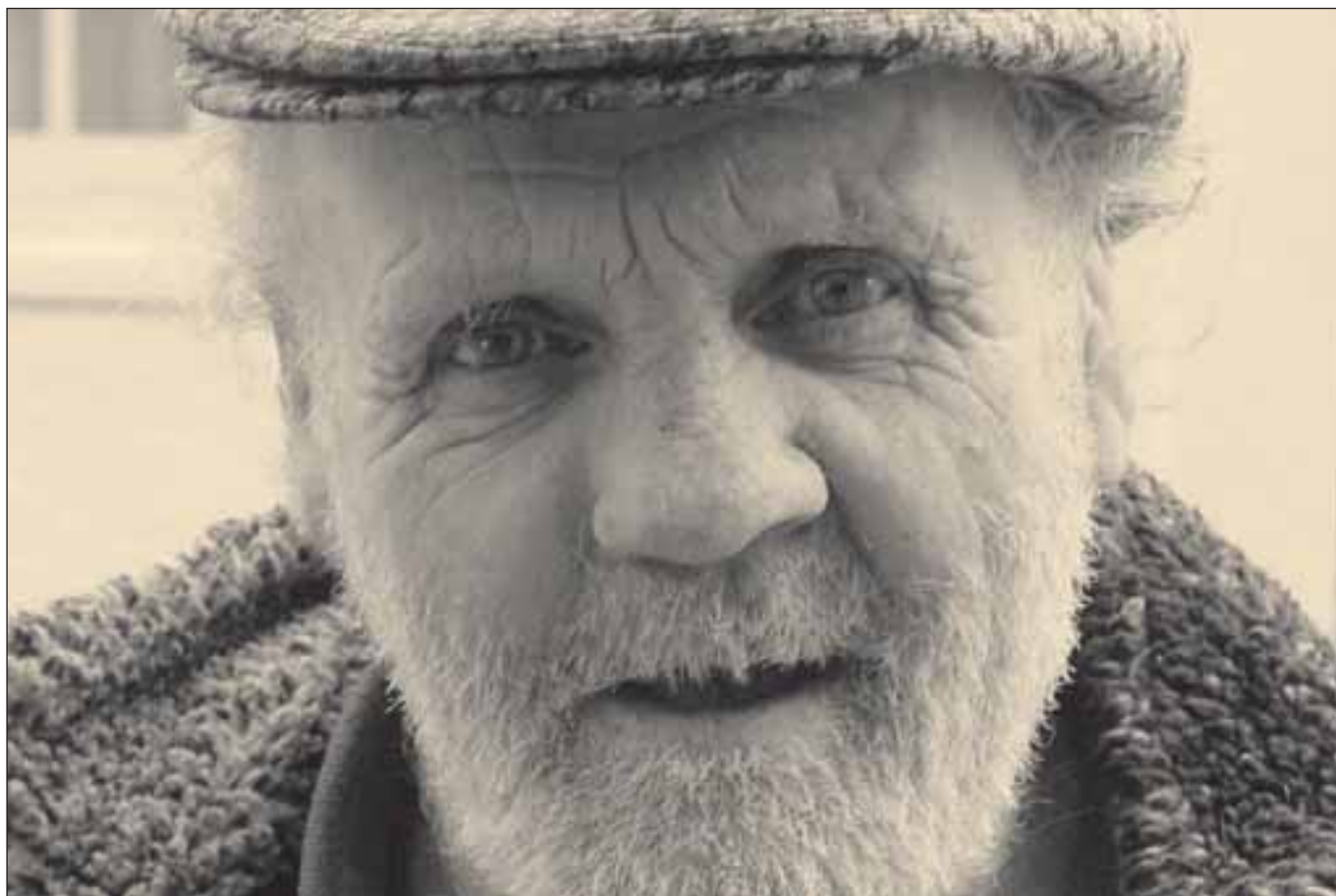
For several, being part of the project reduced their sense of being alone:

'They're always there for you if you have problems. You get things resolved. Knowing that someone is there, e.g. if you're ill. You're not on your own. Someone will know if you're not there.'

'You think you're the only one. You don't realise other people have the same problems. You listen to their situations, you realise one is not alone. It means a lot to a lot of people. I like coming here.'

The co-ordinator noted that in a regular group people started supporting each other and formed relationships. The project provided opportunities for this. As the groups evolved she could see a big change in individuals.

4 Lessons learnt



The Live Choices project demonstrated that homeless and formerly homeless older people can, with continued support, develop new interests, engage in regular meaningful occupation, and become more involved in the community. The project also showed how older homeless people can be meaningfully involved in both service development and evaluation.

The project provided a service to older people who might have been considered to be hard to engage in services. About one-third of clients were heavy drinkers and many had long histories of rough sleeping or living in hostels and had become institutionalised.

A holistic approach was effective in overcoming some of the barriers that prevent older homeless people from engaging in activities, by linking clients into health and support services and working in partnership with community projects. The project also demonstrated that regular engagement in meaningful activities can benefit older homeless people in many ways.

Despite their difficulties, most of the project's clients maintained regular engagement in activities and many became involved in activities in the wider community. Through its individual needs-led approach, the project was successful in enabling clients to pursue and achieve personal ambitions. The co-ordinator was successful in securing funding for various courses and equipment to enable clients to pursue their goals.

Who the project helped

- The majority of clients were former homeless older people who had been resettled into permanent accommodation. The project worked well with this isolated group who valued the social contact, and became motivated and enthusiastic about participating in activities.
- People who were currently sleeping rough did not always want to engage in regular activities because their priorities were finding

accommodation and getting settled. They were none the less interested in engaging in *ad hoc* activities and were, for example, pleased to contribute articles and artwork to the newsletter.

- The project worked well with hostel residents. Staff felt the café morning benefited this group in many ways, building clients' confidence, skills and motivation and increasing the staff's awareness of clients' needs, which in turn led to increased access to health and support services.

Reaching isolated older people

- Initial referrals were slow and took time to build up. The co-ordinator found that establishing referral systems and maintaining them could be a challenge. This improved with time, when organisations became aware that the project was a complementary service rather than a competitive one, and could provide extra support to their clients.
- Once the service was established, word of mouth attracted new clients and older people began to self-refer to the project.
- It proved fruitful to spend time promoting the project to agencies to get their support and commitment to the project. The co-ordinator found that public speaking also generated interest e.g. at Homeless Link's Meaningful Occupation Forum and the UK Coalition on Older Homelessness.
- It was essential to spend time networking and forming links with a wide range of agencies to establish sources of referral to the project and sources of support for clients as well as resources to which clients could be referred.
- It was vital to sell the project to frontline workers, and not only to managers, especially when trying to attract older people living in short-stay hostels. Historically, many hostel workers have not been proactive in helping residents to access services outside the hostel.

- Proactive outreach was essential to reach the more severely isolated older people and to engage with potential clients. A great deal of promotional work to sell the project to clients needed to be undertaken by project staff in liaison with the support staff in contact with clients.
- Arrangements were necessary to ensure that information reached the target group. Many older people were unaware of local services, facilities and resources. Promotional literature (as well as the project's name) needed to be carefully designed to appeal to older people and preferably piloted with a group of older people. There were several self-referrals from the leaflets designed for the Live Choices project.
- The project's widely distributed newsletter proved effective in generating interest in the service, from clients and agencies as well as a means of disseminating information about local opportunities for meaningful occupation.

Involving older people in project development

- Service users were consulted throughout the development of the project. The co-ordinator wanted people to feel they had invested in the process and felt it important to give prospective clients the power to define the service in terms of their perceived needs.
- Many of the activities were set up in response to suggestions made by clients. For example, the project's newsletter, *Live Voices*, arose from a client's suggestion that a community newsletter would be a good way of connecting with isolated people in the wider community and that this would be a project to which he would be interested in contributing. He agreed to contribute regular articles for publication. The cinema club was another client innovation. The first trip, suggested as a means of generating reviews for the newsletter, proved popular, and the club was formed.

- The project co-ordinator strove to ensure that Live Choices was a user-led service. Most notable was the success of the user-led newsletter group (see Chapter 1).

In interviews, clients said they felt they were listened to, that their views were taken seriously and, importantly, that any ideas or criticism they expressed were wherever possible acted upon.

Clients were keen to be involved and to contribute ideas on how the project should be run and developed. Some clients who were not themselves in need of support expressed interest in working with the project co-ordinator to develop the project.

In interviews, older people were very clear about the importance of their involvement in developing the project. In fact, they said they would prefer to be more formally consulted and, importantly, to have the results of the consultation exercise made publicly available. They were keen to be involved in planning further activities and the future development of the project.

'It would be good for all the people that [the project co-ordinator] is seeing to get together and have a big meeting together. Not at the [homelessness centre], I'm not interested in the centre. Somewhere like the Skylight. Somewhere with no smoking – it's good for non-smokers. Or maybe a local church hall. To talk about things, discuss things. We do this for the cinema group. To have a discussion about future outings and activities to be arranged. To be able to have a meeting, with minutes of what's been said. Minutes would be very useful, minutes are the most important thing. An everyday plan. It would be a very rewarding thing. We could have the minutes and plan the newsletter. It would be very, very helpful... An opportunity for people to have a say in the development of the project or activity. It would be very rewarding to us all. You can't expect [the co-ordinator] to organise everything on her own.'

'It might be worthwhile for everyone to have another meeting. If we have a meeting and [the co-ordinator] takes notes down. And in the newsletter as well. It would be very therapeutic

and very rewarding. We can meet again, I can say what I was doing before and now I'm doing all these things. It'd be worthwhile not only for ourselves, but for the project too. You need people to get involved. To have a meeting to discuss people's suggestions and future of the project.'

Making activities and resources accessible to older people

- Meaningful occupation services need to address issues of locality and accessibility. Some services may be inaccessible simply because of their location.
- Some clients were anxious because they had never been outside the homeless circuit and so services needed to be very localised if they were to attend.
- Culturally some clients may find the predominantly white client group too threatening to attend certain groups. If English is not their first language, some people may have difficulties accessing services.
- Some facilities may be intimidating if users are allowed to drink on the premises.
- It is essential to have a transport strategy in place, to ensure that activities are accessible to older people, including those with health and mobility issues. Without the provision of transport some clients may not attend, especially at the start of their involvement with a new activity. Transport can be phased out as they become more independent and confident, part of a group and more eager to attend.

Live Choices clients were assisted with finding suitable transport to and from activities. For clients with mobility issues information and support were available for accessing transport options such as local community transport and dial-a-ride services. For clients able to use public transport but unable to afford it financial assistance was available. Live Choices also invested in prepaid bus tickets. Several clients who did not meet the eligibility criteria

for dial-a-ride services said this would make it easier for them to access activities.

A Help the Aged minibus owned by Providence Row Charity was made available for the project's use. However, access to the minibus was limited due to a shortage of drivers. There were problems in locating licensed drivers, which meant relying on the availability of one named driver. While ideal for daytrips, a minibus is not always the best form of transport on a day-to-day basis for this kind of project. The project aimed to encourage independence, which included encouraging clients to use public transport. For those with mobility problems a taxi was provided, which offers greater flexibility, e.g. if various people need to be in different places at the same time.

- Lack of money may be a barrier for some of the potential clients of a meaningful occupation project.

For Live Choices, the project co-ordinator thoroughly researched local resources and provided information about free or subsidised activities in person and, to a wider audience, through the newsletter. Clients could also be referred to sbp's advice service to ensure they were receiving their full benefit entitlement and maximising their income.

Encouraging community involvement

- The project aimed to encourage access to activities in the community and increase independence from homelessness provision. Services need to look at ways in which more vulnerable older people can access mainstream community resources that will address some of their needs.
- The co-ordinator worked hard to find venues for the groups in mainstream community facilities. It was thought important to locate venues for both activities and meetings with clients outside of homelessness provision. A number of clients mentioned this in interviews. Beginning to access community facilities – for example, in one-to-one

meetings with the co-ordinator – was considered by clients a first step towards increased involvement in the community. It was also perceived as less stigmatising. Additionally, some of the older clients were put off by homelessness centres. They felt intimidated by the noise, the behaviour of some users and the use of drugs.

- Some people came to identify with and rely on the group activities. While acknowledging the importance of the groups for building self-esteem and promoting a sense of belonging, it was important to try to prevent clients becoming too dependent on the groups. Staff also needed to be clear about the nature of the project and not to convey the message to potential clients that people would be joining something permanent rather than using the group support to access other resources in the community.
- When the aim is to encourage people to access community facilities, clients need to be given a lot of encouragement to try other activities and staff need to remain focused on achieving this goal. It is important that services help to provide clients with choices to enable them to move on from a service. The Live Choices co-ordinator always tried to introduce new places and interests, and to hold the groups in community settings so that they did not become institutionalised activities.
- People felt more ownership of the group when they had their own space for it, as opposed to holding a group at a day centre. It was not always easy, however, to find suitable places for groups that offered privacy and the appropriate facilities.
- For people with long histories of homelessness it can be hard to break out of the homeless circuit. The project considered ways of bridging the gap between the homeless life and a life integrated into the community. The process needs to be gradual and gentle, allowing people to proceed at their own pace. The group activities served as a stepping stone towards moving on to an

activity in the community. The group helped clients to build confidence and skills and make new social contacts.

- The project benefited from sbp's established links with other agencies to ensure clients' multiple needs were addressed. Being part of the Tenancy Sustainment Team at St Botolph's Project proved advantageous as problems and crises could be dealt with smoothly and quickly when they arose.
- Relying on support from other organisations to help run groups and activities meant that sometimes gaps occurred in the provision of support and staff assistance could at times be sporadic. This would mean that the co-ordinator would have to run groups alone. On the whole, however, organisations demonstrated commitment to the project and were reliable in supplying staff support and volunteer assistance.
- Few obstacles were encountered in accessing community facilities. In fact, on the whole, staff at community facilities were always very welcoming to Live Choices clients, e.g. providing tea and biscuits or a guided tour. Activities and trips were always planned thoroughly in advance.
- Integrating into existing groups within the older persons' sector was more challenging. Activities were not always available. Older persons' services may not be geared up for older homeless people and while this is the case it will be difficult to achieve smooth integration.
- There were however examples of effective partnerships with older persons' services. The co-ordinator developed a strong link with the Sundial Centre, a community resource for older people in East London, and a number of clients accessed the centre's activities and outings. A staff member from the Sundial was committed to the Live Choices project, and enthusiastic about supporting the clients to become integrated into their services. The worker attended the café morning to talk to clients and attended some of the advisory

group meetings. The Sundial also considered setting up a coffee morning for the clients.

- It is important to spend time at the planning stage to identify suitable organisations for the referral of clients. Organisations need to demonstrate that they are willing to be flexible and to make necessary changes to their practice to accommodate the needs of this client group.
- When referring older homeless people with complex needs to community facilities or older persons' services, the referral agency needs to provide support to those agencies and not view a referral as the end of the process. Agencies may lack expertise, training and confidence in working with older homeless people. However, for Live Choices partnership working with other organisations made it possible to achieve successful integration into some services.

The need for support and encouragement

Supporting and encouraging clients to attend services will be one of the crucial aspects of a meaningful occupation project for older homeless people, to overcome the barriers that prevent them from getting involved in activities.

- Clients often lacked confidence and were apprehensive about attending a group or daytrip, accessing community facilities or travelling to new and unfamiliar places.
- Some clients had untreated chronic depression and lacked the motivation to attend. They could become very withdrawn due to poor mental health and could self-isolate, making it difficult for them to engage in activities.
- Chaotic drinking can make it difficult for clients to sustain engagement in an activity and some clients periodically disengaged from activities due to heavy drinking bouts. Heavy drinking can also interfere with motivation to engage in activities.

- Clients may be forgetful and bad at keeping appointments. Severe short-term memory problems made it difficult for some clients to plan their time and they can become very confused about where and when activities are being held.
- It can take time for clients to engage in the service or in an activity. The Live Choices project sometimes engaged clients in one-to-one activities to build confidence before moving them on to a group activity. Services need to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the needs of this group.
- During difficult periods when a client may have withdrawn from the project, as well as ensuring that the individual was receiving the support he or she needed from other workers, the co-ordinator would maintain contact until the client was ready to re-join an activity.
- Workers need to be aware of these barriers for older homeless people and ensure that attendance at a chosen activity is made as easy as possible. Clients may need someone (paid worker, volunteer or other service user) to accompany them to an activity until they are confident enough to attend independently.

Mr T was introduced to the service because of isolation and alcohol issues. The meaningful occupation co-ordinator established that he was interested in jazz and had been a jazz drummer in the past. He owned a large collection of records which he was unable to listen to because his record-player was broken. The co-ordinator arranged for the donation of a music system which made it possible for him to listen to music again. The co-ordinator also helped Mr T to apply to the mentoring service for long-term informal support in building confidence and engaging in one-to-one social activities.

Ms J started attending the café morning as a way of making social contact without drinking. Her attendance was sporadic as she respected the boundaries of the group and would not attend when she had had a drink. Although she enjoyed the café group, Ms J disengaged for about six months but rejoined the group again later on. She also asked for a one-to-one appointment.

Mr D, aged 80, was extremely isolated. He initially engaged with the service seeking support to plan a holiday to visit his family, whom he recently traced through contact with SSAFA (Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association). He was anxious about getting involved with community activities and tended to self-isolate. He disengaged with the service for two months but then made contact again, requesting a visit.

At first he would engage only with one-to-one support but then decided to join a daytrip to Hendon Air Museum. Subsequently he collaborated on an article about SSAFA for the *Live Voices* newsletter, went on a daytrip to Southend and started attending café mornings on a regular basis. He planned to go on more daytrips and asked a friend to join the café morning group.

Sustaining engagement in activity

One of the main issues arising during the course of the project's development was how to provide the necessary long-term support to sustain engagement in a community activity, and to enable clients to pursue their personal goals.

The project was developed with only one dedicated member of staff in place, which placed limits on the number of service users. The project co-ordinator was able to carry out one-to-one work with up to ten people at any one time. The project ran most of the time at full capacity, meaning new referrals often could not be taken. Other clients could still join the group

activities, however, as long as they did not require support.

The co-ordinator found that after they had engaged with the project contact each month was sufficient for most clients to maintain engagement. Some clients became more independent over time and able to sustain their own activity in the community. The level of support could then be reduced to a minimal level (although some contact was always maintained). Others, however, required long-term support if they were to continue to engage in an activity.

The role of volunteers

It was proposed that the project co-ordinator would supervise volunteers who would provide one-to-one informal support to clients to enable them to engage in activities over the long term. It was originally envisaged that volunteers would be crucial to the success of the project and essential for its expansion.

Several volunteers assisted with running the Live Choices groups. One volunteer was recruited to support the café morning. Another volunteer from Eastend Groundswell helped with the production of the newsletter. The Shoreditch Drop-In centre made volunteers available every week to help with the Classic Film group. One or two clients were referred to the mentoring scheme for longer-term support. Volunteers did not, however, take on the anticipated role of supporting older people to access activities in the community.

During the first six months of the project all direct client contact work was carried out by the project co-ordinator, during which time the co-ordinator could identify how best volunteers could contribute to the growth of the service and support individuals to access activities. A role description and person specification were drawn up for the new role of meaningful occupation volunteer. Meaningful occupation volunteers were to have a different relationship from that of longer-term mentoring, which would also be available to clients where appropriate.

An advertisement was placed in *Guardian Society*, in two separate months. However, there was no response to either of the advertisements and despite all efforts the recruitment of volunteers to the project was slow. Most volunteers prefer evening work and daytime volunteers were hard to get hold of. Also, when people want to volunteer in the homelessness field they often prefer to be at the 'hard end' rather than assisting with coffee mornings or other group activities.

As the co-ordinator was part of the Tenancy Sustainment Service at sbp, it was believed that the post holder would be able to draw on the organisation's existing mentoring service which, at the time, had 19 volunteers in place. With the meaningful occupation project linked into the mentoring scheme, it was envisaged that the project co-ordinator would work closely with the mentoring co-ordinator in training the existing mentors as well as recruiting and training new volunteers for the project.

In practice, however, some unforeseen practical constraints emerged which impeded the implementation of this proposal.

- The mentoring service is available during the evenings only, whereas daytime volunteers were essential for the Live Choices volunteer role. Many services offering meaningful occupation are available only during these hours, and also some older clients expressed a lack of confidence about going out after dark. While the mentoring service could have offered support to Live Choices clients wishing to pursue evening activities and could therefore have complemented Live Choices, it would not have been appropriate, or possible, for mentors to supplement the expansion of Live Choices.
- Mentors meet with their clients on a regular and agreed basis, helping to break their sense of isolation and supporting them in achieving their goals. The mentoring role is focused on relationship-building over a long period of time. Mentoring support is not appropriate for providing emotional and practical support in enabling people to access activities.

- The client group was often not seen as appropriate for mentoring because of its chaotic needs. To qualify for mentoring a client needs to have a goal in mind or want to change in some way. Older clients need a gentler approach than one focusing on change, and goals need to be explored gradually over time in one-to-one work.

There are other concerns about relying on volunteers to provide support to clients:

- To work with a challenging client group volunteers need to be well trained and to receive proper induction, support and supervision. It was felt by project staff that the original proposal did not take into account the level of support, time and supervision that volunteers need. If the co-ordinator had supported the volunteers this would have cut her time with clients by up to 50 per cent, and the Live Choices clients who were receiving one-to-one support required professional input and skills. Volunteers cannot be considered a substitute for paid and experienced workers. The co-ordinator felt there were risk assessment issues and that the clients in most need of one-to-one work, including heavy drinkers and clients with behavioural problems, were not suitable for volunteers,
- The project co-ordinator suggested the potential for a befriending role for volunteers, and to assist with running groups. Once clients were more stable and linked into support services, volunteers could have taken on the maintenance (monthly) contact and supported clients in the accessing of facilities.

After the move to Thames Reach Bondway, the potential role of volunteers for the meaningful occupation project was explored. TRB hoped to recruit a pool of volunteers who would be able to assist with broadening group activities to meet the aspirations of the attendees.

As the project progressed, the co-ordinator would have liked to investigate different types of support for clients. One idea of interest was for some form of peer support for clients attending

the same groups, as a means of helping clients to integrate more and become more independent. The aim would have been to establish a sustainable network of mutual support by clients that existed beyond the involvement of staff.

The need for a specialist service for older people

The Live Choices project highlighted the need for specialist meaningful occupation services targeting older people. Older homeless people have very specific needs which are often not recognised or addressed, and existing provision may be inappropriate to their needs. Homelessness provision is focused mainly on structured training programmes and older persons' services are not geared to working with people with histories of homelessness.

The project co-ordinator, who was experienced in homelessness meaningful occupation work, reported that the role differed from initial expectations. Rather than the anticipated work of providing individuals with support for a short time, then acting as an information resource, it was found that support needed to be sustained: the older clients needed a lot of one-to-one support and encouragement to engage in an activity. When such support is provided, sustained meaningful occupation for older homeless people can be achieved.

As Kim Willcock shows in this report for Help the Aged, the Live Choices project in East London demonstrated that homeless and formerly homeless older people (aged 50 or over) can, with support, develop new interests, establish new social relationships and engage in regular meaningful occupation in the community. The heart-warming words of the projects' participants provide vivid testimony of the success of this initiative, the positive effects of which live on well after the initiative was formally concluded.

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