WOLVERHAMPTON CONVERSATION CLUBS

EVALUATION
“Conversations are an open window for creative ideas to emerge and people to share things.”
Jane James, July 2013

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KATE GANT
CREATIVE HEALTH CIC
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1. SUMMARY

This report reviews the role Conversation Clubs play in achieving social care outcomes. The evaluation examines a programme of arts and social care work undertaken with eleven groups of elderly people still living in their own homes in Wolverhampton. The project brought people together to participate in a specially designed Conversation Club which used reminiscence and arts activities to improve quality of life and enable independent living.

The project was developed in partnership with Wolverhampton Arts and Museum Service (WAVE), Creative Health CRC and Wolverhampton City Council Rehabilitation Team and Arts Council England. It took place from November 2012 to December 2013.

Key Findings include:

- Participants identified that by participating in a Conversation Club they met new people and got to know existing friends and neighbours better. 57% of people participating in a survey agreed with the statement: *The Club has enabled me to get to know people better.*
- Participants agreed that the Conversation Club environment provided a space where older people felt relaxed and supported by their friends: 36% of participants said that at a result of participating in a Conversation Club they felt closer to people.
- Participants agreed that the Conversation Club enabled them to keep active which helped retain their independence: 46% of people agreed with the statement: *Coming along to the Club has helped me keep active.*
- Participants gained a greater sense of involvement within their wider community due to attending the group. 88% of participants said they felt involved: 76% of participants said they felt engaged. 36% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *As a result of coming to the club I have got involved in other activities and events happening locally.*

The evaluation process highlighted the approaches taken by the Arts Team to value participants’ creativity and achieve a quality arts experience.

These were:

- Thinking about the end product at the beginning of the process. Plans to exhibit art work as part of a small exhibition at Wolverhampton Art Gallery were agreed at the start of the project. Participants had the opportunity to work with the Arts Team to create work of the highest possible quality.
- Taking time to reflect, be creative and try new approaches. The arts were used as a way of engaging and involving people in the conversations. The Arts Team spent time after each workshop reflecting on the process and adapting it accordingly to meet the individual needs of participants.
- Facilitating a creative process which involved artistic and creative development for all.
- Encouraging each participant to be aspirational, to aim high and create their best art work. The evaluation findings illustrate the mutual respect between the Arts Team and participants and evidence shows that this has harnessed participants’ creative potential and abilities.
WAVE (Museums, Galleries and Archives of Wolverhampton) is renowned for the breadth of its community and health engagement work. In 2006, WAVE, as part of the Black Country Arts and Health Commissioning Partnership, established Creative Health CIC. Since then they have worked together to develop a pioneering programme combining arts and social care. In particular, they have developed the concept of Conversation Clubs, using the Gallery’s handling collection to initiate conversation between groups of older people.

In 2012 a successful application was made by Creative Health CIC in partnership with WAVE to Wolverhampton City Council’s Third Sector Innovation Resilience Fund. The fund supported creative work that encouraged older people to develop the confidence and skills to continue independent living in the community. The application aimed to build on the existing programme of work and set up Conversation Clubs for older people still living in their own homes in locations around Wolverhampton. Conversation Clubs are based on a simple but effective concept, encouraging older people to get together for a good conversation. A facilitator uses items based on a specific theme, from the Gallery’s handling collection as a way of gently easing people into a conversation and talking to each other. People can come and just listen, they can contribute items themselves to talk about or they can initiate conversations and suggest ideas for future conversations. As they sit together the group conversation starts to flow. Participants are also able to make a lasting reminder of their conversation by working with a visual artist to create their own artwork.

“Creativity is what makes life exciting, it’s an expression about so many different things and ideas, it’s the way to keep the brain active, to keep that spirit alive. It’s important to find all sorts of ways to continue to express ourselves, to say what we feel and think. This (Conversation Club) has enabled our creativity to be harnessed, to experiment, to play.”

Participant L, Finchfield
3. OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMME OF CONVERSATION CLUBS

The Conversation Club programme was developed by Jane James, Arts and Social Care Coordinator, and was informed by a growing evidence base on the issue of loneliness and isolation for older people (www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk, accessed September 2013). Each club was developed in a way that valued each member’s contribution, knowledge, existing skills and experiences, and enabled participants to shape the activity. Conversation Club was mindful of the need to manage groups carefully ensuring that they are open and accessible. This approach is in line with research undertaken by Catton (2005), which outlines broad characteristics underpinning a successful loneliness intervention.

Jane’s role was to develop the project, set up local clubs and facilitate each conversation. Development work started in November 2012 with a number of taster sessions to introduce groups and their leaders to the concept of the Conversation Club.

During 2013, eleven Conversation Clubs were established across Wolverhampton as part of the programme of work (please see appendix one for a full list). Seven of the groups were new or newly established. In these cases, the role of the Conversation Club was to help establish the group, introduce people to each other and enable people to make links and connections. For existing groups, the purpose of the Club was to help establish the group, introduce people to each other and enable people to make links and connections. For existing groups, the purpose of the Club was negotiated with the group leader and included providing a new model or way of group working for leaders, and support to help ensure groups remained open and accessible to new members.

Karina Thompson was appointed artist-in-residence on the project and worked with members of each group to use the conversation as inspiration for their own art work. This element of the project was funded by a partnership with Creative Health CIC, and Arts Council England for a programme of work which explored ‘the concept of quality’ and an arts, health and wellbeing project.

Arts activities were incorporated into the Conversation Club model at an appropriate time according to the specific needs of the group. In some situations, Karina met the group straight after an initial conversation taster workshop to introduce the arts element. She revisited the group in subsequent weeks to support and develop their ideas. In groups which were more resistant to new activities, Jane spent more time getting to know the group first before introducing Karina.

Each art activity was slightly different depending on the needs of the group but all were inspired by the conversations. Activities ranged from creating textile pieces inspired by a personal story to creating collages of family photos or scanned images of familiar objects. For some this was an opportunity to develop their existing creative skills: For example, one gentleman learnt how to use Adobe Photoshop and used the programme to create an image of a family event. Another participant brought their own art work to a meeting, a photograph was taken and it was scanned and printed on a cushion. For many it was an opportunity to try something new, to participate in a creative activity and have a go at something different. The majority of the creative work produced was by individuals. For one group creating a collective piece of work was appropriate. They worked together to incorporate their memories into a snakes and ladders game.

All the creative work from the Conversation Clubs was exhibited at Wolverhampton Art Gallery as part of a small exhibition that profiled the project and celebrated participants’ experiences.
4. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

4.1 INTENDED OUTCOMES

The Conversation Club programme was funded by Wolverhampton City Council’s Third Sector Innovation Reablement Fund. As part of the contracting process, outcomes and performance indicators were agreed. These informed the quarterly monitoring of the project and the evaluation framework. Table One lists these against each outcome.

TABLE ONE OUTCOMES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTCOME</th>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve Quality of Life</td>
<td>Participants feel that attending the group has led to a reduction in loneliness and isolation. Attending the group has enabled participants to build supportive relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enable Independent Living</td>
<td>Participants have a greater sense of involvement within their community due to attending the group. Participants feel that attending the group enabled them to retain their independence.</td>
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</table>

4.2 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Kate Gant, Director Creative Health CIC and Jane James, Conversation Club Development Worker led the evaluation.

In the initial stages, a number of ways of documenting people’s experiences were considered and feedback gained from participants. These included questionnaires as well as the use of diagrams, drawings and images to prompt discussions and debate. The evaluation team were aware of the balance between a requirement to gather information about the impact of the work and the need to respect people’s privacy and ask sensitive questions in an appropriate way. After considering all the options it was felt appropriate to use a mixed methods approach, incorporating a range of tools and techniques.

These included:

- **Questionnaire**
  - 34% of the total number of participants completed a questionnaire. This was used to gain a further insight into how Conversation Clubs supported people to live independently.

- **One-to-one and small group interviews**
  - Twenty-five one-to-one and small group semi-structured interviews were conducted by Kate Gant with participants and their leaders. A semi-structured interview checklist was used to guide the conversation. This approach enabled more sensitive issues to be discussed and enabled the evaluation team to gain a greater understanding about the contribution the work made to people’s quality of life and in particular to reducing loneliness. Findings were also cross-checked with members of the Finchfield group to ensure they were valid.

- **Reflective diaries**
  - Jane James and the artist in residence, Karina Thompson kept journals as a way of reflecting on the key issues discussed in each Conversation Club and to document informal conversations with participants and leaders. Both workers also met after each workshop to reflect on their work and plan the next workshop. At key stages of the project, Kate Gant joined them to reflect on progress.

In addition to these journals, a project blog was established which recorded the discussions and contributed to the documentation of the project.
5. KEY FINDINGS

5.1 HOW DID THE PROGRAMME OF WORKSHOPS IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE?

Connecting with others and developing strong social relationships is an important indicator of wellbeing and quality of life (Five Ways to Wellbeing, NEST, 2008). In this section of the report, we explore how participating in a Conversation Club, people got to know each other better and developed supportive relationships which enriched their everyday lives. In addition, we explore how by participating in a creative project participants felt valued and respected.

Key Finding: Participants met new people and got to know existing friends and neighbours better

Social loneliness is defined as the absence of a social network of friends and neighbours (Burholt, 2011). The evaluation results show that the Conversation Clubs have enabled people to gain a broader group of friends and neighbours:

I grew up in a big family but now I’m alone. I feel very lonely sometimes, my only offspring works and lives far away. They have got their own family to worry about, busy with their own lives. Coming here I have been able to connect with people through conversations and made friends. Companionship and sharing a good laugh!

Participant A, Ashmore

50% of people responding to the survey said they had met someone new at a Conversation Club and 12% said they had met people they hadn’t seen for a long time. As part of the survey, people were invited to select words or phrases that described how they felt during a Conversation Club, 76% of people circled the word ‘relaxed’ and 56% of participants selected ‘close’ to people.

Seven Conversation Clubs were with newly established groups and were used as a way of introducing people to each other. For example the Finchfield Group meets in a Church Hall. It was established by a local resident and had only met once before the first Conversation Club. A number of participants commented on the fact that they had met new people as a result of attending the group:

I only live round the corner from me but we didn’t know each other (Finchfield, KJ). Another member of the group commented: I didn’t realise that M lived near me I pick her up and drop her off now after the group.

Participant C, Finchfield

A member reflected on the impact of the work on other members of the Finchfield group:

You just need to see and look at everyone’s faces today they are engaged, complete harmony in the group no one is being left out we are engaging each other’s company looking forward, not feeling isolated feeling that something will happen next week and you can take those feelings through the week it keeps you going.

Participant M, Finchfield

After the fifth Finchfield workshop, Jane James, Project Coordinator reflected: The group are getting together really well, the person who started the group says you wouldn’t believe that most didn’t know each other before sessions started.

Jane James, Reflective Journal, 19th February 2013

This was confirmed at the end of the project by members of the group: It got us all talking, we now have camaraderie instead of isolation... you lose that feeling of isolation.

Participant W, Finchfield

Similar comments were collected from members of the Tong Court Group, a newly formed independent group established at a Tenant’s Community Room:

We know a bit more about each other. I didn’t realise that P thought I came from Jamaica or somewhere and I told her I was born in Bilston we all had a laugh. People are different from what you think they are, it’s not a bad thing to get to know who people really are and what their background is. Can’t hurt.

Participant C, Tong

Participants used the formation of the group at Ashmore Court to encourage their neighbours to participate in more activities:

I never used to talk to anyone. I was in the house on my own. I was stuck when I bumped into B (a member of the group) and she said to come. I found the sessions you were doing really helped me feel part of the group. I might not have kept coming if felt like the odd one out. Confidence, I had forgotten how to talk to anyone properly, it’s been a life saver. I’ve got kids but they have their own lives and families. They visit when they feel like it & won’t come up the street and go and get me to come here.

Participant R, Ashmore

Even in the established groups some members were new or had previously been very quiet playing a passive role in the group. The Conversation Club enabled people to be introduced to each other again. The topic or theme gave a purpose to the conversation giving something to talk about, to share things in a safe way.

Jane James commented:

One person (the only lady in the group of Asian origin) was very withdrawn and didn’t engage much. No one called her by her name. Through the conversation sessions she has become one of the most chatty people in the room, and has joined in with external activities too. She was initially dressed shabbily, all her hair covered, and wore dark glasses. Now she dresses up every week in beautiful clothing and jewellery, with her hair dressed.

Jane James, Reflective Journal, August 2013

The lady agreed to complete an evaluation questionnaire and wrote about her experience of the group: Some people were very quiet. Some people just talk to their friends. I didn’t know what to say, I think we talk more now, we can’t shut up now!

Participant S, Almar Court

The Oasis Friendship group was well established, having met at the Oasis Community Centre for a number of years. Three of the members attended the Meet me at WAG Conversation Club at Wolverhampton Art Gallery and had worked with Jane James to organise the work at their local group. Members of the Oasis Friendship group observed how bringing in objects from the Gallery’s handling collection and encouraging people to participate in arts activities made a difference to the way they engaged with each other. Some members felt that others were more likely to talk about personal issues as part of the arts workshop. Working in small groups meant that people talked as they worked – implying that the attention wasn’t on them but their art work.

We were still chatting away while we were cutting and sticking, putting our thoughts in. We can discuss problems as well, sometimes it just helps to say what’s on your mind.

Participant S, Oasis

Key Finding: Participants built supportive relationships

Emotional loneliness is the absence of significant other people with whom close emotional attachments are formed (Burholt, 2011). This can be exacerbated over time by age and bereavement. This section of the report explores the role Conversation Clubs have played in enabling participants to develop deeper friendships, which in turn lead to more supportive relationships.

In the survey, 97% of respondents said that had got to know people better as a result of the Conversation Club. 38% of respondents went on to strongly agree with the statement. The Conversation Club has enabled me to get to know people better.
5. KEY FINDINGS

Members of the Woodcross group recognised and valued the Conversation Club approach as a way of encouraging people to develop supportive relationships. A commented in her interview: “We talked about ourselves in a different way, things you wouldn’t usually think of. Another participant commented: “When I brought in the old books and photos and told everybody about the pictures of my mum and dad and uncle I was surprised by how interested everyone was, passing it around for ages asking questions. We found out a fair bit about where people grew up and where they worked! I don’t know why but you don’t usually ask about those things. We didn’t do that before just talked about everyday things.”

Participant L Woodcross

The benefits of using objects from the Gallery’s handling collection was mentioned by a number of participants: “The bringing in of old items makes such a difference to the way we engage with each other and the direction the conversation takes.”

Participant P Oasis

Participants also talked about the role the arts activities played as a way of supporting each other. A thought the Aluminium Art Gallery was of huge significance to everyone who contributed and the positive effect of this cannot be underestimated. Members from each of the groups attended the opening of the Conversation Club exhibition and people were visibly proud to see their work displayed. They clearly valued the fact that their work was of a high enough standard to be exhibited at an art gallery setting.

A member of the St Albans group attended the exhibition with her daughter and granddaughter. Both expressed their amazement at the quality of the work: “We never expected anything like this,” she kept it all very quiet and didn’t tell us about how beautiful the things she had made were until today. They are fantastic, I wouldn’t be surprised if people wanted to buy some of these things for Christmas presents.”

Participant V St Albans

Closer relationships also developed in the newly established groups. As a result of the Conversation Club the format of the Finchfield Group has changed. K described the consequences of this: “We have some talking time in the group now. I think I might have started that when I talked for some time when my daughter had a problem. She’s so far away (in America) and what happened to her was awful but I couldn’t do anything about it. I just wanted to tell everybody, even if they couldn’t help, it took me out of myself a bit. A problem shared is a problem halved, they used to say.”

Participant K Finchfield

Key Finding: Participants felt valued and respected

Participation in the arts has many benefits and the previous findings have focused on the social benefits of the arts. The wellbeing benefits gained as a result of making beautiful, carefully created artwork cannot be ignored. In each of the Conversation Club people described the pleasure they gained from participating in an arts project. This included having the opportunity to try something they have never done before and re-discovering old skills to create work they never thought they could do. Participants expressed positive feelings as a result of their work being exhibited, admired, valued and respected.

The importance of bringing together creative work from each of the eleven groups in an exhibition at Wolverhampton Art Gallery was of huge significance to everyone who contributed and the positive effect of this cannot be underestimated. Members from each of the groups attended the opening of the Conversation Club exhibition and people were visibly proud to see their work displayed. They clearly valued the fact that their work was of a high enough standard to be exhibited at an art gallery setting.

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Participant V St Albans

Members of the Finchfield group were impressed with the way the work was curated and the quality of the exhibition. When asked what they thought of the exhibition a chorus of voices said “great”, “fantastic”, “wonderful”, “beautifully presented”, “well set out” and “displayed”.

One member of the group talked about how the final exhibition made her feel that her creativity was valued and that because of this, the project and the work created was important. Another participant said the exhibition showed what people could do, challenging people’s assumptions and expectations of older people: “When you get older some people think you can’t do anything, we are pushed away but we can still show people what we can do.”

Participant K Finchfield

5.2 HOW DID THE PROGRAMME OF WORKSHOPS ENABLE INDEPENDENT LIVING?

Supporting older people to maintain their independence through playing a full part in their family and community life is a key principle underpinning Wolverhampton’s Strategy for Older People (2012). A range of evidence links successful independent living to the quality of people’s family and social networks (Goddrey and Randall 2003 and Department of Health 1999).

This section of the report explores how participating in a Conversation Club can enable participants to keep active and gain a greater sense of involvement in their local community. This section also explores how this plays a positive role in alleviating the internal causes of dependency.

Key Finding: Participants reported that the Conversation Club enabled them to keep active which helped retain their independence

Evidence shows that there are a number of factors which contribute to older people retaining their independence. At the heart of this research is the understanding that older people’s capacity to make choices and exercise control over their lives needs to be supported. Other factors including older people keeping busy and developing interdependent relationships through supportive networks also affect independence and need to be maintained.


The evaluation team has used these factors to analyse the one-to-one interviews with participants attending the Conversation Clubs.

- Making choices: Levels of engagement

The role of the Project Development Worker Jane James was key to the success of the programme of work. Initially, Jane spent time talking to individual members of a group and their group leader, enabling people to choose to get involved or not. The development work also enabled Jane to find out participants’ interests before developing ideas for the first conversation, Jane then facilitated the conversation, making sure each person was supported to fully participate in the group.

I have been beseched and it’s hard to get out. (June) made sure I was introduced to everybody and included in all the conversations. Doing the activity helped to break the ice. I think it made it a lot easier.

Participant G Woodcross

It takes time to build up relationships and trust. Some participants talked about their initial reluctance to join in or said they had low expectations of the activities; they didn’t know what to expect, thought it would be a bit awkward at first or just thought it wouldn’t work. A member of the Haven Group commented: “We weren’t sure at first but we thought we’d give it a go. We didn’t really expect so much from it.”

Part of Jane’s role was to ensure that participants had a choice about their level of engagement in a Conversation Club. For some people, the group offered an opportunity to listen to each other and take time to watch what was going on around them. After the first workshop at Finchfield, June observed:

Two ladies were quite shy but responded to other people’s anecdotes. The session ended with trying on hats, which was fun with everyone joining in.

Jane James, Reflective Journal 27th November 2012

[12]

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5. KEY FINDINGS

Respecting individuals’ privacy was important. For some participants creating or making something in a group was very difficult and not what they wanted to do. One participant said that this wasn’t because she wasn’t creative, it was just that she found it difficult to concentrate in a group. Another commented that she liked to see other people’s creative work and appreciated their creativity but didn’t want to make something herself.

Other participants used the Conversation Club to share special or personal memories. A member of the Tong Conversation Club talked about how told other people about his childhood:

We just like to get together, relax. It’s been good (at the Conversation Club) to tell people about Jamaica and what it was like growing up there.

Participant A, Tong

The conversation topics or themes were developed with members of the group. So, for example, at Woodcross participants were particularly interested in music, so the conversation focused on songs.

Looking at what people brought in for copying was good, looking at all the different things and explaining to Jane about the things I wanted to use… and when Jane found the old music on the computer I didn’t know you could do anything like that.

Participant A, Woodcross

The artist-in-residence Karina Thompson worked with each member of the group to develop their own creative response to the conversation. This meant that each person’s art work reflected the things that were important to them:

I was inspired by Karina to be very creative with the photography, she gave me a lot of her time to invent a very creative picture using the computer.

Participant J, Tong

The strength of the community engagement and involvement that developed is illustrated by the commitment of the members of the Haven group to continue the Conversation Club. One participant has agreed to become the leader and planned a programme of activities. As D, a participant explained:

Well I’ll keep going on for as long as we can with J leading the club.

• Keeping Busy

Keeping active and busy was a strong recurring theme in the evaluation. A member of the Finchfield Group said:

You really have to keep your brain active, I really think it helps stave off that moment when you start forgetting things.

Participants interviewed talked about the need to keep active, how difficult this could be and how by keeping active and attending clubs and events they could retain their independence.

The Conversation Club approach has been carefully designed to keep people engaged. Jane James used objects from Wolverhampton Art Gallery’s handling collection to initiate a conversation. Depending on the reaction and interests of the group members, themes were developed and additional objects from the collection were used in the conversation. The arts activities were used to enable people to develop the themes:

I liked the involvement. I’ve been coming here for a long time it’s a great group but I think there is more involvement from the way you’ve done it.

Participant D, Ashmore

In each of the groups, participants were invited to bring in objects to show other members. Some people searched through their own memorable and brought appropriate objects to the next group meeting. Others researched the subject and brought in photographs from local history books and collections. At the Haven Club, a member of the group used the theme to write poetry. A member of St Albans Group described the significance of bringing in examples of his and others creative work:

I love showing his paintings and I got to show some of my work around the group without being ‘all about me’ if you know what I mean.

In the survey 86% of people agreed with the statement: Coming along to the Club has helped me keep active. 76% of people said they felt engaged and 88% felt involved at the Club.

• Developing interdependent relationships

In section 5.1 we explored how the Conversation Club enabled people to get to know each other better. In this section we explore how participants went on to help each other and started to look out for each other. This happened on a number of levels, comments from a member at the Finchfield Group illustrate this:

Sometimes it’s nice just to share things and help each other out, like when R tells us about what to do when those people phone you up and try to tell you things.

Jane James recorded a discussion at Finchfield in her Reflective Journal:

I asked them to look at the ‘Who you gonna call?’ sheet. We had quite a discussion about the content and about who you might actually ask for help; some had family members to call on, some were sure they’d be able to cope themselves but as we talked through it they realised that often there were issues that they might be better finding friends or neighbours to talk over problems. One person said “Well, we could bring it to the group, couldn’t we?” which was an excellent result.

Jane James, Reflective Journal, 11th January 2013

As part of the evaluation questionnaire, people were invited to describe how they felt participating in the Conversation Club by selecting appropriate words from a list. 47% of people responding to the question said that they felt valued. 53% of participants said they felt listened to during a Conversation Club.

There was evidence to suggest that relationships developed during the Conversation Club enabled people to support each other outside of the group. This was especially poignant at the two groups that met in sheltered housing schemes.

The Haven is a sheltered housing scheme managed by Bromford Housing. It includes forty-three flats and has a non-resident warden. The Conversation Club was open to all residents. Some of the people who joined the club had recently moved in, whereas others were not active in the community.

As part of the evaluation, two members of the group talked independently about how they got to know each other better. J commented:

We’ve all got used to each other, we’ve got a lot of friends. To be honest I get very depressed, they help bring me back. D looks out for me, tells me to have a shave and makes me get out. This was confirmed in an interview with D: I’ve learned a lot more about J. I didn’t really know about his problems. We have little private conversations, I try to make sure he’s alright.

The closeness of the relationships developed at the Haven Conversation Club was a recurring theme. I had to go into hospital while we were doing the sessions, when I came back I was made very welcome, everyone was so good to me. When we were doing the sessions I couldn’t wait for Thursdays to come round. I’m so pleased we’re keeping it going, and some of us look out for each other all the time. It’s like a family-I’ve got family but they’re all too busy with their own lives.

Participant J, Haven

I went on to explain in her one-to-one interview that she was only just out of hospital and was still feeling poorly, she thought she really should have stayed in but she had pushed herself to come along, and was pleased she did.

A Conversation Club was also held at St Albans Court, a similar sheltered housing scheme to The Haven. The group members told Jane James that one particular member had been ill, he was very keen on the Conversation Club and his non-attendance had alerted the other members of the group as to how ill he was. They made a point of checking in on him throughout his illness and encouraged him to return to the group as soon as he was better.

Reflecting on the project six months after their Conversation Club started, members of the Finchfield group confirmed that they continued to keep an eye on one another. One member of the group provided the group with telephone numbers of each other and of people who were in the same position as they were. They met regularly to discuss their illness or the ways in which they were managing. Other members of the group kept in touch with each other, and encouraged people to make contact with them whenever they needed it.
5. KEY FINDINGS

Key Finding: Participants gained a greater sense of involvement within their wider community due to attending the group

When my husband died, that’s what I did - I got involved with groups. I’m shy and it was difficult but I can’t tell you how marvellous it was.

Participant V. Finchfield

Each Conversation Group enabled people to get involved in activities that happened as part of their club, they determined the subject of the conversation and shaped the programme of arts activities. At the Finchfield group this sense of involvement and ownership has been built on. Members have agreed a constitution, one member has become the treasurer of the group and others are now sharing other group tasks and responsibilities. The group has also changed their name to the Finchfield Companions: It took us ages to decide on a name but we have done, the word that kept coming up was ‘companions’ and that says a lot doesn’t it.

As each Conversation Club was established, opportunities to make links and connections with other community-based activities were explored. The resulting activities enabled members of Conversation Clubs to:

• Make stronger links to local facilities

The Finchfield group meets in a local church hall next to a library. Project workers felt that making a link with the local facility was one way of supporting participants to gain a greater sense of involvement with their community. The link was achieved through the Creative Conversations project blog. Participants were shown the blog posts on lap top computers, members came up with ideas for posts and booked to use the computers at the local library. With the help of the librarian they set up their own email addresses:

I liked it when we went to the library together too, but I don’t think I can get the hang of using computers without the others there to help. I couldn’t have one at home, it’d scare me to death!

Participant J. Finchfield

• Display their work locally

The Oasis Friendship group meets in a community space built as an extension to the local church and school. The group has been established for a number of years and meets weekly. The group leaders wanted to use the Conversation Club to bring members of the group together to concentrate on one thing, which they hoped would give the group a focus as well as welcoming new members. At the end of the project the group was invited to display their art work in the church:

Everyone came up with a different (creative) idea and we were pleased to be asked to display them at the art exhibition in the church. We were just very cross about them being shoved in a corner so we are looking forward to our own exhibition at the (Wolverhampton) Gallery.

Participant P. Oasis

• Hosting and attending Community Celebrations

The Haven group hosted a Big Lunch community event. Other local residents were invited including members of the St Albans Court Conversation Club.

One participant, S, commented: We went to The Haven, that was a great event there for the Big Lunch, with the games and things.

• Visiting Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Bantock House

Project participants were encouraged to attend Gallery events and exhibitions. Members of Long Court group arranged to visit the Gallery to see the Manchester based artist David Hancock’s exhibition, Cosplayers. The exhibition was about the world of youth sub-cultures. One of his new works featured a mythical character photographed at Tong Court. The group from The Haven, Blakenhall, visited Bantock House for a tour and to see dolls and toys to link in to their conversation topic of childhood.

Some participants also used the Conversation Clubs to find out from other people about community groups, extending their own networks and making stronger connections with local events and activities:

During a workshop at Finchfield, the project workers observed two participants, L and C, talking about other community groups. L was thinking of going to one in particular, she was asking, Do you know anything about it? Would she be welcomed? How could she get there? C continued to work on her collage, talking about her experience of that particular group and encouraging L to go along. J also talked about going to new groups and the role one particular member of the Finchfield group might play in encouraging her to attend a new group. I don’t go to any other groups but I might go with K to one. She goes to a lot of things, she’s very lively.

Participant J. Finchfield

As part of the evaluation questionnaire participants were asked if by participating in the Conversation Club they got involved in other activities happening locally.

36% of respondents: either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, As a result of coming to the Club I have got involved in other activities and events happening locally.
6. QUALITY

“I want to talk about the issue of quality because I think it’s one of the most burning issues around – how do we tell if something is good and who tells us that it’s good?”

Grayson Perry; Playing to the Gallery, Reith Lecture
BBC 4, October 2013

The Conversation Club programme was the first of a series of four projects commissioned by Creative Health CIC and West Midlands Arts Health & Wellbeing during 2012/13 to explore the concept of ‘quality’. Each commission enabled artists to examine what quality means in practice and contribute to a more structured planning framework and mechanism to assess quality. This ensured that quality was discussed from the very start of the project. Artist-in-residence Karina Thompson commented in her Reflective Journal, “I knew quality was in all senses an objective in the project. The fact that we are talking about quality means that this is not a ‘hit and run’ project, monitoring it is likely to improve the arts world.”

Karina Thompson, Reflective Journal, October 2013

This section of the report explores the practicalities of ensuring the programme resulted in the highest possible quality experience for each participant and the steps taken by the Arts Team to enable people to create high quality creative work.

* Thinking about the end product at the beginning of the process

At the start of the project the Steering Group had no preconceived ideas of the art form and welcomed applications from a range of artists inviting them to talk about how they felt their art form experience would contribute to the reminiscence aspects of the project. Early conversations with the successful artist, Karina Thompson, flagged up the importance of thinking about the individual end products at the start of the process. At this stage the decision was made to exhibit work from each of the groups in a small exhibition at Wolverhampton Art Gallery. Time was taken to think about how participants’ work would be ‘finished’, ensuring it looked as good as it could. Depending on the group, the presentation of the participants’ work ranged from simply displaying it in a high quality ready-made picture frame, to having the opportunity to have an image professionally printed on a mug, shopping bag or tea towel. This structure worked well to show off individual work in the best possible light as well as resulting in an object that had a domestic function.

An additional materials budget was allocated accordingly to help resolve Karina’s concern that it might not be able to balance the cost of high quality resources and materials against the budget.

The final exhibition and the time and resources spent displaying their work in a professional way proved to be very important for participants. Members of the Finchfield group arranged to see the exhibition as part of their programme of activities. They sat in the Gallery talking about the project and the exhibition. Members were smiling and complimenting each other on their artwork. They were clearly inspired by the project and proud to be having tea in the Gallery surrounded by beautiful work.

It (the project) has shown that everyone has talent, everyone can do something and that well presented work means that everyone’s art looks really good. Participant K, Finchfield
6. QUALITY

- Taking time to reflect, be creative and try new approaches:

Karina and Jane met to plan each creative workshop. Jane briefed Karina about the group, their needs and ideas. Working in this way enabled Jane to focus on the participants and Karina to concentrate on the arts element of the project. After each joint workshop Jane and Karina met, reflected on the work and, if necessary, changed their approach. Karina commented in her reflective journal: “I learnt about the importance of reflection, taking time to think and plan improves the quality of what I do.”

During each Conversation Club participants were encouraged to share their stories. Karina’s role was to support people to interpret their experiences creatively. At times Karina felt concerned that she might be letting people down if she didn’t realise each of their stories. Reflecting on each session enabled Karina and Jane to try new approaches, manage group dynamics and adapt workshops to meet the needs of the individual participants.

For example, after the first Conversation Club it became apparent that the arts activity was too open-ended and complex for the workshop time available. This meant that in an effort to finish creative products the last workshop was rushed, participants didn’t have enough time to re-group, admire each other’s work and celebrate their individual achievements before their next session (keep fit) started. Creative plans for the next Conversation Club were simplified and a clearer framework was established which enabled participants to create their own individual responses rather than a craft ‘production line’ of step-by-step guidelines which would have resulted in identical art works.

We also learnt how to make the most of group dynamics. For example in some groups a member would inspire others by bringing in a special object or people would help one another with a particular technique. When this happened a relatively simple idea grew and developed into a quality piece of work.

Karina described the artistic journey as a roller coaster, in particular the effort made to maintain a high artistic quality, but as the project progressed confidence and quality grew. “I learnt how important it is being able to try new stuff. This is exemplified at the Conversation Club at Almara Court. Participants in the Club were very diverse. Some participants lived in a sheltered housing complex, others at home and were collected and taken home by community transport. A large number of participants had arthritis and some had eye problems, activities had to be modified by Karina to enable everyone to fully participate.

I have no sight in one eye, the ideas are still there! I can’t see to sew so help I get from Karina is really important.”

Participant L, Almara Court

The initial conversation focused on toys and games and dolls that were brought in from the Gallery’s handling collection. Karina developed the idea by suggesting that participants create their own peg dolls. The result was a collection of exquisite, delicate and individually created objects. Group members proudly displayed them, smiling as they were photographed.

I feel really proud. They are great aren’t they? Just look at them all standing there. We made them.

Participant S, Almara Court

- Facilitating a creative process which involved artistic and creative development for all:

The Arts Team worked hard to establish safe spaces in which participants’ creative abilities and talents were valued and respected. Each creative activity was devised and developed in a way that enabled everyone to develop their artistic and creative skills. Karina and Jane built up strong relationships with each of the participants to achieve this. They got to know people as individuals first, found out about the creative activities they were interested in and used this information to offer appropriate workshop activities.

Jane set each group up, spending time with participants to introduce them to the concept. Karina initially felt she might not have enough time to do the same and was concerned it could be detrimental to the process. At an early evaluation meeting she posed the question: “Is there a link between the depth of the personal relationships and, the quality of the arts process and final product?”

The question raised an ongoing theme in both Karina and Jane’s reflective processes and both felt that team working was key. Both developed an excellent working relationship with each other, trusting and respecting their complementary roles. This enabled Karina to make strong relationships with participants quicker than she expected. She could then work with individuals to ensure that each person’s artwork reflected the things that were important to them and was their own creative response to the conversation.

Practically, a number of factors also enabled each participant to develop their individual creative abilities, these included:

- Ensuring participants had access to high quality materials that inspired them. During the first arts workshop people were introduced to a range of different textures, ribbons, cloth and visual images. Karina commented in her Reflective Journal: “Good materials make people feel valued, equal and good outcomes.”

- Investing time in planning and preparing each workshop, this included finding appropriate images and materials to respond to the needs of individuals in the group and enable people to develop their own individual ideas.

- Working with a team of experienced creative volunteers who were able to provide additional one-to-one support where appropriate.

- Encouraging participants to be aspirational, to aim high and create their best art work.

Throughout the project Karina’s aim was to support participants to create their best possible artwork. In doing this Karina faced a number of artistic challenges. The biggest one was lack of time with each group. She only had a small amount of contact time with people. Each Conversation Club was based on a model which included ten two-hour meetings, half the workshop time was given to reminiscences. Within this time Karina still encouraged participants to be aspirational. A participant at St Alban’s commented: “Making the collage and talking with Karina about how to go about it was good, something I’d never have done on my own.”

Karina enabled participants to take their time, reflect on their work and keep improving their designs. This included taking simple steps. For example early on in the collage-making it was important not to let participants stick down their images too early. The number one thing I learnt was the importance of not sticking straightaway but encouraging participants to reflect on their work.

Karina Thompson

One member of the group at Finchfield described how she told Karina about her original idea. “I just looked at her face and I knew she was saying I could do better, so we talked and the idea developed. As a result of Karina’s skills support and approach members of groups regularly said things like: “I never thought we could do things like this, it’s been great what we have achieved and they look fantastic.”

Karina used an image of a collage of pictures of fifteen grand-children to describe her role. This sums it up well. It was a visual reminder of the problems of how to get pictures of all of one Ashmore Park participant’s grandchildren on a small frame. Illustrates my role to enable someone to make real their idea even if they tell you it can’t be done.

Karina Thompson, Reflective Journal, October 2013
7. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

FACTS AND FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTPUT</th>
<th>TARGET</th>
<th>ACTUAL NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Conversation Clubs established</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average number of Workshops per Conversation Club</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average attendance at each Conversation Group workshop</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
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HOW DID THE PROGRAMME OF WORKSHOPS MEET AGREED TARGETS?

Outcome: Enable Independent living

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARGET</th>
<th>ACTUAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>75% of individuals report attending the group has enabled them to build supportive relationships</td>
<td>57% of people agreed with the statement The Club has enabled me to get to know people better, 43% of people strongly agreed with the statement Total 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40% of individuals feel that attending the group enables them to retain their independence</td>
<td>86% of people agreed with the statement Coming along to the Club has helped me keep active 14% of people strongly agreed with the statement Total 100%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Outcome: Quality of Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARGET</th>
<th>ACTUAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80% of participants report a reduction in loneliness and isolation through attending the group</td>
<td>88% of participants said they felt involved 76% of participants said they felt engaged 47% of participants said they felt valued 56% of participants said they felt close to people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Working together, helping each other as we have done is one of the fastest ways of getting to know each other. It’s that interaction which is more natural when you are talking to someone and doing something.”

Participant L, Finchfield

**8. CONCLUSION**

Collaboration has underpinned the Conversation Club approach. The Arts Team have worked together to develop an inclusive approach in which participants’ stories are valued and differences respected. They have worked with each of the participating Community Groups to ensure each Conversation Club is responsive and meets the needs of the individuals and the group. Each conversation has been guided by the participants, which has resulted in a strong sense of local ownership. Members of each group have been supported by the Arts Team to create art works that illustrate their story and also have a domestic function. The results — a splendid, technically accomplished collection of cushion covers, printed mugs, collages and a board game — were exhibited at Wolverhampton Art Gallery at the end of the programme of work.

This evaluation has explored the impact of that approach on participants’ quality of life and their ability to continue to live independently in their own homes. The findings show that people participating in a Conversation Club met new people and got to know existing friends and neighbours better. As they talked and created their own individual lasting reminder of the conversation, they built supportive relationships and felt valued and respected. Participants also reported that the Conversation Club enabled them to keep active which helped them retain their independence. In addition, by making connections with other community resources, including those provided by WAVE (the museums, galleries and archives of Wolverhampton), they gained a greater sense of involvement within their wider community.

The evaluation has also described the legacy of the programme of work and how the approach has influenced the way each Community Group organises its regular programme of activities. For some groups this has included simple changes for example, how the chairs are arranged at group meetings. Other groups now incorporate conversation time in their programme of activities. In two newly-formed groups, members talked about taking greater control and ownership of their group. In one situation a participant volunteered to continue to organise the group.

Wolverhampton Art Gallery continues to support its successful Meet Me At WAG regular Conversation Club and has also established a new club at Bantock House.

The strength and power of the approach taken by Conversation Clubs has been illustrated by the experiences of the participants and the relationships between members.

I missed some meetings, when I came back to the Conversation Club I was made very welcome, everyone was so good to me, I couldn’t wait for Thursday to come round. Some of us look out for each other all the time now. It’s like I’ve got a new extended family.

Participant R, Haven
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THANK YOU TO THE ARTS TEAM

Jane James Arts and Social Care Coordinator
Karina Thompson Artist in Residence
Jo Hallington Photographer

All the volunteers who played a crucial role in ensuring the project ran smoothly: Jane Round, Alan Marriott, Ellen Couchman-Crook, Sue Guest, Anne Hastings, Lin Chiang, Vicky Jiggins, Sydney Hobbs.

The following volunteers were recruited from the Conversation Clubs: Kath Palmer, Wendy Brewer, Pam Packerell, Ray Packerell, Geoff Ward.

All the members of the Conversations Clubs and their group leaders. Without them, their enthusiasm and support, this programme of work wouldn’t have been so successful.

Janet Hetherington, Creative Health CIC – Second Reader.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMME OF WORK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Project role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woodcross Lunch Club</td>
<td>Woodcross Community Centre, WV14</td>
<td>LONGSTANDING GROUP BROUGHT TOGETHER BY AGE UK</td>
<td>HELP TO RE-INVIGORATE GROUP, HELP NEW MEMBERS TO INTEGRATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHA Befriending group</td>
<td>Ashmore Park Community Centre, WV11</td>
<td>NEW GROUP</td>
<td>START A NEW GROUP ASSOCIATED WITH MHA (Methodist Help for the Aged)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Haven group</td>
<td>Tenants meeting room, The Haven, WV2</td>
<td>NEW GROUP</td>
<td>BRING NEIGHBOURS TOGETHER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court Lunch group</td>
<td>Almari Court Communal room, Pendeford, WV8</td>
<td>LONGSTANDING GROUP BROUGHT TOGETHER BY AGE UK</td>
<td>HELP TO RE-INVIGORATE GROUP, HELP NEW MEMBERS TO INTEGRATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Alban’s Court Group</td>
<td>Tenants meeting room, St Alban’s Court, WV13</td>
<td>NEW GROUP</td>
<td>BRING NEIGHBOURS TOGETHER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oasis Friendship Group</td>
<td>St Paul’s Church Foyer, Pendeford, WV9</td>
<td>ESTABLISHED INDEPENDENT GROUP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beacon Court Group</td>
<td>Meeting room, Beacon Court, WV4</td>
<td>NEW GROUP</td>
<td>BRING NEIGHBOURS TOGETHER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashmore Park Friendship group</td>
<td>Ashmore Park Community Centre, WV11</td>
<td>ESTABLISHED INDEPENDENT GROUP</td>
<td>REINVIGORATING GROUP, HELPING NEW MEMBERS TO INTEGRATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet Me at Bantock</td>
<td>Bantock House Museum, WV3</td>
<td>NEW GROUP</td>
<td>INTRODUCE A NEW ACTIVITY FOR OLDER PEOPLE AT THE MUSEUM</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Project role</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finchfield Health and Wellbeing Group</td>
<td>St Columba’s Church Hall, WV3</td>
<td>HELP TO ESTABLISH/DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN GROUP</td>
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<tr>
<td>newly formed independent group</td>
<td>Help to develop a focus for the group</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tong Court Tenants Group</td>
<td>Tenants meeting room, Tong Court, WV1</td>
<td>Help to establish/develop relationships within group</td>
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APPENDIX THREE: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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