

Thriving Communities Trafford: Final Project Report

1. Introduction

Thriving Communities Trafford was a 12-month project social prescribing project which ran in north Trafford, Greater Manchester, between April 2021 and March 2022.

The project was led by three core partners Stretford Public Hall (Stretford), St Johns Centre (Old Trafford) and North Trafford Primary Care Network (PCN).

It was funded by Arts Council England and the National Academy of Social Prescribing, as part of the Thriving Communities funding programme.

2. Aims of the project

The project had three aims:

- To trial the roll-out of the Elemental referral system to community groups, to allow patient referrals & ongoing measurement of health outcome data.
- To develop a series of project activities, designed to engage patients particularly at risk from and impacted by Covid-19.
- To design a training module / toolkit for community groups, to ensure they can provide additional support and signposting to participants referred via social prescribing.

3. Project delivery partners

Project activities were to be developed and delivered by eight delivery partners. These partners were all existing community groups and organisations, who already delivered health and wellbeing activities in the North Trafford area.

Cyril Flint is a befriending charity that covers the Trafford, Didsbury and Chorlton areas of Manchester. They match volunteer befrienders with older people, who they visit or speak to on a regular, weekly basis.

Friends of Victoria Park are an established Friends group which run a community café and hub in Victoria Park, Stretford.

Old Trafford (OT) Creative Space was established in 2018, to bring creative engagement and community art projects to the community of Old Trafford.

Rehoboth for Families are a faith-based, family advocate organisation. They promote positive family living, community inclusion, and tackling the issues that affect children and young people.

Friends of Stretford Public Hall are a community-led co-operative that formed in 2017 to save Stretford Public Hall.

St Johns Centre has been supporting the community of Old Trafford for over 40 years. The centre offers a wide range of learning opportunities, health and fitness classes, community events, and welfare support.

String of Hearts are a community arts organisation that run activities across Trafford. They aim to bring older adults together through music-making.

The Urban Fitness Collective (TUF-C) is a young people's initiative in areas of Greater Manchester that works with young people to encourage them to be active and engage with sport.

4. What we did

The project was made up for three phases:

4.1. Phase 1: Research & design (months 1 – 4)

The first four months of our project were spent understanding the current social prescribing offer in North Trafford, identifying target groups to work with, and developing project plans. In particular, the project team worked together on the following main areas of activity:

- Mapping and understanding how social prescribing currently operates across in North Trafford. We established a Project Steering Group who we went on to meet with regularly throughout the project. At the early stages of the project, the Steering Group were important in helping delivery partners understand how to make best use of Elemental and understanding how well social prescribing was being delivered.
- Set-up & training on Elemental. Elemental is a social prescribing software tool which is currently used by North Trafford PCN. Project delivery partners took part in training sessions to get set up on Elemental and to understand how it could be used to receive referrals. Training was provided directly by the Elemental support team and a training video was made as a reference tool for delivery partners.
- Development of project delivery plans. Project partners were asked to develop a two-page project delivery plan, summarising how they would delivery their project and how participants had been involved in the design of the project.

Our project steering group was made up of representatives from each of the project's core partners, plus health and social care professional from across North Trafford:

- Jane Hynes, Public Health Programme Manager, Trafford Council
- George Devlin, Trafford CCG
- Andrew Hodson, BlueSCI (Trafford Community Mental Health & Support)
- Aliya Bukhari, Voice of BME Trafford

We are grateful for the valuable insight that the steering group contributed to the project.

Identifying participant groups

An important part of the Thriving Communities Trafford project was the aim of working with participants to design activities which suited them.

The first stage of this process was to identify eight participant groups for delivery partners to work with. This exercise was led by the social prescribing team. These were groups which the social prescribing team felt were lacking suitable activities across North Trafford, or for other reasons were unable to access suitable activities.

The participant groups were then matched with delivery partners as follows:

- Young adults aged 25-35 years old – Old Trafford Creative Space
- Older people (over 60s) experiencing social isolation – Cyril Flint
- Those experiencing bereavement – String of Hearts
- Carers (particularly those caring for spouses / partners) – Stretford Public Hall
- Individuals needing support with cooking / healthy eating – Rehoboth
- New members of the community – Friends of Victoria Park
- Individuals needing support with social skills / building confidence – St Johns Centre

- Individuals needing support with parenting / family support – TUF*C.

Co-designing project activities

Once each delivery partner was matched with a participant group, the partners were encouraged to meet with participants and to begin to co-design their project activities. Project partners were encouraged to consider a range of design tools to help with this process:

- **Empathy mapping.** Empathy mapping helps to build a detailed 'map' of a person, to inform a better understanding of them. It is a useful way of identifying likes and dislikes, and similarities between people different people.

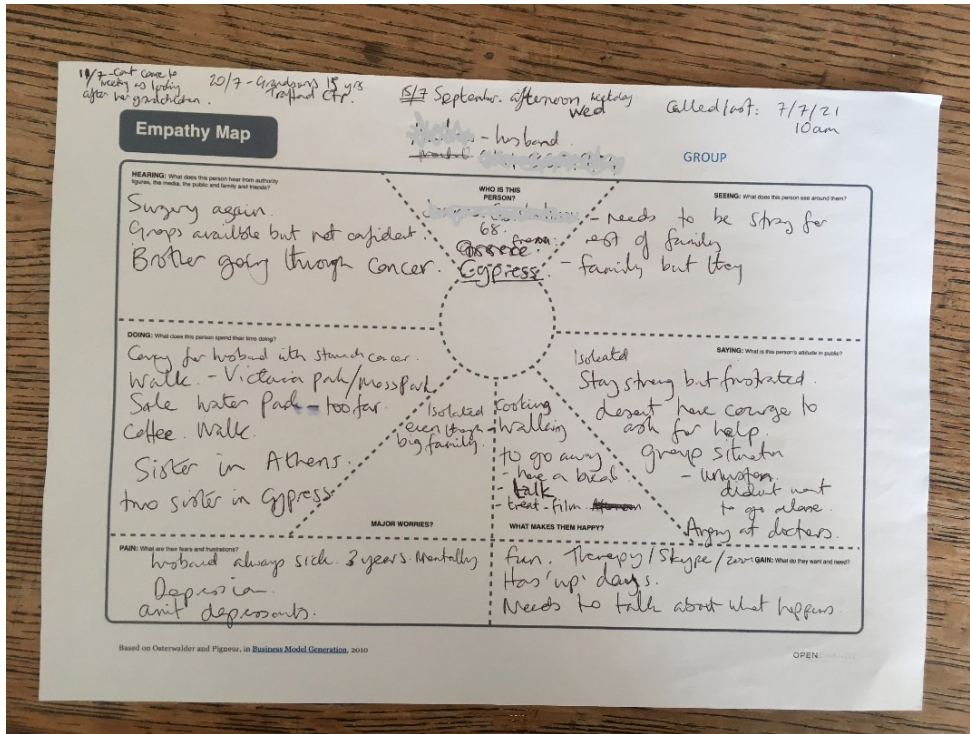


Figure 1: Example of a completed empathy map, for a project participant

- **User journeys.** Journey mapping makes it easier to see an activity or service from the point of view of the user. A user journey is typically broken into five steps: when someone becomes aware of a service, how they join that service, how they use it, how they develop it and how they leave the service.
- **Story boards.** Storyboards are an easy way of 'prototyping' new activities. A story board typically uses a series of images or drawings to tell a story, such as how someone will get involved in a project activity.

4.2. Phase 2: Project delivery (months 5 – 10)

Although our community projects were due to begin in August, several of them delayed their start until September 2021 so as not to clash with summer holidays. Most projects ran for six months, though some experienced difficulties getting started or recruiting participants. The next section of this report considers each of the eight projects in turn.

4.3. Phase 3: Evaluation (months 11 – 13)

The final phase of our project was to evaluate each of the individual projects and to propose a toolkit of training and resources that could be used by other community groups interested in supporting social prescribing.

5. Project delivery

Between July 2021 and March 2022, eight different activities were delivered or developed by project delivery partners. The success of the projects varied, with some experiencing difficulties recruiting their target participant groups, and one hampered by staff changes and delivery difficulties with the partner.

In summary, across the eight projects:

- 159 sessions were delivered in total
- 122 project participants engaged with projects
- Over 50% of participants attending sessions regularly
- 7 volunteers involved, contributing 70 hours volunteer hours
- 3 link workers engaged with project partners

Each project has produced a short evaluation report and these separate reports are available as part of the wider Thriving Communities Trafford evaluation. Below is a summary of each of the projects, and their outcomes and findings.

5.1. Creative Connections at Old Trafford Creative Space

Creative Connections at OT Creative Space offered four blocks of six-week, two-hour creative workshops at their studio space in Old Trafford. Creative activities included: collage and drawing, resulting in an exhibition in the studio's window, painting and printmaking, watercolours, play with clay sessions, and embroidery.

Two direct referrals were made by link workers but, despite initial contact with the individuals, neither attended any sessions. OT Creative Space offered participants the opportunity to attend their studio prior to attending any workshops but this was not taken up.

Due to limited referrals, OT Creative Space shared project information with their own contacts and other local organisations and recruited participants that way. Project activity was launched despite any direct referrals, so that future referrals would have something to join in with, rather than being the only attendee. About 80% of participants attended the sessions regularly.

Participants of the evening sessions were predominantly in their 20s and 30s. The morning sessions were attended by participants in a wider age range. Participants found out about session through electronic newsletters and social media, printed advertising, and information shared with other local organisations. When asked about their motivations for taking part in the sessions, participants mentioned: wanting to meet new people; wanting to learn a new creative skill; a space to come and get time for themselves; a chance to look after their own wellbeing; and the opportunity to try something creative for free, at a time when finances were very tight.

Project outcomes & conclusions

"A wonderful opportunity to get engrossed in a creative activity"

"Really enjoyed attending the course, felt welcomed and overall the experience was great!"

"This was a fantastic course. It was great learning a new skill and I think it's really positively impacted my wellbeing... I've met loads of my neighbours!"

"This helped me to meet new people and help with my mental health"

"I found it amazing, it was great to meet new people, relax and have fun."

Two participants from the daytime courses dropped out while on sick leave with poor mental health but both started back at work before the course had finished. This was viewed as a positive outcome of their participation in the classes. 50% of participants from each six-week course continued to the next six-week course, as they were still interested in the next creative activity on offer.



Most participants were keen to try other creative workshops should they be on offer, and even try new things, they might not have considered before. A clear outline of what will happen each week in the course may encourage continued attendance, though this needs to be balanced with people feeling able to re-join a class if they have missed sessions. Being able to adapt what was on offer helped one participant stay involved as she really loved painting but was uncomfortable using clay. The participant was paired with another participant, who made things from clay which she could then paint.

OT Creative Space are keen to work further with the social prescribers to put together a programme of activities that are more suitable to prescribe into, whether that is one off sessions, taster events, longer or shorter courses or ongoing drop-in sessions.

5.2. Cyril Flint

Cyril Flint Befrienders offer a befriending service for older people in the Trafford area. They train and match up volunteers based on location and interests, with elderly (over 60s) lonely or isolated members of the local community. Volunteers and services users are from all backgrounds and volunteers range from age 18 upwards, making the service multicultural and multigenerational.

Project aim

The aim of Cyril Flint's project was to deliver a co-designed project aimed at socially isolated older people from North Trafford. Due to staff changes and staff being off sick, the project suffered several delays which impacted on Cyril Flint's involvement with the overall project. Training sessions where the principles of co-design were explained were missed, meaning the initial phases of the project were not completed as intended.

In turn, the Cyril Flint team had problems setting up Elemental which meant referrals from social prescribers were not immediately received. The team took the decision not to use Elemental and instead relied on email referrals. This enabled Cyril Flint to build a strong working relationship directly with the social prescribers.

Identification of target participants

The target group for Cyril Flint to work with was residents over 60yrs, living in north Trafford and who were lonely or isolated. The aim was to help people connect with the local community, support them getting back out and about, relieve anxiety from fear or being lonely and isolated, and engage them in an activity that would be mentally or physically rewarding.

Co-design project

Cyril Flint put a notice in their regular newsletter (which goes out to over 90 people living in Trafford) that they were looking for ideas about what activities people would like to see Cyril Flint put on for them. The same questions were also included in a survey sent out to over 90 people.

The team also made individual phone calls to current services users as well as all new people who were referred into their service to ask them what if any activities they would want/ be willing to attend that Cyril Flint could deliver. Most people did not seem to know what events they would like to attend. As the people varied in age and ability, there was no one event that suited all.

Project delivery

Based on phone calls and discussions with referred participants, Cyril Flint decided to tailor support to the different individuals who were referred to them by linkworkers. The support and activities delivered are summarised below:

Participant 1: Interested in organised day trips (eg trips to the seaside, theatre visits) and trips to bingo. Cyril Flint signposted to other local community groups and services.

Participant 2: Unable to contact referred person. Unsuccessful referral.

Participant 3: Was identified by linkworkers as at risk of isolation but this had reduced as Covid-19 lockdown restrictions lifted. Participant did not feel that they needed any additional activities and said they felt too young to attend any activities for people of their age.

Participant 4: Reluctant to take part in social activities due to concerns about Covid-19. During discussions with Cyril Flint, participant spoke about enjoying crossword puzzles and reading. Cyril Flint delivered a wellbeing pack containing books to read (having determined authors the participant enjoyed reading) and crossword puzzles.

Participant 5: Severe mobility issues – too difficult for participant to attend external activities. Matched with a trained volunteer to receive befriending support.

Participant 6: Responsible for caring for parents, suffering from depression and the onset of dementia. Were not interested in any specific activities so Cyril Flint signposted to other services and support available locally.

Participant 7: Initially keen to receive support from befriending service but subsequently changed mind. Referred back to linkworker.

Participant 8: Home assessment completed and concluded that the participant should be matched with a befriender.

Cuppa, Cake, Craft and Planting held in conjunction with Friends of Victoria Park

Having been unable to deliver any group activities as intended, Cyril Flint teamed up with Friends of Victoria Park and organised a cuppa, cake, craft, and gardening / outdoor themed event. This was sent to the social prescribers and advertised on social media. The event was attended by seven residents.

Lessons from the project

A key finding from the work was that those that attended said there was a lack of information for people about what events were being held locally. Older people reported that they struggled to find out about local activities, particularly as local organisations increasingly rely on social media for communication. This highlighted the important role of the social prescribers in signposting to local activities.

Participants wanted to talk to someone on the phone and were happy to receive one-to-one tailored support. This demonstrated there is a need in the community initially at least to address people's individual needs on a one-to-one basis with the hope this will improve their confidence to get back out in the community.

Weather & local environmental conditions: Other factors that affected attendance at our events were related to the time of year and the poor weather. Leaves on the ground present a problem for the elderly in Trafford and Trafford has one of the highest fall rates in Manchester. Several participants reported that they do not like going out and about much during autumn / winter as the roads become very slippery with wet leaves.

Transport links: This was an important factor for many participants Cyril Flint spoke to. There is a lack of transport links that get people to the place they need to be. Ring & Ride often does not stop near local transport links, buses and metros are on main routes only, and lots of events take place at local community centres which are harder to access. A lot of the participants spoken to also didn't know about Ring & Ride, or had heard of it but had no idea how to register for the service.

Food: Some of the participants mentioned the positive impact of free food at an event, reporting that if there were sandwiches or hot soup or cake they would be more likely to attend. Several people in this age bracket did not like to cook or did not feel confident preparing food.

Covid-19 Omicron: The emergence of the Omicron variant also reduced attendance as some restrictions were still in place and a lot of people reported that they did not yet feel comfortable mixing with others at this time.

5.3. String of Hearts - Music-making with older people

Between August 2021 and March 2022, String of Hearts delivered a series of music-making activities for older adults. The activities aimed to improve the wellbeing of older adults (aged 50+), particularly those who are socially isolated or recently bereaved, by building connections, positive mood, self-expression, motivation and skills.

Two types of activities were delivered: music phone calls and in-person workshops - which provided flexibility for participants' different needs and interests. One-to-one music phone calls took place between participants and String of Hearts musicians. Each musician rang the participant at an agreed date and time to explore their musical interests and actively take part in music-making. This model supported people to engage who were digitally excluded and who experienced barriers to leaving the house.

Group in-person workshops took place monthly, facilitated by two String of Hearts musicians. Participants explored a range of music-making approaches including singing, improvising, recording music and writing songs based on topics important to them. All participants who took part in the music phone calls transitioned to attending the group workshops in-person, as they were excited to meet the musician they had been speaking to and develop their musical explorations further. Twelve in-person sessions ran in total, with 12 project participants.

Participants were motivated to take part as the workshops and activities meant they got to meet other people: *“Lonely so it gives me somewhere to go and something to do”, “Being among people and seeing people... they make me feel wanted”.*

Some reported having some anxiety before taking part in the workshop but explained that contact with the String of Hearts team helped to reassure them: *“No not worried about anything, had spoken to Amina before the sessions so that helped”*

“When you first start you are sat with strangers but by end of it you feel like you belong and are a part of something”

Participants reported the project had a significant impact on their wellbeing:

“From the minute I walked into the group I felt loved and accepted and that has taught me that that is how I should feel always in my life”

“The acceptance is very beneficial, and you feel loved unconditionally”

“Really satisfying, feel accepted, that people do care, the way the sessions are led encourage me to participate”

None of the participants dropped out, but one did not attend regularly due to ill health, and another passed away during the project. The family of the participant who passed away told String of Hearts: *“Truly you all made her so happy at a time when she was housebound and she couldn’t do church or any other outlet she enjoyed. She talked about you guys all the time, they (the doctors) thought she was going to pass away two years ago, that kept her going, she lived for singing and meeting people, we really appreciate all the work you’ve done with her.”*



Project conclusion & future plans

String of Hearts have formed a new music-making group through the Thriving Communities project which will continue as one of their core groups for the future. The project was established as monthly workshops because String of Hearts wanted to provide sustained support and regular contact for older adults in the community. They recognised that it was likely that referrals would come in over a series of weeks/ months, rather than all in one go. Whilst this model is beneficial in terms of taking referrals and supporting engagement over a longer period, it requires longer-term funding, which String of Hearts have managed to secure.

String of Hearts’ project proved that there are several factors influencing older adults’ participation in music and social prescribing, including:

- Building relationships with link workers to support their understanding of the activity and its potential benefits
- Regular communication and feedback loops with link workers to support participants
- Supporting participant engagement through regular check-in calls, accessible workshop venues, transport, refreshments
- Multiple referral methods (Elemental, online form, email, phone)
- Choice of music-making activities
- Flexibility of phone activities around participants' health appointments, hospital visits, caring responsibilities, etc.

5.4 Stretford Public Hall: carers group

Stretford Public Hall ran a project which aimed to provide support for carers. The project delivered a monthly peer-support group for family carers, together with weekly wellbeing phone calls.

Attendance to the monthly group sessions was good, with 5 or 6 out of the 10 participants attending each month. The project coordinator delivered nine peer-support group sessions and 162 hours of well-being phone calls.

Six of the 10 participants were referred by social prescribers and all identified the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown as a cause of social isolation.

What worked well

Weekly wellbeing calls were a vital part of the project, helping the project coordinator to get to know the participants and to find out more about their individual situations.

These initial calls helped to build a picture of the different caring responsibilities of the participants and helped to shape the first group meeting.

The weekly calls became an integral part of the project, as they helped to keep the participants in touch with the project coordinator and each other.

Scheduling the group meetings and finding times when everyone could attend was made easier with regular calls, and the calls also meant that the project coordinator could remind everyone about future meetings.

Drop-in sessions were an important feature as it was often difficult for participants to leave the person they cared for. Participants felt that it was important for group sessions to be run on a drop-in basis, so that they didn't feel uncomfortable if they missed a session. They felt this was particularly important for activities aimed at carers.

Liaison with link workers. Close discussion and liaison with the social prescribing team was important for the project coordinator, who spoke to a link worker or emailed them at least once a week throughout the project. This contact was particularly important following each referral, so the project coordinator felt prepared to meet new participants.

For the participants, the referral from a social prescriber was also important. Participants felt that it was unlikely they would have found out about the carers group, if they hadn't been referred by their link worker. They also trusted the referral and felt confident attending the group, knowing it had been recommended to them.

Peer support. It became apparent early on that the participants felt overwhelmed, especially after shielding their cared for through the Covid-19 pandemic. At the first meeting, which took place soon after lockdown, participants cried while telling their personal stories. One participant who had not said much just spoke to say they were 'burnt out' and the agreement was unanimous. They

spoke to one another in depth about medication and lack of support from the NHS that only carers could appreciate and comment on.

The first meeting was initially intended to act as a co-design meeting, during which participants would help to decide on the format and content of future meetings. However, it was apparent that what the participants really valued was simply the opportunity to talk openly with other carers and to share their experiences, after months of feeling they were not being supported.

Even though the participants felt unable to contact the other group members directly, they were and remain very interested in each other's situations and keen to help each other. This meant that the role of the project coordinator was important, enabling participants to keep in touch with each other and check in on each other, but without feeling that they had to do this directly.

All the participants reported that the peer support group and wellbeing phone calls have helped them recover from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The project helped bring people out of their houses for themselves and we have visibly seen a difference in attitude and an improvement in participant resilience over the course of the project.

The project was one of the first carers groups to meet in person in Trafford after the Covid-19 pandemic and this was commented on by all participants, who had felt abandoned by existing support services and authorities like the NHS during lockdown.

"I've gained a lot... Realising I'm not the only one and realising the struggles other people also have.

Being able to discuss things and put different perspectives on things. I've learnt so much"

After the first meeting, the dynamic of the group changed, and participants became more interested in each other which motivated them to attend further meetings. After a few meetings, more structured workshops were also introduced with a professional psychoanalyst who led activities to help the carers manage stress and anxiety. More recently, a representative from Trafford Carers Centre has also attended group sessions, to help signpost and give advice.

Project challenges

Co-design: The co-design approach to deciding on future project activity was of limited use in this project. Many of the carers who were referred to the project initially felt lonely and depressed and found it difficult to think more broadly about the needs of other participants. They were not looking for new activities to attend but instead hoped for support and understanding. As such, they were happy for group meetings to focus on peer support, talking and building relationships with other carers, rather than a particular project activity.

First meeting: The first meeting held with the carers group was particularly emotional and intense, as for many of the participants it was the first opportunity they had had to talk in person to others about their experiences of the pandemic. This also made the meeting difficult and personally challenging for the project coordinator.

This is an important lesson from this project, as similar social prescribing projects could experience this when bringing together a group of people with shared experiences for the first time. Over the course of the carers project, the project coordinator has undertaken several training courses including becoming a qualified Mental Health First Aider. This training has been valuable in the carers peer support meetings.

Elemental: The use of Elemental for the carers project was relatively limited, although the social prescribing team did use it to refer participants to the project. If it was to be used more comprehensively in the future, further training and support would be needed for staff.

5.5 Rehoboth - Creating cultural connections in the kitchen

Rehoboth for Families were assigned to work with men over 40 yrs and originally hoped to recruit a cohort of older men to join their cookery classes. The aims of the project were:

- Weekly cooking class, where simple, cost effective and healthy meals are taught.
- Encouraging community engagement with the diverse people and culture in Trafford.
- Prevention of isolation and loneliness.

Despite a concerted effort to recruit older men, there was a reluctance for men to attend the classes on their own and several were keen to attend with another family member. Rather than targeting men in particular, Rehoboth opened the classes to all.

In total, 20 classes were delivered at two separate venues in Stretford and Old Trafford. In total, 26 unique participants attended the classes, with 12 people referred through social prescribers.

Attendees reported that the classes had several impacts on them:

- Meeting new people and making friends
- Good social interactions
- Learning about other cultures, generated loads of discussions and questions
- Improvement in mental wellbeing
- Learning how to make food from different cultures
- Experiences gained will help in job search
- Improved confidence and pathways to employment – one participant got a new job just prior to finishing the sessions and another participant started volunteering for St. John's Centre
- Helped with curbing loneliness – somewhere to go and people to talk to.

Attendance of the classes was affected by participant anxiety, and also concerns about Covid-19 and the risk of infection. Participant confidence grew as the classes continued and by the end of the programme, participants were more relaxed, and many had made friends. Participants were disappointed that the classes came to an end.

5.6 New Roots, Friends of Victoria Park

Friends of Victoria Park (FOVP) were initially paired with the participant group 'new arrivals', with the intension of working with individuals and families who had recently moved to the Stretford area. The social prescribing team were aware of several patients who, having recently moved house, had found it very difficult to meet new people and to settle in, due to Covid-19 and lockdown. The aim of FOVP's project was to engage with new arrivals and to offer a weekly gardening session, 'New Roots', to try and bring isolated people together.

Despite concerted recruitment efforts, including widespread leafleting by a local estate agents and information sent specifically to new tenants by Trafford Housing Trust, the project failed to successfully recruit participants.

FOVPS offered a gardening group as it is widely accepted that getting outside and engaging with nature has a significant impact on people's mental health and wellbeing. It can also be an effective way for people to engage comfortably with others – carrying out a task that requires teamwork e.g., preparing pots for seed sowing – requires people to work side by side and does not rely on eye contact. People feel more able to casually chat about what they are doing.

Unfortunately, despite broadening the target group so that all were welcome to attend the sessions, FOVP still had little success. FOVP experienced this across their other Wellbeing groups and activities. It is likely Covid-19 was a factor in this.

FOVP joined forces with Cyril Flint Befrienders to put on an activity morning specifically for the over 60s. The morning was nature-themed so in keeping with the gardening group idea and aimed at elderly residents in North Trafford. Activities included making nature-themed mobiles, flower arranging, and planting seeds. All accompanied by tea and cake.

A total of 8 participants attended the day, six self-referrals and two who were referred by social prescribers. At the Delivery feedback session, the social prescriber who made the referrals confirmed that the individuals were keener to attend once they heard the morning was fully funded and tea and cake would be included. Feedback from the session also suggested people thought it might be too physically difficult but in fact there are activities to cater for all abilities.

5.7 Be Bolder at St John's

Be Bolder at St John's was aimed at developing social connections and building confidence in the over 40s through exercise and fitness.

Activities focused on improving physical fitness and wellbeing, with practical advice and guidance on getting fitter; exercise sessions designed to meet specific group needs; and personal training and practical coaching and support for individuals or small groups.

- A total of 80 sessions were completed across two group and one individual programme between 29th June and 7th December 2021. This included an initial participant workshop (to design the programme); a series of twice weekly group sessions; individual personal consultation sessions.
- Sixteen unique participants signed up to the programme: eleven referred by link workers; five self-referred.
- All sixteen were offered a place and fourteen people (88%) took up the offer and attended sessions.
- 80% of participants attended more than two-thirds of the group sessions.

Participant feedback was captured during the programme and, where possible, incorporated into the design and delivery. Five project participants were interviewed following completion of the programme, to explore the impact of the programme.

Project impact & outcomes

All interviewees agreed that the programme had had an impact on their activity levels. All five had continued to do at least one of the activities that they had tried as part of the programme. Others had started other activities which had been suggested, including the Mile Shy Club (beginners walking & running) and healthy cookery sessions.

More than half had bought equipment suggested and were using or planned to use it at home. All interviewees mentioned other facilities or resources that they had found out about through programme, which they had used or thought they would use in future:

"I have enjoyed my time in your group and I am determined to carry on with the gym at George Carnall. Thanks to you I will be a different person next time we meet."

For some, their progress had been put back by the return of Covid-19 and winter weather and storms, but they seemed confident that they would get back into it.

Interviewees also mentioned having more energy, feeling happier (immediately and in the longer term), and being more motivated:

"This programme was the bit of motivation I needed and getting the one-to-one attention has made all the difference."

"I think the balance of talking in the group mixed with exercise is perfect, healthy minds make healthy hearts."

"Being part of this group of strong women, each of us from very different backgrounds and experiences, has been amazing. It's had a huge positive impact on us all."

"I have loved meeting new people which I haven't done for a long time. I love having a purpose - to be as fit as I can..."

I would NEVER have gone to a gym alone. Before this I felt I had no purpose, my life had changed so dramatically."

Interviewees felt that everyone had found the programme really valuable, most both in terms of activity and social/confidence. This was mainly due to the Programme Lead's personal qualities and approach – supportive, encouraging, personalised, no pressure, practical.

For most interviewees, the social aspect was important; they valued being in a group of people from different backgrounds but who were all there for similar reasons. Participants also set up their own Whats App group which enabled them to support and encourage each other.

As part of the programme participants tried different activities including cycling, dancing, gym, meditation, and open water swimming. All the activities were enjoyed by at least some of the group – the meditation was "too religious" for one person but "loved" by another, who is still pursuing it. Everyone who went to the dancing really enjoyed it. Many participants found the George Carnall Leisure Centre a bit of a revelation because it seemed to be geared away from the young or super-fit, and at least one of the participants is still going regularly (3 months on from the end of the programme).

Even in a co-produced programme, it may not be possible for everyone to enjoy everything about the sessions. In this case, the majority of participants were very enthusiastic about the social aspect, but one just wanted to skip that part and just do the exercise.

Interviewees felt that the Programme Lead had managed to strike a balance between encouraging people to come, and putting them under pressure.

"This made a lot of difference for me, otherwise I might have felt like I couldn't go back after missing a session because I wouldn't know what to say."

At the time of project evaluation, it was more than three months since the end of the programme and about 50% of participants claim to be still exercising regularly. Those who have not been able to sustain their levels of activity – mainly due to ill health – still talk about benefitting from the experience of being on the programme.

Additional learning

- The participants who successfully completed the whole were already preparing to make changes in their lifestyle when they were referred.
- Those with the best attendance record were also those who have recorded the highest levels of improvement to their activity levels; they are also seeing the best long-term benefits of the programme and are still moving more.

- The combination of group sessions, and individual consultations and fitness plans, was an effective way to establish and maintain commitment to the programme and a new routine.
- Establishing a common set of targets for activity was a grounding and helpful place to start – 150 minutes of moderate exercise and two sessions of strength and balance each week
- Being a fitness programme that builds in complexity and intensity means no one gets left behind but makes it difficult to accommodate people joining after the course has started.
- The initial 8-week programme of group activities was agreed with – committed to by - participants when they signed on. The group sessions after this initial 8 weeks were less well attended. This suggests that in future it would be useful to renegotiate the participant ‘contract’ when a new block of sessions begins, to renew this commitment.
- The evaluation questionnaires did not provide any definitive indications about the programme, but the testimonials and reflections from participants have been positive and instructive.

5.8 The Urban Fitness Collective (TUF*C)

Project summary

The aim was to provide activities for parents and older (school age) children to do together. This was identified as a gap in existing activities.

The original plan was to co-create a family cycling activity to run over 6 sessions. It was to be open to all parents and children who can ride a bike, with bikes provided if needed.

It was advertised on St John’s Centre and TUF*C’s website and social media, with posters and leaflets, and at summer family activities at St John’s. There was not enough interest to start the activity – possibly because parents were mostly working and thought they wouldn’t be able to attend activities (even though weekday sessions were not specified), or because families were away during the summer holidays.

It was readvertised in October 2021 but there was still not enough interest. The darker days and weather may have affected this as well as parents struggling to find time.

TUFC then decided to join up with WETA (Women’s Empowerment Through Arts), who were looking at providing cycle rides for Asian mums. Older Asian women who had taken part in the St John’s Centre Ambition for Ageing “Try a Bike” project were also invited.

One ride was organised for December 2021, which was well attended, partly by people who couldn’t ride, but the weather prevented any more rides until March.

Three sessions were held in March 2022, with a ride for adults and children in Seymour Park, with chai and chat afterwards in local café. There were 12 attendees, including children. All the adults self-referred and stated their main motivation for coming to the sessions was social isolation.

TUF*C and WETA are still working together to provide recreational cycle rides for women and children. However, these are usually organised at short notice, depending on the weather, so it is hard for residents to be signposted to a particular ride. In future, it would make more sense for them to be signposted to WETA, so that they can be offered the rides along with other social activities.

6. Project findings & conclusions

Despite varying levels of engagement with participants, all eight of our Thriving Communities Trafford projects have provided important lessons about the delivery of social prescribing locally in North Trafford. Below are the key findings and conclusions identified by project partners:

The positive impact of community projects

Our project has shown the beneficial impact that community projects can have on individuals' wellbeing. This positive impact was evident across all eight projects, through the feedback of the participants themselves and through the observations of linkworkers.

For some participants, such as the carers taking part in peer-support groups and the participants joining String of Hearts' music-making sessions, the impact on participants' mental health has been significant. Participants valued the opportunity to meet people, to talk with others, and to have a reason to get out of the house and take part in an activity.

'Keeps me going as I am lonely so seeing different people gives me something to do and it has made me happier and made me feel a lot better.' – Participant, String of Hearts

'This was a fantastic course. It was great learning a new skill and I think it's really positively impacted my wellbeing... and I've met loads of my neighbours.' – Participant, Creative Connections, OT Creative Space

For others, project activity also had an impact on physical health, as well as mental wellbeing. Participants in the Be Bolder project, which aimed to build confidence and encourage participants to exercise, reported that even their short, six-week programme of activity had started to help them get fit.

'I have started to feel really energetic since starting this. It is good to have some time for me. Thank you for your time and motivation, you certainly have made me make time to do exercise.' – Participant, Be Bolder

Referrals & the value of relationship building

The most successful projects were those where delivery partners were able to invest time in one-to-one phone calls and meetings with individual participants, allowing participants to build a relationship with the delivery partner and to feel confident about attending the project activity.

Time and space are needed between a person being prescribed a community activity and the activity starting, to give participants the chance to become comfortable with the prospect of attending. Linkworkers reported that being asked to join an activity immediately tended to make participants anxious, whereas the suggestion of joining a new activity in the future was less intimidating.

The time and space between a referral and an activity beginning is the space in which the one-to-one contact between the delivery partner and the referred participant can happen. This personal contact was recognised by participants as an important factor in their joining and continuing with project activity.

'This programme was the bit of motivation I needed and getting the one-to-one attention has made all the difference.' – Participant, Be Bolder

Social prescribers as trusted intermediaries

Participants reported that they trusted their social prescriber and that this was an important factor in them feeling confident taking their advice to join a new group.

Participants also recognised the important role of their linkworker in signposting to activities which they would not have known about otherwise:

'I don't really go out much so I'm not sure where I would have seen a flyer or poster, I'm not sure where I would have found out about it' - Participant, Carers' group.

Project partners agreed that there was a fine line between a new participant feeling welcomed and feeling pressured to join the activity. There is potential for using texts and WhatsApp as a less high-pressure way of contacting people, rather than phoning – this could be by existing group members, rather than a group leader. Participants can also be sent information, such as a film or photos of the activity, to give them a better idea of what to expect.

Linkworker visits & referral parameters

Several project partners identified the importance of linkworker visits to the community projects, as part of the referral process. These visits allowed the social prescribers to get a better understanding of the nature of the community activity being delivered, and an understanding of any practical barriers or considerations which might affect who could attend the sessions. This in turn made it easier for the social prescribers to recommend activities to their patients, as they could describe them accurately.

The visits also provided an opportunity for the delivery partners and social prescriber to discuss the remit of the activity / group, to ensure a clear, shared understanding of who should and should not be referred to the group.

Partners reported that this, in turn, forced the groups to reflect on their target audiences and to consider whether they had parameters about who they worked with.

Partners agreed it is important for community groups to be very clear about this before embarking on social prescribing, as it is important for them to know who they can and cannot support.

The timing & frequency of activities

Participants valued regular timeslots for activities – it was helpful to participants to know that if they missed a session, they still knew when the next one was and that they could still come to it. This was particularly important for participants who found it difficult to commit to regular sessions due to personal commitments (eg caring responsibilities) or due to poor mental health.

Participants across several projects recognised the importance of the sessions being relaxed and informal, so they did not feel pressured to attend or guilty if they could not attend.

Although many participants want their activities to go on indefinitely (because they are enjoying them and finding them beneficial), a fixed length programme (or a project with a defined outcome) encouraged participants to start, and continue coming, rather than putting it off.

Progression on project completion

Having progression routes after the end of an activity is also important. This can include delivery partners introducing participants to other activities, such as the Be Bolder project which introduced participants to the gym and dance studio. This has led to several of her participants continuing these activities independently.

Communication between delivery partners & social prescribers

Good communication between delivery partners and social prescribers was an important feature of the most successful projects, enabling partners to monitor attendance and follow-up non-attendance when appropriate. Although it was hoped that Elemental would be used to track

attendance, none of our project partners were able to use Elemental in this way so attendance was instead tracked manually.

Social prescribers particularly valued 'feedback' calls from project partners, which gave community groups the opportunity to provide feedback on participants. This went beyond just whether a participant had been attending project activity and included other barriers the participant might have encountered, how well the participant was engaging with the activity and any other issues which the project leader felt it useful for the social prescribers to know. (All project participants were asked to sign consent forms, prior to taking part in their projects, and they knew that information would be shared in this way.)

Practical barriers to engagement

Delivery partners identified a range of practical barriers which can prevent or put off people from engaging with community activities:

Marketing & information. With an increasing number of community groups relying on online communication and social media to share information, it is becoming harder for those who are not online to find out about local activities. Older participants reported that they often found it difficult to find information about local activities, and as a result did not feel that they had enough information about existing activities.

Transport & parking. For many participants, particularly older people, a lack of affordable transport – or concerns about transport and access – were often a barrier to taking part in activities. Social prescribers can help to overcome these barriers by taking the time to find out what transport options exist for participants (eg availability of local parking; nearby bus stops etc). Similarly, community groups should focus on promoting community transport options (eg by sharing information about Ring & Ride).

Environmental conditions. For older participants, concerns about poor weather and local environmental conditions were also a barrier to participation. This was particularly a problem in the autumn / winter, where older people were concerned about poor lighting and difficult walking conditions, caused by leaves or ice on pavements.

Co-designing community activities

The intention of all eight projects was to work with participants to design suitable community activities, through consultation and design workshops. While this approach worked well for some projects (eg Be Bolder, String of Hearts) it did not work as well for all groups. Cyril Flint, for example, had intended to organise activities for isolated older people (over 60yrs) but found that the needs of this broad cohort were too diverse, making it difficult to identify an activity that would suit everyone.

For Friends of Victoria Park, the absence of referrals at an early stage, meant they were unable to work closely with participants to plan their activity. For the carers group, it was clear early on those participants were not interested in a particular activity, but instead valued the opportunity to meet with peers and to share experiences.

Training & professional development

Our project set out to explore how to support more social prescribing across North Trafford, by improving the links between social prescribers and community groups. Delivery partners were not expected to need any training to deliver the proposed project activities, but we wanted to identify any training that could support community groups to deliver social prescribing in the future.

We identified three levels of mental health training which are widely available across Trafford and encouraged project delivery partners to promote the training to their staff.

Suicide prevention training. Trafford Council has encouraged all residents to learn how to save a life, through suicide prevention training. The short, online course – developed by Zero Suicide Alliance – is freely available to anyone¹.

Making Every Contact Count (MECC) is an approach which encourages health professionals to consider how every point of contact they have with someone is an opportunity to promote positive change. Project partners were signposted to the online E-learning module, developed by Health Education England².

Mental Health First Aider training. For staff requiring more in-depth training, partners were encouraged to consider Mental Health First Aid training, is an internationally recognised course which will qualifies those who complete it as a Mental Health First Aider.

In addition, project partners suggested that coaching skills are also useful when working with participants who have been socially prescribed – for example, listening skills, the ability to help people find their own solutions, and being able to steer conversations to positive conclusions.

Several of our projects found that discussions between participants, or between project staff and participants, could touch on difficult subjects or could become in-depth and personal. For groups which were focused on delivering a particular activity, these discussions mean that group leaders / coordinators needed to be able to respond sensitively and to steer discussion away from difficult topics, responding positively and with care.

It also means it is important that the staff who are leading group activities have sufficient support and supervision, and where necessary access to therapy. This was particularly highlighted by the Carers project, where group discussions could at times be upsetting.

Trialling Elemental

One of the aims of our project was to trial the roll-out of Elemental as a software referral tool, to support social prescribing across North Trafford. Across our eight projects, two community partners were able to successfully install and use Elemental to receive referrals; three groups were able to use it but chose not to use it for referrals; and three groups experienced problems trying to get the software set up and in use.

For those that did use Elemental for referrals, the software did not reduce the amount of contact needed between link workers and project delivery staff. Although Elemental allowed a community group to see when a person had been referred to the project, it was still necessary for delivery staff to speak to the link worker in person – to discuss the referred person's needs in detail.

It was originally hoped that community groups would be able to use Elemental to record wellbeing data directly for project participants – by accessing the ONS4 data section of Elemental. However, the licence arrangements which North Trafford have in place would allow only this to be done for project participants who were referred by social prescribers; the community groups could not add new participants who had self-referred or joined the projects through other referral routes. Given that most delivery partners were using paper copies of the ONS4 survey, the project team took the decision to record and analyse ONS4 data separately, with only those participants who had been referred by social prescribers having their wellbeing data recorded on Elemental.

¹ <https://shiningalightonsuicide.org.uk/learn-to-save-a-life/>

² <https://www.makingeverycontactcount.co.uk/training/e-learning/>

One feature of Elemental is that it identifies 'cohort' groups with similar characteristics. Project partners agreed it would be useful if community providers were more aware of these cohorts and how they are used within Elemental. This would mean that community groups could identify which cohorts their activities are aimed at and most suited to – which would improve the referral process.

The use of ONS4 to measure wellbeing

We had also planned to use the Office of National Statistics measures for personal wellbeing ('ONS4') to measure the impact of project activity on participant wellbeing but the use of this across the projects was unsuccessful.

The two projects which used the measure most successfully were the Be Bolder project and the Creative Connections project run by Old Trafford Creative Space. These were the two projects which ran activities over a set period (6 to 8 weeks) with a defined start and end point. This made it easier for these projects to ask participants to complete the surveys, as it was easier to explain their purpose and use.

For other projects, where participants joined at different stages, delivery partners found it more difficult to distribute and use the surveys. For example, for the carers group, the project coordinator felt uncomfortable asking participants to complete the surveys:

'I have done wellbeing phone calls with them, so it felt like asking them to fill in the ONS survey was going backwards and like I had not been listening.' Project coordinator, Carers project

The results of the ONS4 surveys that were completed are included in individual project reports.

Final reflections from social prescribers

"This project was really beneficial to us as NHS social prescribers at four large North Trafford GP Practices. It helped us to connect with community groups and work collaboratively in a way that we hadn't before. It was a fantastic opportunity for us strengthen our community links, getting more information about what was on offer locally and nurturing positive working relationships. It also helped to raise awareness of social prescribing which has been mutually beneficial both for the NHS, community partners and ultimately patients.

It felt great to be able to identify the gaps in community provision and to do something proactive to be able to address this. Some of these groups have been really successful and it has been really beneficial for patients to have something appropriate to offer where this was not available before.

Sometimes it was difficult to commit to the time needed for the project due to our extremely high caseloads. This was frustrating at times as the project felt very relevant to our role. Communication with community groups was vital and has shown how developing relationships through collaborative projects has a broad reaching, positive impact via social prescribing. Helping to facilitate more successful referrals and benefiting patients and ultimately reducing pressures on local NHS services and promoting better health and wellbeing for the entire community.

The project identified some issues with Elemental and how this software may be a barrier to community groups. Identifying the need for an 'Elemental Champion' felt important and if this could be in place, would help facilitate more referrals through the system"

A toolkit for social prescribing in Trafford

Build relationship with social prescribers

Social prescribers should visit community groups to understand what services / activities the groups offer. Social prescribers need a good understanding of each activity and how it operates – this allows them to describe the activity accurately to patients.

Identify target groups and who should be referred. Set clear referral parameters and have a good understanding of who a group can and cannot support.

Identify the practical barriers that might prevent someone from attending an activity – eg transport barriers, environmental issues - and work together to overcome these barriers.

Collectively agree your referral process

Decide with the linkworker how participants will be referred to community group. This might mean the contact details of a particular person, or it could mean designing a referral form which could be used by the social prescriber. It might also mean using Elemental.

Think about any standard patient information which would be useful for your community group. You might want to work with your social prescribing team to develop a standard referral form which can be used by all community groups in your area.

Support participants during the referral process

Use posters, leaflets & local press to advertise new activities – more needs to be done to advertise activities to those who do not have digital access.

A simple referral – recommending that a patient attends a new class or activity – is unlikely to be enough to persuade someone to join a new group or activity, particularly if the person is suffering from mental health issues (such as anxiety or social isolation), or if someone is not used to community activity.

Community group should be willing to contact the referred person and to take the time to get to know the person in advance. This could be done through an introductory meetings or phone calls.

Following an initial phone call, additional contact may be needed to persuade someone to join a new activity. Consider what can be done to build confidence and overcome anxiety. Where possible, consider an accompanied first visit with a link worker, or a buddy scheme which pairs an existing participant with someone newly referred.

Ensure staff are appropriately trained to support participants

Three levels of training recommended for anyone delivering health and wellbeing activities within local communities:

- Suicide Prevention Training
- Making Every Contact Count
- Mental Health First Aider training

Coaching skills and creative facilitation skills are also useful, particularly for groups where discussion and reflection are likely through group work. Supervision and line management of group coordinators is also important, particularly when facilitated groups which might involve difficult or traumatic conversations.

Identify end goals & progression routes

Participants who are likely to face barriers to attendance (eg caring responsibilities, poor mental health) may prefer a more relaxed activity structure, where they are not expected to attend each week and can choose to drop in and out when convenient.

Participants who are looking for motivation to improve physical fitness, or seeking to meet people through a new activity, may respond better to structured programmes, with a set start and end date. Projects with a set end date should consider how participants can be signposted to future activities or local groups when the course ends.