

Social Effectiveness Research Centre

Carers' Voice (Unsung Heroes)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(July 2018 – July 2020)

Introduction

"It's difficult being an older carer juggling work and caring role, looking after my husband with heart problems and my father who is very elderly, but the Neil story the project ran has given me hope."

Older carer beneficiary, Carers' Voice

Carers' Voice (also known as Unsung Heroes after a major element of its work) was a project commissioned by BVSC (Birmingham Voluntary Service Council) on behalf of the Birmingham Ageing Better Partnership and its Ageing Better in Birmingham programme (ABB). ABB works to reduce isolation for people over 50 in the city and is delivered in partnership by a range of organisations, led by BVSC.¹ ABB is part of the National Lottery Community Fund's England-wide six-year, £78 million Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better programme.²

The indicative budget for the project was £70,000 over the two years, with the primary output for this being the development of a media campaign to support three headline outcomes the project was seeking to achieve in Birmingham:

"(a) To raise awareness of the issues that carers face and ensure that services, activities, employers, organisations and institutions are 'carer-friendly'.

(b) To raise awareness of the services and support available to carers and enable them to access these effectively.

(c) To reduce the key risks and triggers of isolation amongst carers."

In order to evaluate progress made against the project's headline outcomes, the evaluation process comprised an initial review of the background and contextual literature, analysis of the monitoring data collected by the project over its two years, a remote survey in which over 40 older carers (aged 50+) living in Birmingham gave their views on the project and various aspects of its effectiveness, with telephone/video follow up interviews where permission was given, and additional remote interviews with other stakeholders, including with employers who had been involved in elements of the project, and with project staff.

¹ Ageing Better in Birmingham, 'What We Do', available at: <https://www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk/about-ageing-better-in-birmingham/what-we-do> <accessed August 2020>.

² National Lottery Community Fund, "Ageing Better", available at: <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/ageing-better> <accessed August 2020>.

Increased Awareness of Older Carers' Issues

"The project brought awareness of how many older people care for others into the general public. Keep the good work up in bringing this issue into the public domain."

Older carer beneficiary, Carers' Voice

The first main outcome Carers' Voice sought to achieve was that of increasing awareness of the issues that carers face. Almost two-thirds (65%) of the older carers feeding back as part of this evaluation felt the project had achieved this.

Along with the quantitative data relating to this outcome, evaluation participants also fed back numerous qualitative comments outlining exactly how the project had helped raise awareness through these activities, or – as one older carer put it – *"enhanced caring as a major issue"*. Comments relating to this theme included the following:

- *"It was something good for carers to show that they have been recognised for all they are doing."*
- *"It raised awareness."*
- *"The project highlighted carers."*
- *"The project increased awareness of older carers."*
- *"I've always been a carer, and it's great that carers are being recognised."*
- *"It's nice to see that older carers are now being taken into consideration and that awareness of older carers does exist."*

Greater Awareness of Support Available

"It's made me aware of help I can use which I didn't realise was there."

Older carer beneficiary, Carers' Voice

The second main outcome Carers' Voice aimed at for its beneficiaries was also about increasing awareness. This time, however, it was awareness among older carers themselves

of the support and services they could access. This was the area in which the project had the most success, judging from the responses received from older carers for this evaluation – three-quarters (75%) of respondents said that the project had helped them in this regard.

Qualitative feedback from older carers themselves also bore witness to the project's success in relation to its second outcome. Along with carer quoted at the start of this section, numerous others explicitly named increased awareness of support as the most important change the project had achieved for them:

- *"It helped me become aware of what help is around for me and the person I care for."*
- *"It made me aware that there is more support for me than I originally thought. People do not understand how hard it is to be a carer."*
- *"The project notified me of available information and help."*
- *"It made more aware of what support there is."*
- *"The project made us aware of help and courses available to us."*
- *"I found out what services I could access."*
- *"It's made me aware that there is more support out there to have."*

Reduced Isolation

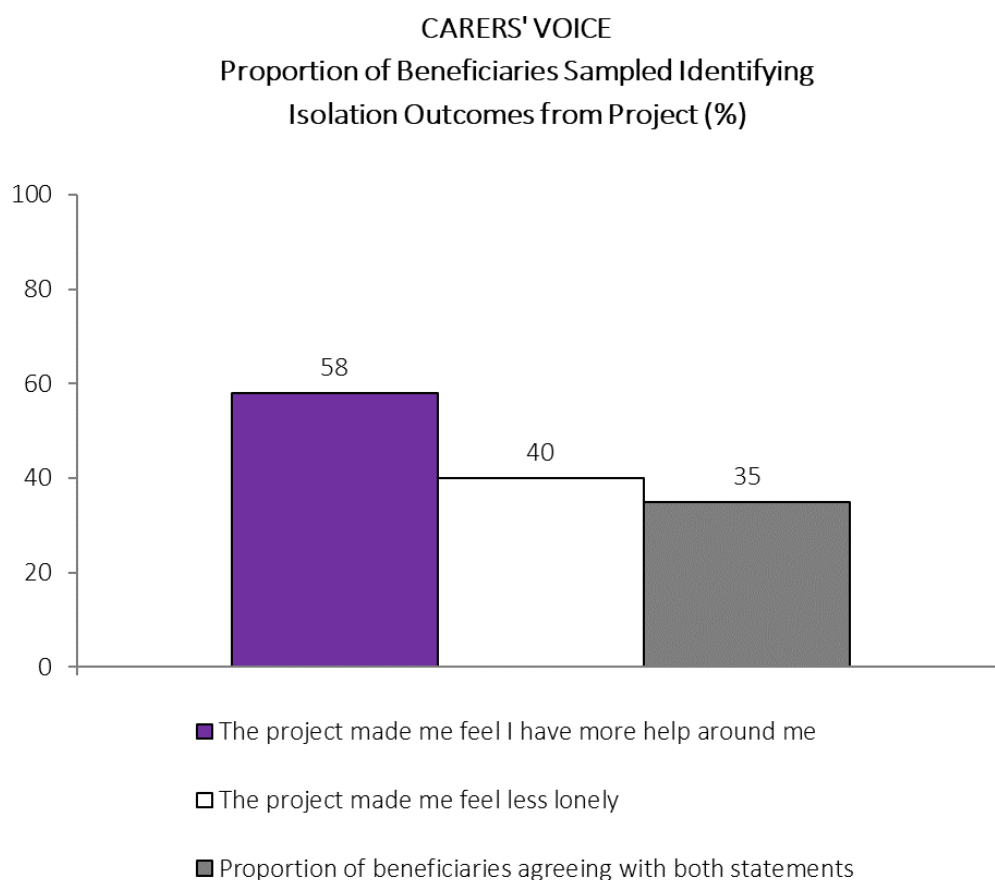
"I don't feel like I'm alone doing this caring any more. It's made me more confident."

Older carer beneficiary, Carers' Voice

The final main outcome Carers' Voice wanted to bring about for its beneficiaries was reduced isolation. Isolation can take two forms – objective social isolation from support networks and/or subjective feelings of loneliness and distance from other people. Loneliness will often go hand in hand with social isolation, but may still be felt even when with other people or when part of wider social networks.

As the following graph records, significant proportions of the older carers feeding back in this evaluation felt Carers' Voice had helped them in relation to one of these two potential

depressant factors on their wellbeing. Moreover, over a third also felt it had helped them in relation to both types of problem:



There were numerous testimonies from beneficiaries indicating that this may have been the most immediately impactful of the project's outcomes, if their descriptions of the biggest change it had on them are anything to go by:

- *"The most important change is knowing that I am not isolated and other carers are going through similar or same issues."*
- *"That help is out there when a carer needs help and support – knowing others are in the community going through the same ups and downs in a carer's life."*
- *"Understanding that you are not alone when you are struggling to cope with various problems."*
- *"The regular contact during the lockdown has made me feel as if I am not on my own. Thank you."*
- *"Just to feel that there are others in the same position in these challenging times."*

- *“Knowing that we’re not alone.”*
- *“That other people around you care about what you’re going through.”*
- *“It’s made me feel more valued and less isolated. I think this is a brilliant initiative and has brought people more confidence and involvement within the community.”*

Conclusion

“It renews your faith in human nature that there are others that care.”

Older carer beneficiary, Carers’ Voice

Judging from the evidence gathered as part of this evaluation, for a relatively small scale project, Carers’ Voice seems to have had a wide range of different impacts upon the older carers in Birmingham who were its target audience. These include some deeper impacts, such as the effect of the project visible in the quote above, that might not have been entirely expected at its outset.

As a potential model for an older carer-focused project, Carers’ Voice took an innovative approach, basing itself on a partnership between a carers’ advocacy organisation (Forward Carers) and a professional communications agency (Orange Juice).

Out of that partnership seems to have come a genuine ‘test and learn’ approach, as both organisations challenged each other’s preconceptions and ideas. The result was a project that came up with new, non-standard ways of reaching its audience, such as the way in which it raised older carers’ issues and made them aware of the support available to them.

Through the project’s link with Ageing Better in Birmingham, in turn part of the wider National Lottery Community Fund’s Ageing Better programme across England, there is also – despite all the challenges of the new post-COVID world – an opportunity to share the learning from the two-year journey of Carers’ Voice more widely.

It is very much to be hoped that this opportunity will now be taken to the full.

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