**Peer Support Cultural Partnership - Creative projects for people living with dementia**

Since 2010 four institutions in Leeds have been working together to develop a creative participatory programme for people living with dementia: Leeds Museums and Galleries, the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds Libraries and Leeds City Council’s Peer Support Service for people in the early stages of dementia.

This collaboration came about through discussions with the Head of Commissioning in Leeds Adult Social Care (Mick Ward) who has a strong interest in culture and the arts and how they can impact on health and well-being. We are very lucky in Leeds to have the ‘Ageing Well Board’ which comprises of representatives from Public Health, Adult Social Services, Third Sector Older Peoples organisations and various other services like Museums and galleries and libraries, with a very fluid remit to look at how we can all contribute to making Leeds the Best City to Grow Old In. We also have the Leeds Older Peoples Forum.

The inspiration for the Cultural Partnership was the Museum of Modern Art’s Dementia programme in New York where people with dementia were encouraged to visit the gallery and explore the artwork in a new and exciting way, looking at new learning as a tool to help cognitive skills.

In Leeds, after some planning meetings and consultation we decided to pool our unique cultural resources and offer a similarly inventive form of creative engagement. The pilot project ‘Thinking Arts’ was based at Leeds Art Gallery and was funded through a small grant of £1,000 from Adult Social Care. The project involved working with six adults referred through and supported by Peer Support and started with a tour of some of the gallery spaces and conversations/discussions around some of the paintings and how they related to people’s lives. The group then worked with an artist to create suitcases packed with memories, stories and objects: each suitcase was painted and decorated and worked on over an eight week period. The finished cases were really special and they went on show in the main Central Library after a proper exhibition preview and then toured around key venues before being returned to the participants.

Project evaluations revealed that ‘Thinking Arts’ had been really successful and there was a huge commitment to continuing from all the partners BUT sadly no more Grant money to support it. So we decided to continue anyway but draw on huge amounts of ‘in-kind’ support, bits of funding from our respective organisations and deliver sessions ourselves where possible. The ACE money LMG secured in 2012 really helped to sustain the partnership and helped with some of the artist costs and materials.

Over the last five years we have run two to three self-contained projects a year, each one exploring different themes and covering drama, object handling, reminiscence, visual arts, song-writing, poetry, puppetry and story-telling. Sessions rotate across the three main venues of the WYP, the Discovery Centre and the Central Library so that people feel a sense of familiarity and safety, although we have also had field trips out to other museums and the City Varieties Theatre.

Some topics we have covered include:

* ‘Musical Memories’ developed new talents through group song-writing
* ‘On Yer Bike’ linked to the Tour De France’s Grand Depart from Leeds in 2014
* ‘Wild Worlds,’ explored the tactile natural world linking the Natural Science collection at the Discovery Centre store to West Yorkshire Playhouse’s production of ‘The Jungle Book’ and a pet handling session at the library.

Each project involves sharing stories, celebrating memories of happy times, and firing the imagination through learning new creative skills. We adopt a person-centred approach, adapting the content of sessions to best support each individual within the group , whether this is through 1:1 working or being mindful of differential needs. All staff members participate too and this makes for more of a level playing field in all learning together and trying new things and experiences.

People with a diagnosis of dementia are referred and supported to attend the project by Peer Support and their partners or carers are also encouraged to join. This inclusive approach allows some couples to spend quality time together enjoying new experiences that don’t revolve round medical and social care appointments. Participants are introduced to cultural institutions they may not have visited before or have lost confidence in visiting. Numbers vary each session and each week but we regularly have up to 20 people and we have had to ‘cap’ numbers as over 25 become unworkable. We have regular reviews and evaluations to check out that what we are offering is still of value and also problems and issues that arise.

What we have learnt:

* Feedback from the first project and all the others that have followed on have shown that focusing on an ‘end’ product creates some difficulties; people felt rushed and under pressure and we tried to do too much over the time period. The process is much more important than the outcome
* We now have sessions over 10 to 12 or even 16 weeks so that people can really develop confidence and familiarity with staff and venues
* Each session is sufficiently self-contained so people can dip in and out of the project according to their health and other commitments but people attending the whole project can see how it all links together
* Environments are also crucial, people needed to feel safe and comfortable and some of the venues have worked better than others and they need to be accessible by public transport as people travel independently wherever possible
* Refreshments are key to the sessions for people to relax and socialise
* It is very time/staff intensive in terms of preparation and delivery
* Participants need a lot of support, sometimes on an almost 1:1 basis especially if their partners or carers do not attend.
* The pace of the session is also important and the length of time people can focus – we find 1-1.5 hours is enough and afternoons are better
* Activities need to be appropriate and engaging but not too challenging (we have sometimes put on activities that are age inappropriate or had speakers who did not sufficiently adapt to the audience)
* The participating organisations contribute in-kind support with staff time, workshop space, materials, refreshments and occasional additional freelance artist fees so it is a big commitment
* The emphasis should always be on what people can still do or learn not what they can’t
* Wherever possible all staff involved at all stages of the project should have done Dementia Friends training and venues should be working to become Dementia Friendly