

Evaluation of the Living Voices pilot

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Living Voices is an innovative national pilot programme run by the Scottish Poetry Library (SPL) and Scottish Storytelling Centre (SSC) with the aim of developing and delivering a model of practice for working with older audiences, particularly in care homes, using spoken word (storytelling, poetry and song) and reminiscence to improve quality of life.

The pilot ran between July 2012 and July 2014. The programme was funded by The Paul Hamlyn Foundation, The Baring Trust, Creative Scotland and The Gannochy Trust. Programme delivery was informed by scoping research undertaken by Blake Stevenson in 2011. SPL and SSC subsequently commissioned Blake Stevenson to evaluate the impact of the pilot; this summary report presents key findings from the evaluation.

About Living Voices

Programme need and rationale

There is increasing evidence that participatory arts (including spoken word) and reminiscence have a positive impact on well-being and quality of life for older people. Furthermore, healthcare policy in Scotland increasingly recognises the role of social and cultural activity in continued well-being in older age. Enhancing care services and volunteering become particularly important in the current climate of an ageing population and limited public spending; when care staff are often hard pressed for time to attend to medical and physical needs, let alone social needs, time spent by volunteers and arts professionals can become an essential part of care and wellbeing.

Prior to working together on Living Voices, both SPL and SSC were aware of the challenges of an ageing population and the need for them to explore how their services could address them. Separately they had worked on a number of small-scale spoken word projects with older people. These projects confirmed that talking, listening, reading and remembering are powerful ways to gain (and sometimes regain) pleasure, interest and companionship, and suggested that combined use of story, poetry, music and song could have a particularly powerful effect. The projects also identified an absence of creativity, stimulation and human connection in many care settings for older people, gaps that creative participation had the potential to address. Living Voices set out to explore a model of service provision that could respond to these needs.

Programme overview

Over an 18-month period, Living Voices delivered monthly sessions in 18 care settings across three areas (Aberdeen, South Ayrshire and Perth and Kinross). Sessions were planned and delivered by professional artists (storytellers, poets and community musicians) and in most cases, supported by a volunteer and care home staff. Sessions accommodated between five to 15 residents (depending on individual support needs) and were based on a common theme

following patterns in the calendar year. In total 288 sessions were delivered, reaching an average monthly audience of 140 people. The programme was co-ordinated by a central project manager and supported by a Steering Group comprising strategic representatives from SPL and SSC. The programme engaged to varying degrees with different local partners including library services, Social Care Departments, and Third Sector Interfaces (TSI).

The Living Voices session model draws on the rich culture of spoken word in Scotland, particularly the participative form of the ceilidh, and recognition that a combination of spoken word art forms has even greater potential to engage older audiences and encourage participation than using the art forms separately. Participation is core to the model: Living Voices is not intended to be about artists performing, but about artists facilitating a shared group dynamic. Spoken word is the foundation of a co-created session in which every participant is enabled to contribute in their own way, whether listening, reciting, sharing memories or participating in conversation.

Evaluation methods

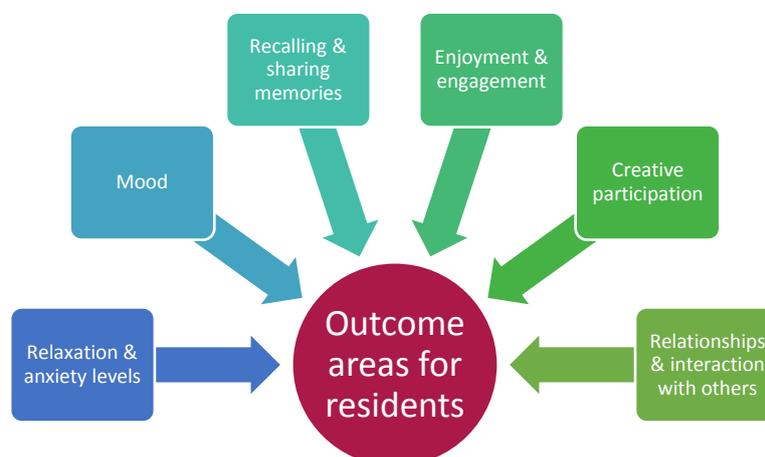
Evaluation findings draw on qualitative and quantitative evidence gathered using the following data collection methods:

- Baseline, interim and final surveys with facilitators, volunteers and care homes
- Monthly facilitator reflection logs and volunteer observation sheets
- Quarterly residents' survey and care home observations
- Researcher observation visits to three sessions at three different care homes
- Interviews with facilitators, volunteers, care home staff and local partners.

Key findings on the impact of Living Voices

Impact for participants

A main aim of the evaluation was to assess benefits and outcomes for older people participating in Living Voices. The evaluation focused on the following outcome areas for participants:



Overall, Living Voices has been effective at supporting improvements in terms of some or all of these outcome areas for the majority of participating older people, including participants with dementia and/or cognitive impairment.

Many participants appear and report being more relaxed and less anxious than usual during Living Voices sessions; this effect is sustained for a period of time afterwards for some participants. The rhythm of the different spoken word art forms used in the Living Voices session facilitates an environment which is both relaxing and engaging for participants.

"It has a huge impact on residents who participate... they're more relaxed, they have better morale and they are more talkative"(care home staff member).

"I feel more relaxed [after Living Voices], the days don't feel so long"(resident).

Living Voices has had a positive impact on participants' mood and many feel happier and more content overall after a session.

"Oh yes, I enjoy it. No complaints because if I did I would have told you! [laughter]. I like sharing my stories. I like the poems and some of the stories you tell us are awful good, and I love a sing song, not that I can sing! [laughter] I love to hear everyone singing, and yes, singing puts me in a good mood, definitely!" (Resident).

"...I love this group and how it allows everyone a chance to express themselves. It is such a morale booster and their confidence has shown such an improvement, it truly is remarkable"(care home staff member).

In general, Living Voices sessions help maintain or improve an already good mood, as well as improving a poor or low mood, leading to participants generally feeling happier overall during and following a session. The energy and atmosphere skilfully created by facilitators supports this, through appropriate and tailored use of engaging literary materials and props. Importantly, Living Voices sessions also create a space for participants to be contemplative and to share and express sadness, and the pilot highlights the value of this.

Living Voices sessions have helped participants to recall and share stories and memories. There are numerous examples of residents recalling and sharing personal stories which prompt whole group conversations and increase connection within the group. Ability to share or recall memories varies depending on the capabilities of individual, however the use of spoken word to prompt and stimulate discussion enables participants to share "in the moment", reducing the need for memory recall. In some cases, Living Voices has elicited memories and stories from individuals with dementia and/or memory impairment in a way care home staff had not considered possible. Living Voices was often described as a "safe place" for residents to engage with each other and to share memories, both good and bad. Facilitators' use of personal stories

during the sessions has helped increase connection and empathy within their groups, creating an atmosphere of trust and respect within which thoughts and memories can be shared.

"I think it has given many residents the chance to chat, even to bond with each other, a memory here from one will stir a memory in another. In some cases I think small 'friendships' have been formed as they feel less isolated and comfortable and find common interests through old geography, work places, schools and so on"
(volunteer).

The majority of participants have enjoyed Living Voices sessions and engagement and participation in the sessions has generally been high and has improved over the course of the pilot, particularly in groups where attendees have been consistent. The participatory nature of the sessions facilitates good engagement from those who might be less engaged in a larger group environment or more passive activity, and enables participants to contribute to the extent to which they desire and are able.

The combined use of different art forms provides a stimulus that appeals to a variety of tastes and taps into different personal experiences and memories. The most active engagement with groups has often come when singing, sharing jokes, using verbal or physical humour, or using props to elicit memories or bring to life poems and stories.

"It's given them something to look forward to, to fully connect with, whatever their communicative level they have someone who listens to them actively... some began to speak where before they were withdrawn, another started to mix in the home...I think they appreciate they are not pressured to behave a certain way and are accepted for who they are today"(facilitator).

"I find this of terrific value...It's very good, stimulating to be learning new things when you get to this age!"(Resident).

Living Voices has enabled many residents to participate creatively as well as to input, where possible, to the direction and content of the sessions. The main forms of creative participation have tended to be group singing or sharing personal memories and stories, or residents remembering and reciting a poem, song or joke. There are also (less common) examples of more tangible creative results including residents writing their own poems and creative outputs co-produced by residents and the facilitator for example songs and poems written by the group. Sessions have been acutely responsive to participant needs and desires; facilitators' skill in taking a lead from residents rather than sticking to pre-prepared material has been key to this.

"This model gives us all dignity. Living Voices is enjoyable shared activity and because it is facilitated you know what you offer is what people want. People in care homes might be just as likely to want the Rolling Stones as old War songs and using this model they aet their sav and aet somethina appropriate" (facilitator).

Living Voices has had a significant positive impact on group dynamics, social interaction and residents' relationships with each other and care home staff (also see impact for care home staff below). Facilitators and care home staff have observed residents making new friendships and close bonds with one another as a result of sharing memories and discovering common interests during the sessions, especially where the group composition has been constant. This has reduced feelings of loneliness and improved resident experiences within the care home

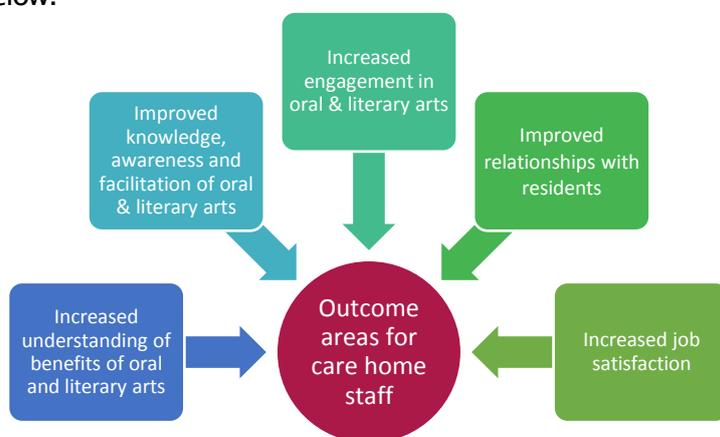
“One lady didn't like to join in with activities and wasn't very social often making excuses not to join activities or eat with others, and her family were worried about her wellbeing but she was persuaded to attend Living Voices and now she actively wishes to speak with other residents, the sessions helped her make connections and reduced her isolation” (care home staff member).

There are some examples where Living Voices has also had a positive impact on connections between participants and their family members.

Impact for care homes and their staff

Care home staff have been involved in Living Voices sessions in a range of ways and in most cases have provided valuable support and input to session delivery. Their role varies, with some primarily providing practical assistance and supporting those with additional support needs, through to others who have more actively participated, sharing personal memories and stories, and on occasions leading an activity within the session. Time pressures, competing priorities and management support all influence the involvement of care home staff.

In general, involvement in Living Voices has been a very positive and welcomed experience for care home staff and has supported the key outcomes summarised in the following diagram and explored further below.



Living Voices has **increased care home staff members' understanding of the benefits that participating in oral and literary arts can have** for older people, and has a **positive impact on care home staff members' skills and confidence using various art forms** and reminiscence as tools for engaging with residents. Comments from care home staff include:

"[I have gained] confidence to hold similar sessions every month with our residents built on the experience gained through the Living Voices project."

"I am less nervous about approaching texts."

This enhancement of knowledge and skills has influenced the way some care home staff work with residents, **leading to increased or enhanced engagement in oral and literary arts in a number of participating care homes**. Despite being subject to significant time pressures from daily care tasks and duties, many (but not all) have made efforts to sustain interest in oral and literary arts in between Living Voices sessions, for example talking about Living Voices with residents; supporting residents to take part in other oral or literary arts activities; using techniques observed at Living Voices in their work; and using Living Voices materials in between sessions on a one-to-one or group basis.

Outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding have been experienced to a lesser extent by those care homes who were already actively engaging in creative activities, although spoken word activities now feature more in some of these homes as a result of Living Voices.

Living Voices has had a significant positive impact on staff and resident relationships. Sessions have helped care home staff get to know their residents better, to communicate more effectively with them, to spend quality time with them and to see them as unique individuals with a better appreciation of residents' past and preferences; all key components that will assist in the delivery of effective person-centred care. There are also examples where Living Voices has had a positive influence on how the care home is viewed by residents. Comments from care home staff include:

"Living Voices has provided me with information of our residents, which I wouldn't have been aware of and has given me a deeper understanding of their personal lives."

"One of our residents is much more satisfied since she is part of the project and was also thankful that I made every effort to give her a chance to participate... this has also improved our personal relationship and her outlook on being here."

The majority of care home staff surveyed reported **increased job satisfaction** as a result of Living Voices.

"I thoroughly enjoy the sessions myself and to see the clients enjoy it with the chatter, smiling faces, laughter and joining in the singing makes you feel warm inside because after all it's for them that this is for"(care home staff member).

There is a high level of interest in continuing Living Voices activities in care homes: all surveyed wish the programme to continue, and all said they are likely to continue delivering arts and creative activities after Living Voices ends. A key challenge will be addressing low confidence among staff in their ability to deliver these activities without Living Voices support or the presence of a professional facilitator. Even where care home staff feel able to continue delivering Living Voices-inspired activity without support, there would be significant disappointment if the role of professional facilitator was removed

"They [care home staff] don't want Living Voices to end. They could have a go themselves but what they valued so much was professionals like us coming in from the outside world... bringing it with us...bringing a fresh perspective...new and stimulating relationships and possibilities."(Facilitator).

Impact for Living Voices Facilitators

Overall, Living Voices has been a highly positive experience for the ten professional artists (facilitators) involved and a valued professional development opportunity in terms of their creative practice with older audiences. The extent to which each facilitator has benefited is influenced by their individual experiences and backgrounds; some had previous experience working with older audiences and using many of the art forms employed in the Living Voices session model, others did not.

"Professionally, it's had a massive positive effect for me... [it has] been a really useful learning experience to watch how the material I use has had a positive social effect - I've never witnessed this before. It's really taken my creative practice leaps ahead, giving me complete recognition of how and why things work...fantastic for my confidence."(Facilitator).

Living Voices has supported the following outcomes for the majority of facilitators:

- 🌀 increased skills and confidence in facilitating spoken word activities with older audiences, and working with older people, including those with dementia and cognitive impairment:

"it has necessitated very different skills in some ways than are required for working with young people. It has allowed me to develop a gentler, more mindful approach at times, and to slow down, listen very carefully and respond to needs that are very specific and potentially very difficult to overcome (in terms of communication)"(facilitator);

- 🌀 increased understanding of the benefits of oral and literary arts for older people;
- 🌀 increased skills and confidence in using various (and, for some, new) spoken word art forms;

- ⦿ increased skills and confidence in using a combination of spoken word art forms to best engage the groups they are working with;
- ⦿ influencing their creative practice and outputs, for example some have used the oral histories gathered through their Living Voices work to inspire and inform their practice with other audiences, some have produced creative outputs inspired by Living Voices, and others have adapted their approaches as a result of the pilot;
- ⦿ increased mentoring skills, although to a lesser extent than other outcomes – in the current model facilitators have found it challenging to address some support and development needs identified for volunteers due to the focus on session delivery and limited resourced time to support volunteer development;
- ⦿ positive impacts in terms of facilitators' own health and wellbeing, their outlook on life and their abilities to deal with challenges presented by their own personal circumstances; and
- ⦿ a positive impact in terms of facilitators' wider professional development gained through increased contacts and connections and the opportunity to work on a longer-term, larger-scale national project:

"[I am now] more informed on impact and modes of working with older people, have more contacts in the field and have visited other projects" (facilitator).

Impact for Living Voices Volunteers

There has generally been a team of 18 volunteers involved in Living Voices, but this number has fluctuated over the pilot period and not all sessions have operated with a volunteer. Volunteers have provided valuable support and input to sessions in a range of ways and have added value in terms of the different personal experiences and local knowledge they bring to the sessions.

The evaluation evidences the following key outcomes for volunteers as a result of their participation in Living Voices:

- ⦿ increased confidence and skills in working with older people;
- ⦿ improved skills, knowledge and confidence in working with people with dementia;
- ⦿ increased awareness of and skills and confidence in using spoken word art forms;
- ⦿ increased interest in volunteering or working in care homes and with older people in the future, as one volunteer said: *"I was initially wary of working with the elderly and care home residents but am now confident enough to consider volunteering in this sector in the future"*;

-  a positive impact in terms of professional development and connections with some volunteers gaining employment as a result of their experience, and others developing new contacts or skills that will help them professionally;
-  a positive impact on some volunteers' wellbeing in terms of improved ability to deal with personal and family experiences of dementia, feelings of increased satisfaction and self-worth and a sense of making a positive social contribution, and reduced stress.

"I always leave the session feeling uplifted and centred rather than rushing on to the next meeting and the next problem to sort out... I keep hearing how volunteering gives workforces huge benefits in terms of wellbeing and mental health. I think this project really proves that"(volunteer).

"I found working as a carer to be challenging because of the system it operates in, which to me felt very stark. But in Living Voices I found a humanising counterbalance that brought monthly reminders of the kind of beauty and creativity that can be brought out in care settings. I'm not sure I would have been able to cope with the care work in the way I did had I not also been doing the Living Voices volunteering"(volunteer).

Reflections on the Living Voices model and future potential

The Living Voices pilot programme set out to develop and test a practice model for using spoken word to improve the wellbeing and quality of life of older people in residential care settings. The evaluation concludes that the piloted approach is highly effective at improving the experiences and well-being of older people in care settings, as well as supporting positive outcomes for volunteers, professional artists and care home staff.

The evaluation also highlights a continued need and demand for activity of this nature in light of the apparent continued paucity of opportunities for stimulation, creativity and human connection in many care settings for older people, exacerbated by staffing and resource issues and a focus on task-orientated care. The Living Voices model provides a more personalised approach to care of older people, where people's histories, interests and personal preferences are addressed, which could support a range of care settings to deliver care in a more person-centred way.

There are a number of factors which have been absolutely critical to the success of the Living Voices model and should inform future iterations of the programme and/or the development of similar initiatives:

-  being a national programme run by two national arts organisations has brought authority and credibility to the programme;

- ⊗ the role of a centralised project manager has been crucial and future roll-out and development of the approach would be highly challenging without it;
- ⊗ use of professional artists who can bring the “*outside world*” into the care setting and are skilled in using multiple and combined art forms to meet participant needs and create an atmosphere that maximises impact;
- ⊗ enabling and encouraging a resident-led model that offers a personalised, person-centred and tailored approach;
- ⊗ rather than performing *to* an audience, Living Voices offers a curated conversation that facilitates participation and co-production;
- ⊗ the use of a combination of spoken word art forms to “*trigger stories, memories, participation, develop friendships and connections*” and to relate to different needs and desires;
- ⊗ the use of props and artefacts which offer a multi-sensory approach which enhances engagement and memory; and
- ⊗ a longer-term, well-resourced intervention which allows relationships to grow over time, and maximises impact for all.

Other key learning from the pilot that will usefully inform any future expansion of the programme and the development of other initiatives that use creative practice to improve wellbeing of older people in care homes include:

- ⊗ the importance of raising awareness and getting buy-in from care home management at the outset;
- ⊗ the need for further training and support for care home staff if they are to conduct/sustain Living Voices-type activity without a professional artist leading the session;
- ⊗ the potential benefits of a more flexible approach to volunteer involvement rather than fixed facilitator-volunteer pairings; and
- ⊗ the person-centred approach Living Voices takes is best facilitated in smaller groups with access to a designated quiet and appropriately sized room.

Sustaining and rolling out the Living Voices model as piloted will require continued core funding from existing or alternative funding sources – there is significant appetite for this to happen from areas and care homes who have not participated in the pilot, as well as those who have; as one local partner said: “*The ideal is to roll out to all care homes just as it is... it works*”.

Other potential options for future development are:

- ⊗ involving family members/informal carers in sessions;

- 🌀 expanding to other community-based settings;
- 🌀 using professional artists to train and mentor care home staff to deliver sessions independently; and
- 🌀 making Living Voices resources and guidance widely available to care settings.

While the wider roll out of Living Voices, may be challenging in the current economic climate, there are clear benefits of doing so. The evaluation confirms the value and benefits of using spoken word to develop and promote person-centred approaches to the care of older people, and the value of using professional artists who are highly skilled and experienced to undertake this kind of work, or to support care settings to undertake this work. The Living Voices model moves beyond the more traditional, often passive and generic entertainment and craft-based activities commonly delivered in care settings for older people, to offer a group model that is participative and personalised and offers meaningful opportunities for social interaction, relationship building and fulfilment. In addition to the clear benefits in a care home setting, the tested approach has great potential for expansion into a wide range of community settings. Through this expansion, Living Voices could continue to support a range of current policy initiatives¹ relating to an ageing population and the future care of older people, through contributing to improved experiences and outcomes for more older people, including supporting people to age well and lead more fulfilled and connected lives in their local communities.

¹ For example, Reshaping Care for Older People (Scottish Government); Scotland's Dementia Strategy 2013 -16 (Scottish Government); Standards of care for people with dementia (in particular 'People with dementia will have the opportunity to be included in community life and meaningful activities as they wish'); and The COSLA/Scottish Government report, 'The Future of Residential Care for Older People in Scotland.'