

This report presents an overview and evaluation of the People Addressing Loneliness (PAL) Project delivered by Engage with Age, Belfast from 2018 to 2020 with funding secured from Comic Relief

‘Finding Their Feet’

PAL Project – Overview and Evaluation



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Dr. Siobhan Poulter SP Consulting and
Eamon Quinn Director EWA

Contents

1	Executive Summary.....	1
2	Introduction	3
2.1	Methodology	4
2.2	Engage with Age	5
2.3	PAL Project	5
	Aims of the PAL Project.....	5
	Anticipated Outcomes	5
	PAL Output targets.....	6
	PAL Project Structure	6
3	What Did We Do?	8
3.1	Referral pathways and recruitment.....	8
	PAL Partnership Group.....	8
	Referral Breakdown	9
	Referral Observations	9
	Recruitment Events.....	10
3.2	Activity Groups	12
	Activity Group Creation	12
	Group Structures That Emerged	14
	Capacity Building and Sustainability	15
	Group Operation - Dance Group Case Study	16
	Group Leader and Facilitator Comments on Group Operation	18
	Group Activities – Participant’s Feedback	21
	Covid-19 Post-Script.....	22
4	How Well Did We Do?.....	24
4.1	Participant Interviews	24
	Baseline Assessment including Loneliness	24
	Group Welcome/Ethos	27
	Increase in Social Opportunities/Interactions	28
	Changes Experienced	29
	Quantitative Survey Results.....	33
4.2	Group Leader and Facilitator Interviews.....	35

Observations on Loneliness	35
Group Operation	37
The PAL Steering Committee	38
4.3 Other Feedback	39
4.4 Interview - Director of EWA	45
Role of Staff Involved in the Project	46
Challenges Experienced	46
What would you do differently?	47
Value for Money	48
5 Discussion and Recommendations	49
5.1 Were Project Aims Met?	49
5.2 Observations	50
What does loneliness feel like?	50
The Importance of the Welcome	50
Allow space for individuals to have ownership	50
Paying Up/ Paying for Transport	51
The Kitty-Cat Approach to Addressing Loneliness	51
5.3 Recommendations	52

Appendices (page 53)

PAL Project model.

List of PAL Referrals 2018-2022

Interview questions

Referral form

PAL project sub-outcomes

1 Executive Summary

Engage with Age's "PAL Project" (People Addressing Loneliness) ran from May 2018 for two years until into the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic. It was an initial two-year project which carried on during periods of Covid-19 lockdown and increased isolation experienced by older people.

The methodology of this evaluation comprises a large-scale survey and semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants who engaged in the project to address their own loneliness, as well as group leaders and staff.

The PAL Project sought to address the impact of loneliness and/or isolation on older people, through forming sustainable activity groups. The stated outcomes of the project included:

- Older people who have experienced loneliness and/or isolation develop improved health and wellbeing;
- Older people who have experienced loneliness and/or isolation develop improved social connections;
- Participants exert increased control over their social connections;
- The project helps increase awareness of the impact of loneliness and/ or isolation within the health and community development sector, with a view to influencing improved commissioning.

Significant levels of activity took place over the two plus years of the project. This included: setting up referral routes and promotion; organising and enabling individuals who have experienced loneliness to form activity groups; developing a model (see appendix 1 for overview), an approach, and associated activities; enabling sustainability for the groups. The planned conclusion of the project was disrupted by the Covid-19 Pandemic though, much activity continued, and new activities were initiated under the PAL Project banner on a continuing basis.

The overwhelming evidence is that this method for addressing loneliness is very effective, with a high number of success stories. Interviewees described in extraordinary detail what their loneliness felt like and the challenges they faced in making a change. Interviewees noted the friendliness, welcome, and culture of equality within groups, which group leaders evidenced was a pre-planned and intentional atmosphere they sought to create. Interviews repeatedly highlighted improvements in confidence, feelings of self-worth, and increased social connections.

Observations and learnings from the evaluation include: loneliness is personal and different for all participants and needs to be treated as such; getting the initial welcome right has a huge influence on whether or not participants will return and become regular attenders; group activities worked best when participants felt they had true ownership over the activities, and paying small amounts of attendance fees every week helped create a sense of value for the activities. A peer-lead approach works best and makes the participants feel comfortable and safe. It was noted there are sometimes activities were not initially

successful, though a culture of positive failure' was embraced as staff, leaders and participants tried to find activities would work.

It is notable that this style of group activity is not ideal for everyone. Approximately 50% of referrals that were in contact with Engage with Age requested some form of one-to-one befriending which at the time wasn't available, and some individuals didn't engage at all. Balancing this, an approach to addressing loneliness, "The Kitty Cat Approach" was developed, as well as a number of individual events which are successful as models for recruitment activities and general engagement.

Over 200 people engaged with the project, most of whom are still engaged in their activity groups despite of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Most of the aims of the project, which were to improve wellbeing, develop social connections, and enable control of social contacts, were achieved to an almost unanimous degree. The aim to increase awareness of the impact of loneliness and/or isolation within the health/community wasn't particularly stimulated by this project as parallel initiatives took place from other stakeholders, but the PAL Project contributed to this overall aim.

The recommendations of this evaluation include: expanding the scale of the project to meet unmet demand; maintain the guiding principles of the project of participant and peer led activities; maintain promotional strategies to achieve ongoing levels of awareness; improve monitoring schemes; grow the programme across Belfast; revise expectations for group sustainability and independence.

The project has resulted in refining and improving approaches to enabling older people to address their own loneliness. The project involves long-term engagement with participants and has resulted in long-term improvements in the wellbeing of participants. As one participant noted in regard to the impact of joining PAL: "Loneliness is a dark place... it [PAL] was as if the curtains were pulled open and the light came in... it was a wonderful new world to live in."

2 Introduction

“Loneliness is a subjective feeling that the human connections we need in our life are greater than the human connections we have. That subjective element is really important because what loneliness is not, is something that is determined by the number of people around you, you could be surrounded by one or two people and feel perfectly content if you have strong relationships with them or you could be surrounded by hundreds of people but feel profoundly alone.”¹

It is recognised there are particular times in life when a person is more prone to be lonely, these are when sick, lose a spouse/partner and when lose a job or retire. Sometimes all three of these happen around the same time. People may demonstrate loneliness in different ways, for example some show anger and short temperedness, for other people it might look like they are quiet or shy or withdrawn. In today’s world to say you are lonely is equivalent to saying you are some sort of a failure, therefore making it hard to talk about openly. Persistent loneliness has been linked to poor physical health, Dr Vivek Murthy, 19th Surgeon General of the United States explains:

“I would think about loneliness like hunger or thirst, the challenge to our health comes when loneliness persists for a long time, what loneliness is ultimately is stress state ... in the short term stress states can be helpful but chronic stress states we know are harmful to our body, it will lead to greater levels of inflammation ... we see a connection with an increased risk of premature death, heart disease and dementia, anxiety, sleep disturbances and the list goes on ”¹

Cognisant of emerging research into how to mitigate the deleterious effects of loneliness which shows that a *few high quality interactions can be profoundly healing even if they are brief*, Engage with Age trialled and delivered the PAL Project from 2018 to 2021 in East Belfast. The PAL Project is a new programme designed and delivered by Engage with Age to address the impact of loneliness and isolation on older people. PAL stands for “People Addressing Loneliness”. A key feature of the programme is older people being enabled to address loneliness themselves and the establishment of sustainable groups undertaking social or fun activities.

¹ Dr Vivek Murthy, 19th Surgeon General of the United States - <https://www.theatlantic.com/podcasts/how-to-build-a-happy-life/>

2.1 Methodology

This report presents an overview and evaluation of the PAL Project together with recommendations which may help with future programme delivery by Engage with Age (EWA) and/or adoption by other similar service providers.

In order to assess the effectiveness or success of the PAL project the following qualitative and quantitative methods are utilised

- Survey of participants – whilst a number of focused surveys were conducted for individual events and group sessions, the majority of quantitative results used are extracted from a wide ranging survey carried out by EWA in March/April 2021 (delayed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic).
- Nine semi-structured telephone interviews² with group participants
- Six semi-structured telephone and Zoom interviews² with group leaders and group facilitators
- Four focus group with the PAL Steering Group and other groups
- One semi-structured Zoom interview² with the director of Engage with Age
- Case Studies

The report is split into four main sections:

1. The first section describes the PAL project aims and structure.
2. The second section ‘What did we do?’ describes the development of the activity groups together with key learnings from EWA staff and group leaders and facilitators.
3. The third section ‘How well did we do?’ reports on qualitative and quantitative feedback from staff and participants on how well the PAL project has met its objectives with observations on loneliness and isolation.
4. The final section presents observations and recommendations with discussion for further work.

² See appendix 3 for a copy of interview questions

2.2 Engage with Age

Established in 2000, Engage with Age's mission is to enable older people in Belfast to lead happier, healthier, and more connected lives. Engage with Age is active in East and South Belfast delivering health improvement programmes for older people using community development principles and working mostly with groups of older people. More recently Engage with Age has worked with individuals to help form activity groups and provide one-to-one support. Addressing the impact of loneliness and isolation on older people has been a priority since Engage with Age was established, and this is written into the charity's objects in its Memorandum and Articles of Association.

2.3 PAL Project

The PAL Project was designed taking into consideration the learnings from the previous HOPE Programme. The HOPE Programme was delivered between 2012-2017 and the PAL Project is followed from May 2018 and May 2020, though the activities have continued after the initial end date of the programme.

Aims of the PAL Project

- To engage older people in Belfast in order to address isolation and loneliness experienced by their neighbours within their communities.
- To increase levels of sustainable older people's activities across Belfast.
- To build community and neighbourhood links and networks.
- To communicate the specific needs of isolated older people to those whose decisions affect their lives.

Anticipated Outcomes

- Isolated or lonely people have better access to connections with their community.
- The wellbeing of isolated or lonely older people in Belfast improves.
- Older people in Belfast develop resilience and skills to combat the impact of isolation and loneliness.
- Through peer volunteering older people feel more valued due to making a meaningful contribution to addressing isolation and loneliness within their communities.
- Community networks are developed that help build neighbourhoods and strengthen communities

The acronym "PAL" was chosen to reflect a "soft" approach to addressing loneliness. The main methodology was to stimulate the formation of **sustainable activity groups** for older people who have experienced loneliness and isolation. The overarching ethos and format of these groups are informed by recommendations and learnings from the HOPE Programme, these are :

- Ensuring person-centred engagements underpin the planning and development of services.

- Ensure significant time is invested in developing the relationships with the beneficiaries of the programme.
- Ensuring beneficiaries have authentic ownership of the programmes from having a leading voice in planning services through to delivery and evaluation.
- Promote dual pathways to engagement that includes one-to-one befriending and group-based social activities.
- Ensure sustainability is a founding principle of all work with groups and motivate groups to instil confidence in their ability and belief in running their own groups.

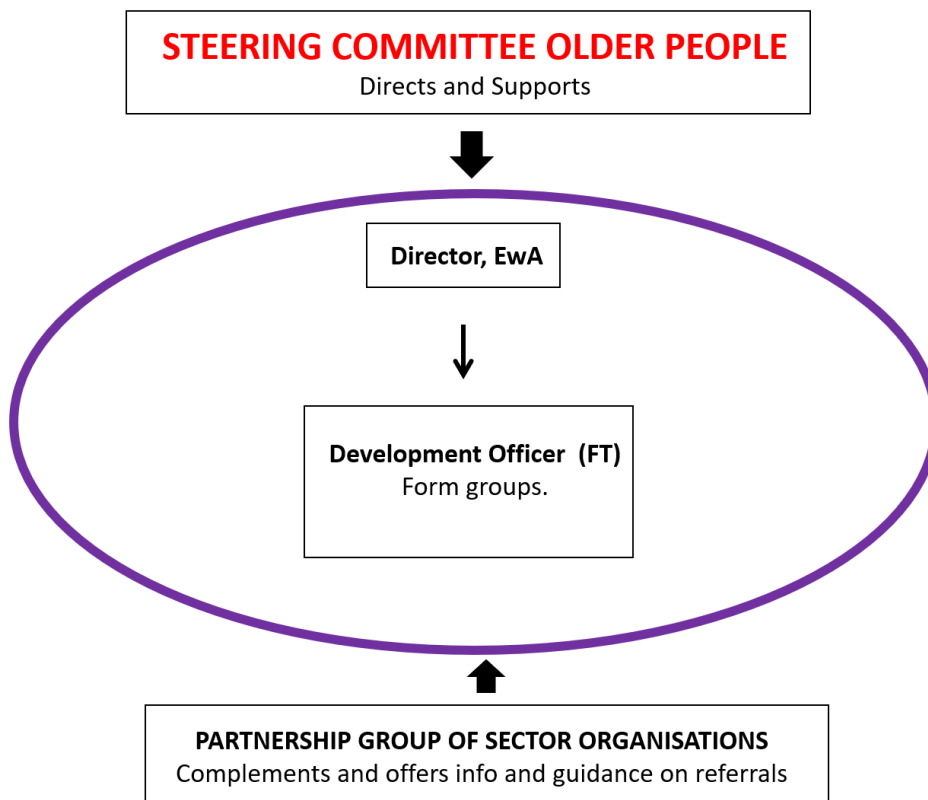
PAL Output targets

- Develop 20 sustainable groups benefitting 200 people who have experienced isolation and isolation.
- Produce learning materials to inform and influence sector services for older people experiencing isolation and loneliness.

Due to the nature of the funding, the PAL Project only focused on group activities and did not offer one-to-one befriending. However, it is noted that Befriending was established during the Covid-19 Pandemic in association with the other funders.

PAL Project Structure

The structural organisation of the PAL project is as represented below (from original application):



A key feature of Engage with Age is that older people are prominent in all its formal and informal structures, as Trustees, leaders of older people's forums, committee members and group members. For the PAL Project it was envisaged that the PAL Steering Committee (SC) would take a leading role in directing and advising the development of the project.

The PAL SC is made up of eight to twelve people drawn from the activity group leaders and enthusiastic individuals who were members of one or more of the activity groups. The SC established roles, a format for reporting and minuting meetings and took the lead in reporting on progress; in addition, SC members were actively involved in recruitment activities such as promotional events and excursions.

The Development Officer (DO), an EWA staff member, was responsible for the overall day to day management of the PAL Project with input from the Steering Committee.



Figure 2: Conceptual graphic of the PAL project

3 What Did We Do?

This section of the report looks to describe in more detail the processes involved in establishing twenty activity groups comprising two hundred plus older people over the lifetime of the PAL project. It is noted that not all twenty groups can be deemed sustainable, but all are important in the growth and evolution of the PAL Project. It is useful to present first how older people were recruited onto the PAL project and then how the Activity Groups are established and evolved.

3.1 Referral pathways and recruitment

The PAL Project promoted its work with older people experiencing loneliness to the following sector links:

Connected Community Care Hub ³	Referrals from partner organisations
GP surgeries	Peer referrals
Local health centres	Referrals by family members
Social workers	Marketing

This was further reinforced and supplemented through: the City-Wide Group on Isolation and Loneliness, a sector body facilitated by Age Friendly Belfast, marketing materials and online promotion, door to door campaigns and word of mouth. EWA also undertook social media, broadcast media and print media campaigns to bolster recruitment and also promote the views of older people who have experienced loneliness.

In addition, Engage with Age undertook specific recruitment events such as:

- Easter Picnics
- Afternoon Teas
- Halloween and Christmas parties
- Slipped Disco (further information on this later in the evaluation)

PAL Partnership Group

In order to raise the profile of the PAL project and to create links with existing peer health organisations, it had been intended to establish The PAL Partnership Group with peer organisations to assist with referrals and forward the views of older people experiencing isolation. At very early stages of the project, however, it was recognised setting up a formal group would duplicate the work of the *City-Wide Group on Isolation and Loneliness*, which comprises the same organisations. In order to maximise resources and reduce duplication, referrals became a regular topic addressed by the City-Wide Group; testimonies and research were also distributed to the City-Wide Group and its members. Due this strong partnership EWA was able to sign-post referrals, they couldn't place, to the City-Wide Group and also to the Befriending Network administered by Volunteer Now.

³ Belfast Health Trust social prescribing unit

Referral Breakdown

For a full monthly breakdown of the referrals and promotions see appendix 2. Table 1 below presents a summary of the referrals for Years 1 and 2 up until the introduction of Covid-19 restrictions in March 2020.

Table 1: Summary of PAL referrals for Year 1 and Year 2			
Type of referral	Year 1 2018 to 2019 (Apr to Mar)	Year 2 2019 to 2020 (Apr to Mar)	Totals
Professional referrals	50	65	115
Self-referrals	42	67	109
Door-to-door	12	0	12
Existing HOPE attenders	17	0	17
Totals	121	132	253
<i>Additional referrals wanting befriending</i>	<i>77</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>168</i>
Grand Totals	198	223	421

The above referral statistics don't include total numbers of those who attended The Slipped Disco on a regular basis. EWA did not have a mechanism for tracking these attenders, though we have attendance numbers and were able to identify attenders which didn't attend other EWA activities.

It should be noted that the referral procedures ceased around the 2nd week of March 2020 due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, therefore Year 2 referral period is reduced by a number of weeks.

Referral Observations

The following observations are noted:

- Referral levels were greater than anticipated, over an average of 200 people per year. The Belfast Health Trust Connected Community Care Hub system was a very effective source for referrals. Less successful was Older People's Services within the Health Trust.
- Promotion of recruitment with partner organisations requires an ongoing effort and back-up communications/ media as reminders of the services. Administrative burdens and caseloads experienced by health care staff means that criteria and service availability is often not clear because health care staff lack the time to fully digest the PAL promotional information. The Development Officer has an ongoing task of reminding referral partners.
- Self-referrals/family referrals always increased following media awareness; however, due to the limited the news-worthiness of "loneliness" it is not always possible to promote the same story within the media on a recurring basis.

- Referral locations were predominantly East Belfast. There is significant additional potential with having a greater focus on South Belfast.
- Almost half of the referrals received wanted one to one befriending or some social company. They did not want to have to join new groups or meet groups of people for the first time.

Recruitment Events

In order to raise the profile of the PAL Project and attract participants, a number of recruitment events took place which included coffee mornings, stalls during Positive Ageing Month, stalls at Age Friendly Belfast conventions, afternoon teas at the East Belfast Network Centre, and parties.

Key to recruitment was the “Peer Lead” nature of the programme. Older people from the PAL Steering Committee (SC) took on event roles in this way ensuring older people were visible. So older people staffed the registration tables and the doors, welcomed, and “placed” new referrals at tables with other older people, and lead activities. One particular technique used at these events were informal ‘interviews’ with new referrals. Carried out by SC members, new arrivals were sensitively asked about their interests and likes, these were recorded and passed to Development Officer to follow-up and match the new referral with a group. Both new referrals and potential group leaders were successfully matched to group activities this way.

The Slipped Disco

It of interest to look at The Slipped Disco recruiting event in a little a more detail as it was found to be both an effective recruitment channel and became a group activity in itself. The Slipped Disco was a social evening of dancing for older people underpinned by a clear delivery approach. Whilst it was principally a social event, it also allowed the opportunity to invite new referrals to get to know Engage with Age and filter onto the PAL Project. The event became an activity within itself as there were attendees who came to The Slipped Disco who did not attend other activities.

The Slipped Disco delivery approach included: clear event roles and responsibilities, attention to creating a convivial atmosphere, and employment of planned techniques to welcome new referrals and gather information. So here older people were central to the event, maintaining the Peer Lead principle, though the event required staff expertise for booking, decoration and creating The Slipped Disco delivery approach. The specific roles for the event are as follows:

- Registration/ Door
- Stewards to direct participants to seats
- Hosts to welcome new arrivals/ referrals and seat them with other older people and encourage conversation (a more detailed role than the Stewards).
- Refreshment and snacks
- Cheer Leader style dance leaders, who encouraged people to dance at the event.
- DJ (in this instance an older person under the moniker “DJ Groover”).

The Slipped Disco Learnings

It is felt that The Slipped Disco performed very well. Surveying highlighted high satisfaction levels. Of the 78 people surveyed at the January 2020 event, 70% of the attendees had been before. 85% of respondents had met new people through the event, 62% had made new friends through the event; and 62% said the event encouraged people to be more physically active. 81% said they would pay a ticket price for the event, with most people suggesting £5.

The music played scored inconsistently with some people proposing different music and having a variety of DJs. The event was also prone to poor attendance as a result of poor weather/ rain.

The approach of welcoming and hosting new arrivals and new referrals operated well. There is anecdotal information on individuals referred to The Slipped Disco, turning up alone, being anxious before coming in and being introduced to new people and joining in with other EWA activities. For example, a woman in her late 50s, who was referred via her GP arrived alone after pacing up and down on the street outside the venue, she was greeted, introduced, and seated with others, she later joined new EWA group activities and has now become a volunteer telephone befriender with Engage with Age. A more detailed case study for this is later in this evaluation.

Groups of friends would attend and arrive at the venue at 6pm before the advertised start time of 7.30pm. We also noticed the routine attendance of a group of older people with dementia, who were supported by a supported accommodation provider to bring groups of attendees to the event.

It is accurate to say that not everyone attending The Slipped Disco was experiencing loneliness or isolation. A proportion of attenders were frequent attenders at other EWA events. It is fair to say that overall, the attenders were on a spectrum of loneliness with some experiencing severe loneliness and others not experiencing loneliness at all. EWA reflects that this is a common feature of some events targeting loneliness and a mix of types of people is useful when organising events that are enjoyable and address loneliness in a less direct manner.

Given the Covid-19 Pandemic restriction the event transitioned to “The Virtual Slipped Disco” on Zoom and Facebook Live on three occasions, and while the event was successful it didn’t have the same quality impact as the in-person event.

The Slipped Disco has now become a regular event in itself, with pre-Pandemic requests to delivery it as a programme event to address loneliness and isolation in other Northern Ireland local authority areas.

3.2 Activity Groups

The Development Officer (DO) took a person-centred approach to all referrals and people joining groups. Most referrals were accompanied by a referral form (see appendix 4), which was either completed by a referral agent (social worker, GP) or by the DO during an initial meeting. All older people joining the project received a one-to-one meeting in advance to check interests, how the person felt, and what they wanted from the project. This enabled links to specific groups. The DO established a “culture” within groups of openness, established that all individuals were important, and emphasised the need for a warm and interested welcome. Existing members of groups were encouraged to take responsibility to welcome new arrivals. The DO established this convention of “welcome” and inclusion at a level that was authentic, reassuring and which felt “safe” for referrals.

There were difficulties in recording evidence of improvements in wellbeing experienced by attending this project. It was anticipated that a new referral to an activity group would complete a baseline measurement using the well-known Older Persons Outcome Star assessment method. It became very quickly clear that this assessment method proved to be very unpopular and a barrier to participation in itself, leading participants to feel anxious, to feel as if they were being monitored, and leading them to wonder if they were more unwell than they already felt. At an early stage it was agreed to take a more informal measurement approach which didn’t draw attention to any issues felt by participant, but which still enabled tracking of how participants felt.

Activity Group Creation

The PAL Project looked to address loneliness and isolation through the formation of a range of sustainable activity groups, none of these were already running, the idea is to create and sustain new groups according to participants needs and interests. Table 2 documents twenty groups formed in the lifetime of the PAL Project, detailing group name, size, when established and status.

Table 2: List of Groups formed during the PAL Project

Group	Established	Size	Status/ Notes
Creative Writing Group	Summer 2018	8	Continued through to mid-Pandemic
Silver Screen Movie Group	Summer 2018	5	Lasted 5 months
Craft Group	Autumn 2018	5	Lasted 4 months
Learning Spanish Group	Autumn 2018	3	Lasted 4 months
Dementia Activity Group	Spring 2019	8	Lasted 2 months, paused due to Pandemic, re-started 2021
Choir	Spring 2019	8	Lasted 2 months

The Tea Party ⁴	Summer 2019	8	Lasted 8 months but lacked sustainability
Walking Group	Autumn 2018	6	Lasted 3 months, reformed during pandemic
Book Group	Autumn 2019	8	Ongoing
"Pub Quiz"	Spring 2019	15	Ongoing
KIT Group	Spring 2019	20	Ongoing
Tai Chi Group	Spring 2019	25	Ongoing
Belle Bashford Court Games Group	Autumn 2018	25	Suspended due to Pandemic, reforming
Dance Group	Spring 2022	25	Ongoing
Slipped Disco Group	Spring 2018	80	Suspended due to Pandemic
PAL Committee	Spring 2018	10	Ongoing
<i>Groups Established after Covid-19 Lockdown</i>			
East Belfast Walking Group	Summer 2020	15	These Groups were established during pandemic to mitigate impact of Lockdown due to Covid-19
South Belfast Walking Group	May 2021	12	
Chocolate Bingo (online)	May 2020	20	
Dementia Friendly Group x 1	Summer 2021	8	
Classic Book Group	June 2021	8	

The DO looked to form groups based on perceived interests and capacity of people who were recruited onto the PAL Project. Participants were either referred onto the project by a third party (GP, social worker, health organisation etc) or made contact and volunteered themselves. Formation of the activity groups required assessing the capacity and likelihood of participants to undertake roles with responsibilities and/or to continue attendance.

Group formation relied on a variety of factors including capacity and amenability of participants, matching the collective interest of a range of diverse people to an activity, the availability of host venues and costs, the timing of the activities, and more. Given these wide ranging factors, a culture of "positive failure" was adopted. This meant, it was expected that not every group activity idea would be successful, and it was important to try and see what worked and what didn't work.

A key goal in the PAL project was for these activity groups to achieve a level of self-sufficiency and sustainability allowing EWA to reduce the level of support required thereby freeing the DO to establish and assist other activity group/s. This required activity group members to take on volunteer roles to ensure the long-term sustainability of the group. Success in recruiting volunteer commitment was varied, with some excellent examples of involvement/ownership, and other cases when this didn't work.

The DO created a wide variety of types of groups, responding to ideas from participants, and his professional knowledge and experience. There was a healthy mix of ideas and groups that

⁴ Dementia friendly coffee group

were tried but were not successful, and activities that were very successful and sustainable. Where appropriate some groups were established through discussion with groups of new individuals. Here interested participants met together with the DO, with a clear agenda set out in advance, and through discussion and consensus a group activity was agreed. The Pub Quiz group emerged from this approach.

Group Structures That Emerged

As highlighted in HOPE evaluation “It’s The People You Meet”, authentic ownership of group creation and development is hugely important for a groups’ long-term success. Authentic ownership here means that the participants have influence in the type of group activity, group name, how it is managed and take on some of the roles and responsibilities. Whilst it is recognised that a group is likely to be more successful if participants are meaningfully involved at all stages, there is still a need for staff members to stimulate and support the activity in early stages. A number of group structures emerged during the PAL Project; these are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Staff Stimulated Groups

In the absence of a clear idea for a new group of a particular interest, the DO proposed an activity considering participants’ interests as gathered from referral notes and interviews. The DO took responsibility for launching the idea, making relevant bookings, promoting the group activity, and organising all elements for delivery of the activity. In this way the participants were reassured that the activity would take place as planned. For example, the Keeping In Touch (KIT) group was created as a staff-led initiative and has proved very successful and is still running. KIT has consistently demonstrated high attendance and positive feedback. A potential drawback to this group creation approach is that the participant may not feel responsibility for this group as they didn’t really have any part in setting it up. In order to mitigate this, looking at the KIT group, the group session content evolved to include participant suggestions, in this way participants can start to take ownership of the group delivery and direction.

Participant Proposed Staff Assisted Groups

In this model, a participant proposes a group activity that requires staff support to make it happen. This participant also volunteers to be the Group Leader and help deliver the sessions. The Belle Bashford Court Games Group was initiated in this way. Stimulated by a resident of the Belle Bashford Court supported living centre, this group attracted residents and non-residents. Every Wednesday a range of games were played including darts, dominos, Monopoly and indoor bowls, this group could be described as “a pub without beer”. The DO supported the Belle Bashford Court Games Group by providing the games, one-to-one training on leading group activities and initially hands-on support at each session. In addition, a paid facilitator was utilised for a number of early sessions. It is noted that other participant proposed initiatives did not succeed, such as crafts group, language group and exercise

groups. This, however, was part of the approach of trying to see what kinds of activity groups would work. Participants of groups which didn't succeed were encouraged to attend other groups.

Super Volunteer Leader Groups

All groups need a leader with relevant and appropriate leadership skills; volunteer group leaders are keenly sought after. The PAL Project facilitated a number of "Super Volunteer Leader" groups. A Super Volunteer Leader has leadership experience and skills, can run groups with a clear and popular focus, and has the capacity and initiative to smoothly run the group every week with little support from the DO. The Super Volunteer can run the group with great success. With the PAL Project, the Tai Chi group and Dance group were led by Super Volunteers. This has lots of positive elements to it. The Super Volunteer has a greater degree of acceptance within the peer group and has a greater potential for long-term sustainability. A downside of this method is the tendency for all of the work to be carried out by one person. A learning is that Super Volunteers should be encouraged to develop a number of people who can assist in running the activity and also have a 'deputy' in place to run activities if they are unable to make a session.

It is recognised that sufficient numbers are needed for a group to develop the traction required to be able to be good fun and move forward. It feels better for individuals to attend an activity if there are plenty of people there. A recurring concern was that while individual activities were well received, if there were not sufficient people attending then it was less enjoyable for individuals to attend.

Capacity Building and Sustainability

A key objective of the PAL Project was to create sustainable groups with older people in charge and taking ownership of their groups. In this way groups are more likely to continue after the funding period has finished. From a community development perspective, the more activity groups with older people in Belfast then the greater the number of support networks for older people and the greater the number of ways improved wellbeing can be promoted.

The task of developing sustainability within a group is challenging; here the DO is working with a group of people with varying levels of capacity and interest in taking on tasks and responsibilities for the group. For a group to be sustainable EWA recommend having the following key features in place:

- Group Name, purpose, location, meet times, small fee to cover room hire/ tea and coffee
- Group members allocated to roles/responsibilities
- Establish group rules/procedures with help from EWA
- Carry out Risk Assessment for venue and activities
- Log attendance
- Collect fees

- Prepare venue for activity e.g., set out chairs tables, refreshments, activity equipment etc
- Hold meetings to discuss and agree group activities, direction and ambitions.
- Liaise with EWA as the group see fit

Anecdotal evidence from the PAL project suggests groups that have or do the following are more likely to be sustainable:

- Hold regular activities at the same time every week
- Use a venue participants want to visit, and which is easy to get to
- Create group identity e.g., T-shirts, name activity
- Have peer older people visible at the front of all groups
- Attend required training and learning events
- Allow the group to develop at its own pace – sometimes the group is an immediate success, other times after investing a significant period of time strength and independence gradually emerges.

Group Operation - Dance Group Case Study

For the Dance Group, most of the attendees attended on their own/ as individuals, with a small number of couples (friends/partners). After three weeks or so the Group moved to a bigger room in the venue however, the Group Leader (GL) immediately noticed that the larger space made it initially harder to create an inclusive atmosphere, it was more difficult initially to bring people together to chat, interact and connect. The GL therefore rearranged the table and chairs to reduce the space and create a setting more conducive to social interaction.

Initially the DO, GL and a facilitator (F) were responsible for all the main tasks necessary to run the group. The GL prepared and led on the dance activities; preparation included choice of music, breakdown and teaching of all dance steps at a level both suitable for complete beginners and those more skilled.

In time the group participants helped with setting up the room, refreshments, attendance recording and collection of fees.

Group administration procedures evolved to include:

- Participants completed a Details form to include contact information
- Participants signed up to the Tasks Rota
- Participants paid a small fee to cover refreshments and room hire
- Participants joined the Groups WhatsApp if they wished
- Participants were kept informed about Group activities via email sent by the GL. A small number of participants were contacted by phone by the GL as they were not on email or WhatsApp

The GL's role in the development of the group was critical, he used a number of approaches to ensure success, these include:

- Tea/coffee is available on arrival
- Create time for a chat at the beginning of the session
- The dance session begins when the GL **feels** the chat 'is drying up', the timing of this may vary from session to session
- Participants change dance partners often therefore increasing the opportunity to meet and connect with other participants
- The GL partners/dances with **all** participants and is very careful not to dance too much with the more skilled dancers
- The sessions are never rushed, they are specifically planned to accommodate all abilities from those that have impaired movement to those who are more proficient dancers
- All participants are encouraged to go at their own pace
- The participants do not have to take part in all the dances, they can stop/rest when suits
- The emphasis is on taking part and moving, it is NOT important how well, fast, or skilful the movements are
- The GL interacts with each participant gently and sensitively encourages all to take part as much as they are able to, he is also sensitive to any physical, mental, or social inhibitors participants may have

In summary, the GL is sensitive to how the participants may be feeling and understands how loneliness may be affecting them, the GL was able to create a welcoming, inclusive, safe environment that allowed participants to interact and take part in a way that suited their needs.

It is useful to note how the Dance Group evolved over time and coped with Covid-19 restrictions which started in March 2020, 6 to 8 weeks after the group started. The key milestones are itemised as:

- Started in January 2020 with 22 participants
- Prepared for and participated in BBC Comic Relief community initiative mid-February.
- Planned to perform a dance piece at EWA 'Slipped Disco' in early March 2020
- Dance activities stopped during the first Lockdown period from 16th March 2020 (EWA's lockdown date) until the relaxation of regulations in June 2020. However, some social interaction continued in the WhatsApp group during this period – this is reported to have provided a lifeline for many of the participants who were forced to be even more isolated and lonely during this first Lockdown period
- Dance sessions restarted outdoors at Ormeau Park on Friday afternoons in June 2020 - only socially distanced line dancing was permitted (no jiving). In addition to the Friday outdoor dance sessions a Wednesday afternoon Walking Group formed
- The GL reports a strong group identity emerged in Summer 2020, the group proved resilient and galvanised due to Lockdown restrictions

- In Autumn 2020 the group was able to resume indoor sessions following Covid-19 guidelines
- Autumn 2020 the group worked with Age Friendly Belfast to feature in their annual calendar.
- In addition, approximately 12 of the group met on an informal bases on Sundays to dance to Belfast Ukulele sessions in Ormeau Park, Belfast.



Figure 3: Graphic to show the ‘spin-off connections’ from the Dance Group (smaller circles represent other social interactions between the participants outside the main group activity)

Group Leader and Facilitator Comments on Group Operation

It is interesting to note the Group leaders and facilitators comments on aspects of group operation including format, welcome and sustainability as presented in the below table:

Table 3: Group Leaders and Facilitators Feedback on Group Development and Operation	
Personnel	Comment
Group Leader Dance	“Well, I attended EWA Christmas party and got talking to the DO, I mentioned my passion for dance and he [DO] asked me if I would take the lead on a Dance group in the New Year as EWA had requests to start up a dance group, but they could never find anyone to do it. So, in a spirit of pre-Christmas bonhomie and generosity I said ‘yes’. I kind of forgot about it until I got an email from the DO in early January! I then met with the DO in the EWA office and agreed on a flyer and the name of the group and looked at a venue”

	<p>"So, we made sure that when people came in it wasn't straight into dancing, they would have a cup of tea and relax and have a chat and I would kind of just sense the moment was right to start to dance when the conversations were drying up. And then maybe half-way through I would stop again and say we'll have a break so that was another opportunity for people to chat and thinking about it even when we finished people would say let's for go for a coffee that is before Lockdown in March."</p>
<p>Group Leader Tai Chi</p>	<p>"I got it organised for everyone to buy a blue training t-shirt, it had our logo printed on it, I felt it was very important for the group to have an identity and the t-shirts helped with this."</p> <p>"I decided that halfway through the lesson we would have a sit down for a break and talk. I told them that I had been diagnosed with Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis, a fatal, untreatable condition. That broke the ice and every week we revealed ourselves and events breaking down barriers. That was good. I also found that one student also had IPF!"</p> <p>"We all changed; we became friendlier and familiar. Each Christmas I organised a group dinner at a Chinese restaurant using up the group funds. This helped to dispel the feelings of loneliness and bonded us as a "team". We had learned four major Tai Chi and Qi Gong disciplines and we were able to practice these at home as well as in the Friday class. I hope the students have continued practice."</p>
<p>Group Facilitator for a number of groups</p>	<p>"Initially the groups were totally reliant on me and the group leader to do everything like make tea, record attendance and collect fees. It took time for the group participants to help with tea and coffee, but I could not attend a session, so I asked a few participants who I thought would help with the refreshments the following session. These participants continued to organise the refreshments for a number of weeks until the GL became aware that some people felt that it was 'always the same people doing the teas'. So, the group then discussed with the leader and voted that they would create a rota and everyone in the group should take turns making the refreshments. A rota was also created for the attendance logging and collection of entry fees."</p> <p>"I think sometimes there are reasons why the participants did not help with refreshments you know like some felt too shy, felt they weren't needed, thought the people doing it were happy and wanted to do it, thought maybe they wouldn't be able to do it due to disability and maybe they felt it would be too stressful trying to remember how everyone likes their tea and coffee."</p> <p>"I feel the groups would not of its own accord take on the tasks/responsibilities unless encouraged by the GL or DO. I feel this</p>

	<p>should perhaps be made clear at the very start of the Group. This perhaps needs to be carefully considered as too much responsibility (stress) may negatively impact on the development of the Group ... I feel the participants became too reliant on the DO and GL and therefore this jeopardises the long term stability of the group. Instead, perhaps there is a way of reassuring that the roles and responsibilities are not too difficult, and it just needs a few to volunteer for key organising roles and there will be help/support from the DO/EWA/GL."</p> <p>"Overall, I feel the groups did run really well, they were greatly appreciated and valued by the participants. I think the way they are run can help people experiencing loneliness and isolation and will certainly reduce loneliness and isolation during the group session, but it is difficult to say whether this reduces their global loneliness I mean when they get home to an empty house."</p>
Volunteer Facilitator Games	<p>"I helped set up the room, get the money if people wanted to give it, I didn't push them if they didn't bother paying that was ok. I made the tea and coffee and helped with the games. I also helped let the residents here know about the Games I reminded the residents."</p> <p>"But after a while I didn't want to help so much with teas as I just wanted to play the games ... I felt that maybe there should be more formal roles of who does what and this made clear to the group"</p>
Group Leader Games	<p>"I had done a 'Royal Family' project for EWA and the DO said they were looking for a new group with PAL project and I got interested, as many years ago in my youth, I was a lay preacher and I got very interested in the Games group at Bell Bashford. So, it was my job to run the Games session, so every week I would pick up the games from EWA office and every week I would ask the group what they wanted to play the following week. They were very interested in carpet bowls as I did it at Girdwood every week ... they were very interested in team games as well which I thought was very encouraging."</p> <p>"So, the first thing I did was ask the participant did they want tea or coffee and then got them sat down and chatted for a while to ask them what their interests were and what they would like the group to do because it is their group."</p> <p>"We did have one or two of the members who helped set-up the games like the darts which I thought was important as they got more involved which is a good thing."</p> <p>"I think we got quite close to being able to run the group ourselves without EWA before Covid. What we needed to do was have a meeting and talk about the financials, I think we would have got it as we were</p>

	pretty much running the session on our own without the DO or a facilitator ... and if it wasn't for Covid it would still be going on ... and I think if I wasn't able to take the session and there was a good supply of games at the home then I think they could have run it themselves ... I also wanted to play games outside during the summer."
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Group Activities – Participant's Feedback

Comments as presented in Table 4 below clearly demonstrate the participants enjoy the group activities, find them interesting, intellectually stimulating, and good fun. Interviews with the group leaders confirm they consulted with the group members asking what they wanted to do and welcomed suggestions. For example, each week the Games group decided together which games they would like to play the following week. The KIT group started out focusing on helping participants get the most out of their smart phones, iPads, and laptops, for example using WhatsApp, making online purchases, and booking, and using Zoom, Spotify etc. As the number of participants of KIT increased other activities were included, these being influenced by participants' interests; so, there was knitting/sewing, painting/drawing, crafts and the addition of a pool table proved a popular attraction. Whilst the variety of activities at the KIT sessions was well received it also encouraged the participants to take more of a lead and help/teach each other thereby allowing more meaningful interactions among participants.

Table 4: Participant Feedback on the Groups and Group Activities (Guiding Principle 4)⁵

Participant 1 (M)	"I am very happy with how groups are running"
Participant 2 (F)	<p>"The groups are very well organised, we feel safe because he [DO] takes care of everyone in the group, he [DO] phoned us to see if we are going and it is all very well organised."</p> <p>"I love crocheting, painting, and knitting ... yes I love helping others [to do these activities]."</p> <p>"I am very pleased that they [Engage with Age] help with transport, without that I would not be able to go."</p>
Participant 3 (F)	<p>"Oh yes there was painting crocheting, colouring in, darts, snooker, help with phones and iPads. The DO helped everyone, he was great, and helped with Zoom, exercises on Zoom. The DO was going to start table tennis, put 2 tables together and buy nets and bats."</p> <p>"They [the walks] are absolutely brilliant everyone can go at their own pace."</p>
Participant 4 (F)	"I enjoy that [KIT group] because we do different things, sometimes we play games, at the moment I am teaching Annie how to do cross stitch because she doesn't know how to do it, so I am teaching her how to do that ... and it is a learning experience, you can learn about different things and there are different activities. There are males and females there, you can discuss things, tell jokes"

⁵ HOPE Guiding Principle 4 - Facilitate participants to authentically "own" and have responsibility for the group programme

	and things like that and it is a safe environment for us to talk, if you can understand about our feelings and maybe the loneliness we feel.”
Participant 5 (F)	“Well, I think it is quite good and they have a lot [participants] going ... she [another participant] taught me how to do cross-stitching, I have done two lovely photographs, one of a dog and one of an owl and I crocheted a lot myself and knit a lot ... so anything that goes on I have a go at it”
Participant 6 (F)	“Overall, honestly I think EWA do a great job. I am very very happy to continue with, it’s all brilliant. Quite honestly no I don’t have any other suggestions I am enjoying everything”
Participant 7 (M)	“I always looked forward to what was going happen that day, because it was different every time, although you knew it was the same routine, you didn’t know what you’d be doing, what subject you would be working on.”
Participant 8 (M)	“I helped them with any problems they have with their phones, their tablets, their laptops, I showed them how to use it how to access it and get them more used to it. I showed them how to use WhatsApp so then they could chat among each other. And other times they had so many messages so with their permission I’d delete messages, clean their phones up. And how to use their tablets. They can use them to play Sudoku and crosswords. I’d show them where to go to download apps. I’d show them how to use their tablets and phones.”
Participant 9 (F)	“When you walked in there was a CD on and the board games were ready on the table, and there were other activities, there was another wee group and you could have sat with them, although it was in only one room it was like separate activities, there were other groups and you could have sat down, and different activities. You could have sat down and had a cup of tea with some of the residents and had a wee chat with them and you could have gone to the table because it was loaded with games, and you had other ones that were writing stories, there was so many activities, you couldn’t have added on anything else?”

Covid-19 Post-Script

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Lockdown affected the PAL Project. The initial two year project was due to end in May 2020 and in the middle of March 2020 all participants and employees went in to ‘Lockdown’. Contact was maintained with all participants through telephone, post, online activities and outdoor activities. The ‘Lockdown’ and continuing uncertainty over Covid-19 restricted the capacity to undertake this evaluation because all resources were invested in maintaining contact and combatting isolation.

Referral numbers, not included in the figures above, increased across Belfast significantly, with a rise in 300% of referrals through the Connected Community Care Hubs network. Service developments for Engage with Age that were connected to the PAL Project included the establishment of a Telephone Befriending Scheme, online activities, the creation of the

PAL Gazette newspaper for those not online, and development of Covid-19 safe processes. Many of the activity groups stayed together in some form and at the time of writing February 2022 many groups are reforming while new groups are being created.

There has been increasing awareness of the need for services for older people affected by isolation and loneliness following Covid-19 . Demand remains significant.

4 How Well Did We Do?

This section of the report presents in some detail how the PAL project delivered on the key project outcomes; these are:

1. Older people who have experienced loneliness and/or isolation develop improved health and wellbeing
2. Older people who have experienced loneliness and/or isolation develop improved social connections
3. Older people who have experienced loneliness and/or isolation exert increased control over their social connections
4. There is increased awareness of the impact of loneliness and/or isolation within the health and community development sector, with a view to influencing improved commissioning

Each of these outcomes have a number of sub-outcomes, see appendix 5 for a full breakdown. It is noted that this evaluation report forms part of the delivery of outcome 4 and will be used to present learnings on, and insights into addressing loneliness and isolation through activity group development and growth.

4.1 Participant Interviews

Semi-structured in-depth interviews allows us to better understand the participants' circumstances and levels of loneliness before joining the project. They also help us to see how they integrated into the group, what they thought of the group activities and how these were delivered. And finally, the participant interviews allow us to gauge if they experienced any changes to their overall wellbeing as a result of attending the groups. Analysis of these interviews is presented under the following headings: Baseline Assessment Including Loneliness, Welcome/Group Ethos, Group Activities, Changes Experienced. It is noted that quantitative survey results are also presented to further support changes experienced by PAL project participants.

Baseline Assessment including Loneliness

Table 5 presents baseline comments relating to how participants were before attending the activity groups in terms of their personal circumstances and perceived state of loneliness and or isolation.

Table 5: Base line comments on perceived loneliness/isolation before attending the groups	
Participant 1 (M)	"Loneliness ... I suppose I was in a way, but it never bothered me that much, but I just wanted to team up with people I wanted to talk to."
Participant 2 (F)	"Oh yes I remember that I was going for counselling, the counsellor told me about the activities of Engage with Age, she took me to EWA office ... I found the groups were the only way to stop my really bad depression."

	<p>“What I use to do [before the groups] was stay here [home], looking out the window, doing nothing, staring at the walls, it was terrible, but now my life is really totally different.”</p>
Participant 3 (F)	<p>“I worked till 71, I was an auxiliary nurse, there were some very hard times, I worked in a hospital and loved it ... then my husband took ill, and I nursed my husband night and day till he died. I have a daughter and grandson; they are my life. During my husband’s illness I was given 8 weeks of respite activities, I played tennis and then heard of Engage with Age groups.”</p>
Participant 4 (F)	<p>“Mm, I am in a rather unique position, I only have two brothers, no sisters, so I am used to being on my own all my life but when Lockdown started, I found it quite difficult as I was not able to get out and around.”</p>
Participant 5 (F)	<p>“The thing is I am on my own here and I think for people that are on their own and have nobody belonging to them would benefit more from going to them [groups] because we will meet new people and have someone to have a conversation with.”</p>
Participant 6 (F)	<p>“I was getting out and about quite a bit and I have family down the road as well, you know grand-kiddies as well, but I have found through EWA it’s more about mixing with other older people and there a lot of activities which EWA have organised and have been brilliant... so I am doing a lot more activities now whereas I might have gone by myself to a leisure centre or community centre but have not been involved in as many activities as I am now”</p>
Participant 7 (M)	<p>“It’s in my nature to have a partner, and then I hadn’t got one. You know, my wife died, and I didn’t know where I was, because, even if I could just talk to her, I would be okay, but I had nobody at all.”</p> <p>“Once my wife died, I found out what loneliness was, and until then I didn’t know what loneliness was. Even though I didn’t see her that often.”</p>
Participant 8 (M)	<p>“I’d been in and out of hospital quite a lot, so I was stuck in the house, and I wasn’t getting out. And I was a sociable person, and I went from a working environment to not working and not being able to get out. And it really put me in a bad place. And then through my time in hospital I got to hear about having a social worker. I’d never heard about having a social worker as an adult, you always hear about it for children. And from that there that I got put into contact with a social worker and she told me about different groups, and she told me about the KIT group in Belfast. With my technical experience and knowledge of mobiles with the KIT group it was no problem and I’ve been there [KIT group] over two years, and it’s great.”</p>

Participant 9 (F) “Well, I’m a carer for a 35 year old and I feel totally isolated, and I remember staring out the kitchen window watching the weather going by and I thought, you know, life’s passing me by here, and I got talking to the DO **and it was like the DO had opened the blinds and the light came in.** I think it was about 2019, so it was. And that was the start of going out to Dee Street, playing connect 4 or just talking and it was just wonderful. My problem is not making many friends over the years and the few people that I have, you know, and I remember going to The Slipped Disco and walking up and down the cobble stones outside because I hadn’t the courage to go on my own. And I remember meeting yourself at the door, and there was a lovely girl who said hello to me and she let me sit with her and you know, I would never sort feel like that though it’s probably normal, but once you got in there you know nobody looked at you any differently because you were there on your own, you know, it was fabulous.”

Participants show a range of background circumstances and levels of perceived loneliness. As widely recognised in academic literature the feeling of loneliness is subjective and is not necessarily determined by the number of friends or social contacts but instead on the quality of contacts, for example a person may have regular contact with one or two people and feel perfectly content if they have strong relationships with them or they may be surrounded by/meet many people often but feel profoundly alone. Participants 2, 7 and 8 seem to indicate high levels of loneliness and mental ill health. In contrast Participant 6 says she was getting out and about often and is in contact with family members but lacked contact with other people of her own age. Participants 7, 8 and 9 were able to tell us more how loneliness felt to them:

Participant 7 (M) - *“Loneliness is a sort of a disease you know, it’s like being like a nervous person or something like that. It’s a weird thing you know. You need to be involved in it before you can understand it, you know? There’re very few people who would be facing loneliness the way I was. My loneliness was different, I mean I needed a person, obviously a female, I needed a person who I could communicate with, and that just wasn’t what they were offering [referring to going to quiz groups]. So, there was no point in me getting involved. “*

“Well, I tried to do something about it [loneliness] but it’s not easy to do something about it. I tried. But you see the way people try to solve that for you is to get you involved in quizzes and wee dopey things. It depends on how intelligent you are. I used to think, are people wise, you know. But when you look back on it, they are doing their best to sort of help and lift my spirits.”

Participant 8 (M) - *“It feels like a pit, that you’re not happy and you just feel like despair, because you don’t want to feel like that but at the same time you don’t know how to get out of it, and you need something like that [groups] to help you get out of that there. You need an incentive to get out of loneliness. Because you can be happy*

enough in your own loneliness but you're not happy because you're sitting there looking at the four walls. You can be in a crowd; you can be out on the town, but you can still feel alone. If you had someone there to help you overcome that part, it gives you an incentive to come out of yourself."

Participant 9 (F) – *"Yeah, you know, you think loneliness is an illness, and I think everybody's circumstances, whether you're a carer or whatever, loneliness is I would say, loneliness is an illness, and you need something, something to take that away. You need some kind of interest to take you away from what you are doing. You need someone to talk to, you need company ... it's a very dark place. You know, it's a very.... It's not a nice place to be, lonely, it's dark, and coming back to an empty house and it's not a nice place to be in."*

Group Welcome/Ethos

Key learnings from the HOPE project (2012 to 2017) can perhaps be thought as Guiding Principles for PAL group creation, growth, and sustainability. These Guiding Principles are:

1. Deliver a person-centred approach.
2. Ensure participants feel "safe" in order to engage, particularly if they have been isolated or felt lonely for some time.
3. Invest time in engaging with people who are isolated and/or lonely recognising the challenges involved.
4. Facilitate participants to authentically "own" and have responsibility for the group programme

As presented in Table 6, overall, participants report finding it easy to join the groups, feel valued, welcomed, and safe. Many note the key facilitation role the Development Officer (DO) and group leaders/facilitators play in creating a welcoming, inclusive environment making it easy to integrate, feel relaxed and enjoy.

Table 6: Group Ethos - Feel Welcomed? (Guiding Principles 1, 2 and 3)

Participant 1 (M)	<i>"Ah absolutely yes, loved it, I walked in there started talking to a lot of people, you know it filled in the day." "I found everyone willing to talk, but then I'm a talker anyway!"</i>
Participant 2 (F)	<i>"They were very easy [to join] because the counsellor accompanied me to EWA office, and I met the DO and that made going to the groups easy."</i>
Participant 3 (F)	<i>"Oh yes there was always somebody there to speak to you, take the lead and to have a one-to-one."</i>
Participant 4 (F)	<i>"Yes it was, it was easy to join the groups, everybody made me feel welcome, when I first started going to the writing group, I was a wee bit wary because the group had been long standing and everyone else in the group was older than me"</i>

	and I was feeling a little bit uneasy but after a couple of sessions I felt comfortable going ... it's like anything that you start new you are a bit wary about it."
Participant 5 (F)	"I know most of them that goes to it, I sit with X, me a X can chat away about what we are doing you know."
Participant 6 (F)	"I would talk to anyone; I am a very sociable person ... I just get straight in there and muck in" "I was just so glad to get out again, get involved in stuff, do stuff and meet people"
Participant 7 (M)	"I didn't find it hard to get involved with it. I just automatically went along." "I thought the idea of the whole thing was very good. They talked around each other in a friendly manner, and there was nobody above anybody else or anything like that. It all went really well."
Participant 8 (M)	"It was brilliant, everybody was very friendly. My social worker brought me over and I got talking to the DO and he got me sitting with a couple of people and got me introduced to them, and the groups were very friendly and there was no-one stand offish with me, and they were very welcoming, so they were."
Participant 9(F)	"Yeah, yeah [feel welcomed], and you know the best thing about it too, you go to somewhere that you've never been before, and it's a strange place, and you meet all of these people and you don't know them ... the first time I went there, I went 'hello there', and they went, 'do you want a game of darts?', and that's where all the banter began, I probably hit the wall a few times, and not the dart board, it was like The Slipped Disco, the door opened and it was like another world, a brilliant world to live in... "

It is clear that PAL groups are successfully incorporating Guiding Principles 1,2 and 3 from the HOPE project. Guiding Principle 4⁶ is further discussed in later in sections.

Increase in Social Opportunities/Interactions

Whilst the group activity provides the participant a physical activity to do such as dance, tai chi, or games; quality 'social connecting' opportunities are created during a deliberate built-in 'time to chat'. So, for example both the Dance and Tai Chi groups allow a little time at the beginning of the session for 'hello and how are you' before starting the main activity, both these groups have a break of 20 to 30 minutes in the middle of the session allowing for the opportunity to chat, develop and deepen relationships. This 'social connecting time' is often facilitated with a tea/coffee and sometimes a discussion lead by the group leader.

In addition, the group leader and/or facilitator encourages the participants to contact each other outside of the session, for example with a phone call, WhatsApp, or a trip together. The

⁶ Guiding principle 4 - Facilitate participants to authentically "own" and have responsibility for the group programme.

following comments demonstrate the development of social connections as a result of the PAL Project:

- “When I first came to live here, I didn’t know anyone, just relatives, but relatives are not the same as having friends, it is a whole different thing. There is one guy that I particularly knock about with, we go out a couple of times a week for coffee and chat to set the world to rights, the usual sort of stuff!”
- “Now I know a lot of people and all of them are very good friends, the people who go to the groups are very caring to each other ... I feel very good with everyone there [in the groups].”
- “Yes, I would have [met participants] on different occasions, once we went downtown and had a coffee or we went one Saturday we met a lady who lives in Dundonald and we all have our passes and got bus to Newtownards and spent a few hours there as Saturday morning is market morning and it was the most beautiful day it was in the middle of summer, it was lovely, so those sorts of things are good.”
- “I’ve made new friends and I look forward to seeing them every week and if somebody is not there, we might say why is so and so not here, and someone might say they have a hospital appointment or something like that there and we always look out for each other, that’s just the way we are.”
- “Usually now you meet up with the same people, I have got to know them more, whereas before you would have met up with different people, but it wouldn’t have been as close, such close contact, so getting to know people more, it is definitely fantastic, I think it is brilliant”
- “I meet a couple of friends every week and we go to a local bar and have a shandy. I’d never have gone to a bar. I had friends and I hadn’t spoken to some of them in a long time and I go out now every Wednesday and we go out for a few hours. We go to Belfast and talk to the locals in the bar ... I wouldn’t be worried about going into a bar anywhere. It wouldn’t bother me now whereas before I wouldn’t do that.”

Changes Experienced

In order to understand if anyone is any better off as a result of being involved in the PAL Project, data from both the qualitative participant interviews and quantitative results from EWA survey in March/April 2021 are interrogated and presented below.

Qualitative Results

Analysis of the participant interviews reveals a range of positive changes experienced as a result of the PAL project; a number are presented below together with a summary of the ‘change experienced’:

Participant Comment	Change experienced
<p>"I would go along with that [feel less lonely], but even though the activities are not going [due to Covid], people that I met, I'm still meeting and in fact I am going for lunch tomorrow with some of them [group members] ... so these people I met have become pals, friends."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less lonely • More friends
<p>"I found the groups were the only way to stop my really bad depression."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced symptoms of depression
<p>"It [the groups] help a lot with my depression and everything."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced symptoms of depression
<p>"The groups have enabled me to cope better with life because as you know I used to be a nurse and everyone use to say to me you are a 'giver' rather than a 'taker' and I just can't get out of that mode, so I think the groups are helping me because <i>I miss work</i>."</p> <p>"... whenever I lost work, I felt a bit ostracised but going to the groups is beneficial it makes me feel that I am not wasted, if you understand."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cope better with loss of work • Feels less ostracised • Feels valued
<p>"I definitely didn't feel just the same. But, eh, you really felt that you had a family, you know. Really. And you felt loved and stuff like that. Things I hadn't felt for years. I mean a good wee group that I always remember."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt sense of belonging
<p>"Yes, I was a lot happier and a lot calmer. That I could go out and talk to strangers again and not just the family circle. And there was an improvement in that way rather than sitting in the house talking about soap operas."</p> <p>"After the group, now I can go out and talk to people. I can approach people. Before I wouldn't have talked to people before they talked to me first."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feels happier and calmer • Increased social contacts • Increased confidence and self-esteem
<p>"It sort of is like the way when you feel you have your dinner a night time, it fills you up for the rest of the week, and you can't wait until the next, because it was a Wednesday and you can't wait until the next Wednesday until you're back again and when you walk in the doors the place is going to be the place to give you a bit of a lift until you go back again."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives a mood lift which sustains through the week till the next session

“It gave me a new lease of life. It gave me a boost, it lifted you from that one day you went there till you went back again. Better than any tablet as the saying goes.”

All participants interviewed for this evaluation report a range of ‘changes experienced’ as a result of being involved in the PAL project. These ‘changes’ are summarised and presented below for each participant linking to project outcome indicators.

Participant	Changes experienced	Sub-Outcome ⁷
Participant 1 (M)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feels less lonely • Getting out and about more • Developed meaningful friendships/pals • Provides opportunity to meet others and ‘talk’ 	<u>CHANGE TO ACTUAL SUB-OUTCOMES</u> 1b, 1c, 2a, 2c, 2d, 3a
Participant 2 (F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greatly reduced symptoms of depression and loneliness • Loves to be able to help and care for others in the group • Could barely speak English before attended the groups now is very confident in being understood • Created more friends and in particular a close friendship with one other group member. 	1b, 1c, 2a, 2c, 2d, 3a
Participant 3 (F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides the opportunity to be a Caregiver • Receives immense pleasure from ‘helping others’ in the groups. • More social interactions. 	1b, 1c, 2a, 2c, 2d, 3a
Participant 4 (F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More friends • Learn new things and ideas e.g., creative writing, sewing, knitting, crocheting • Feel she has a value and worth through caregiving and helping others • Gives her a focus each week 	1b, 1c, 2a, 2c, 2d, 3a
Participant 5 (F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoys group activities • Developed strong friendship with one other participant 	1b, 1c, 2a, 2c, 2d, 3a
Participant 6 (F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet people of her own age 	1b, 1c, 2a, 2c, 2d, 3a

⁷ See appendix 5 for sub-outcome breakdown

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet more often develop friendships 	
Participant 7 (M)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found group activity intellectually stimulating • Less lonely whilst attending groups 	1b, 1c, 2a, 2c, 2d, 3a
Participant 8 (M)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased confidence in meeting people • Increased self-esteem as result of helping others in group • Increased social contacts • Improved capacity, member of PAL steering committee 	1b, 1c, 2a, 2c, 2d, 3a
Participant 9 (F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced feeling of loneliness rated herself as 1 (low) on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 - high) • Reduced social anxieties • Increased resilience 	1b, 1c, 2a, 2c, 2d, 3a

Case Study Participant 8 (P8)

In order to further demonstrate potential long-lasting changes experienced as a result of the PAL project it is of interest to present P8's journey. P8 has a history of mental health problems requiring hospital treatment on a number of occasions and is currently not working. Whilst in hospital P8 was assigned a social worker who sign-posted P8 to EWA who were able to encourage P8 to attend the KIT group. P8 had an interest in mobile phones, iPads, laptops, and desktop computers. On joining the group P8 became quickly known as the 'go to guy' for anything to do with phone/mobile devices as P8 reports:

"There was one wee woman who was there, and she talked to me about her family, and she had a picture of a cottage and an address, and I was able to get it up on Google Earth for her, there was an address, and it was a picture of her home, and this was a Miller's Cottage that her family used to own, and she was reared in it and then she came to Belfast. It gave her a sense of joy; she was still able to see the cottage and it was still standing. It made me feel good that I was able to do that."

P8 joined the Tai Chi group reporting a continued increase in confidence and self-esteem feeling he can take part in group discussions, P8 reports *"In the past I haven't been able to do that, I'd just stuck to myself, whereas now I can go in and chat to people because they're so welcoming."*

P8 has a friend who is experiencing loneliness and isolation, given his experience with the PAL project P8 understands more about the importance of finding an approach and a group that can help connect with that person, P8 reports *"It's all about trying to get somebody out of the house into a group environment again and with somebody they can talk to."*

Seeing how P8 has changed as a result of the group activities, EWA has encouraged and supported P8 to join the PAL Steering Committee thereby allowing P8 to develop further social interconnectedness, skills and experiences that can potentially allow a return to the workplace or other volunteering roles.

Times when the approach didn't work




The DO would spend a significant period of time making invitations to individuals to join in group activities. A routine aspect of the process of invitation is for opportunities to be declined. This can happen for a variety of reasons; lack of suitable opportunities; timing issues; accessibility reasons such as transport. There will also be reasons for declined invitations the DO will be unaware of. Sometimes the circumstances and timing are just not right.




Case Study: Male, early 80s – The Slipped Disco

The individual's partner had long-term declining health and was in residential care. The individual made a number of attempts to become involved in activities including attending The Slipped Disco. At that event the individual remained distant, stood alone at the bar, and observed the dancing, but stayed separate from everyone else. Despite attempts to engage the individual in conversation the individual remained at a distance. The individual retained distant contact with EWA, received bulletins and occasional invitations, and only engaged with the activities after the formal end of the PAL Project, getting involved in the KIT group and walks. In explanation for the earlier failure to connect with this individual was because the individual wasn't ready for social contact. The individual's preoccupations with his partner's health meant that the timing wasn't right. EWA's response was to allow the individual space and time while recognising the solution to loneliness sometimes lies with the individual.

Quantitative Survey Results

An extensive survey, carried out by EWA staff in March/April 2021 distributed both via an online Survey Monkey link and hardcopies asked a number of wide-ranging questions on all aspects of EWA activities and programmes including the PAL project. The following results are extracted from this survey and can be used as supporting evidence on effectiveness and success of the PAL project.

Table 5: Participant Survey Summary			
Question	Result summary	Outcome indicator	
1. How useful do you find Engage with Age PAL activities? (n=103)	76 % found PAL activities 'Very Useful' or 'Extremely useful'		NA
2. Does taking part in Engage with Age PAL activities make a difference to your life, such as exercising more, meeting more people, or feeling better? (n=99)	86% responded either 'Good', 'A lot of' or 'Huge' difference. 33% said they made a 'Huge' difference		2a
3. Has your circle of friends got bigger, smaller, or stayed the same as a result of taking part in these activities? (n=148)	73% responded their circle of friends has got bigger		2b

4. As a result of taking part in PAL activities, are you routinely in contact with more people, fewer people, or same number of people outside of these activities/ on your own time? (n=104)	61% responded they are in contact with 'More people'		2b
5. Does taking part in these activities improve your mental health and wellbeing? (n=74)	67% responded either 'Good', 'A lot of' or 'Huge' difference		1a
6. Do you feel your opinion is heard/ valued by those who make decisions that affect you? (n=67)	74% responded either 'Yes', 'Yes a lot' or 'Very much so'		3c

These survey evaluations presented above are from the final year of the project. The accumulated response for the same questions in the first year of the programme highlights positive responses that are far in excess of target response levels for the project:

PAL Cumulative survey indicators

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Overall two year total</i>
How useful do you find Engage with Age PAL activities?	126 people responded "extremely useful" (target 66 positive responses)
Does taking part in Engage with Age PAL activities make a difference to your life, such as exercising more, meeting more people, or feeling better?	134 responded 'good', 'a lot of', or 'a huge difference'. (target 66 positive responses)
Has your circle of friends got bigger, smaller, or stayed the same as a result of taking part in these activities?	154 responded bigger (target 66 positive responses)
As a result of taking part in PAL activities, are you routinely in contact with more people, fewer people, or same number of people outside of these activities/ on your own time?	126 responded they are routinely in contact with more people (target 66 positive responses).
Does taking part in these activities improve your mental health and wellbeing?	102 responded a 'good', 'a lot', or 'a huge difference' (target 66 positive responses).
Do you feel your opinion is heard/ valued by those who make decisions that affect you?	101 responded 'yes', 'yes a lot', or 'Very much so' (target 66 positive responses).

4.2 Group Leader and Facilitator Interviews

Analysis of interviews with group leaders and facilitators allow us to further explore and present approaches they feel are effective with people experiencing loneliness. In addition, the group leaders and facilitators make comment on the group organisation, structure and operation noting 'What worked well' and 'What could be improved' (Tables 6 and 7 below).

Observations on Loneliness

Dance Group Leader (GL)

Whilst this GL did not have formal training in tutoring people experiencing loneliness and/or isolation, he was able to employ previous professional and life skills to successfully deliver activities in this setting.

The GL feels he is in tune with and sensitive to the participants' physical, social, and emotional needs. His ethos is to treat each participant as an individual, cater for their individual needs (as far as he can), be gentle, encourage, value and praise. The GL is very clear that the primary role of the group is to be 'social' using dance as a mechanism for interaction, connection, and companionship, he feels the group is best described as a 'social group who dance'.

The GL reports

"I am able to identify participants who appear lonelier than others by their body language, how they interact with the other participants and also how they appear when dancing. I encourage all, even the reluctant participants, to get up and dance which can take a bit of time. A husband told me about how his wife is much happier now because of coming to the Dance group."

The GL reports many examples, in particular men, who appeared very shy and hesitant in getting up to dance but with time and his persuasion they did. It is to be noted fewer men attended the sessions. One man is a regular attender, due to physical disabilities he is unable to dance and remains seated, however given the social nature of the group he continues to come along and is included in all other aspects of the group as fully as permits. In order to help participants, integrate, the GL sees the following as very important:

- Ensure all participants have a partner during dance activities (dances complying with covid guidelines)
- Change partners often increasing the number of interactions/contacts
- Encourage participants to join the WhatsApp group
- Encourage participants to meet up outside the group
- In addition, give extra time to new members, partner them with chatty, friendly types and generally keep a watchful eye on their progress.

The GL is aware when a participant is doing better, they participate more in the dance activities, they chat and help more with the group tasks. The GL reports he is much more confident in running an activity aimed at people experiencing loneliness and/or isolation and notes that a group cannot be 'cloned', each will be different, growing at its own rate in an authentic and organic manner.

Group Facilitator (GF)

The following points summarises the discussion with GF around signs of loneliness and approaches she used to make participants feel comfortable and happy.

- Some people would say in conversation that they were lonely and didn't like living or being on their own
- Some people appeared to be lonely from their demeanour, body position/language, look down a lot, speak quietly or not speak at all, would sit alone, did not take part in activities
- GF felt that she could identify changes in participants or at least that they were doing better: these include, smiling, taking part, meeting up outside the group, sharing the tasks, helping others, encouraging others and spending time with other participants they did not know before joining the group
- GF reckons the following are important:
 - Be aware and understand that for some first joining the session can be overwhelming
 - Introduce a new participant to a naturally welcoming, talkative empathetic participant/s
 - Be a very alert listener, listen for interests and hobbies, try, and match up/introduce to other participants with similar hobbies/interests
 - Be very sensitive to participants' body language, for example, GF reports
"I could see that a new participant sitting on his own was very interested in a drawing/design activity another person was doing at the activity-table area. He kept looking at the activity but did not move to join. I was very aware that the distance between the new person and the activity-table was a huge distance in his mind, so I offered to bring the activity to him in where he was sitting which he accepted. I was so pleased to see in the next session this man join the activity-table without any further encouragement and he continued to take part in the group activities."
 - GF encourages participants to meet up outside the group sessions. For example, GF noticed two participants spent quite a bit of time playing Pool together, so she suggested why don't they meet up outside of Group-time and play pool or snooker. Subsequently she noticed the two participants arrive together, they reported that one had a car and gave the other participant a lift and in addition they had met up outside the group to play pool and go for a drink.
 - GF also made sure she did not spend too much time with a participant or a small number of participants; she made a point of talking to all participants and continually encouraging integration, development of relationships, conversations and peer to peer helping. The trick was to encourage/support a participant a great deal to begin with and as soon as you see a participant can cope with the group activities on their own, the support is withdrawn or 'weaned-off' gradually in a way that the participant does not feel upset or hurt

– this of course can be a difficult balance and relies on personal judgement and experience.

In summary GF thinks a good facilitator:-

“Is continually scanning the group looking for opportunities to make a positive intervention with the aim of making a participant more comfortable, either physically, socially, or emotionally. So, a person might be sitting on their own, not talking much, not taking part in an activity, not making eye contact, display facial expressions of discomfort or sadness/distress. If I see this, I try to put them at their ease, this should be done in a way that they are not aware of. This of course is a skill that is difficult to teach and relies on treating everybody as an individual and what works for one person might not work for another. A safe environment or relationship should be created to allow the participant to ‘come out of themselves’, where they feel valued, supported and more at ease.”

GF reports now being more confident and knowledgeable in addressing the issue of loneliness/ dealing with people who have experienced loneliness and is able to incorporate these learnings in other groups she is involved.

Group Operation

Summary points from discussions with the group leaders and facilitators on ‘What worked well?’ and ‘What could be improved?’ are as follows:

Table 6: What works well?
Groups were well attended
Groups were well structured, run and managed
Groups were very welcoming and friendly
Participants appeared to enjoy the group activities
Participant return rates were high, i.e., drop off was low
It was clear that participants met/communicated/developed friendships outside of the group session
There were clear aims/goals of helping participants who felt lonely and or isolated
There was a clear emphasis on integrating participants into the group ⁸
Groups created a safe space for all participants to address the effects of loneliness and isolation
Groups were distinct but yet allowed participants to cross-fertilise and attend more than one group.
Some participants created their own events inviting all group participants
Participants decided each week what they wanted to play the following week
Good support from EWA to get the group up and started
Both the GL and PV could see positive changes in the participants over time

⁸ There was a clear emphasis and desire to find the ‘hook’ that would encourage the participant to continue to attend, relax, take part more in activities, lower the barriers and trust both the other participants and the group organisers

Group proved resilient reforming when Covid restrictions reduced
Good level of participant assistance with group tasks
Good use of WhatsApp to increase social connections and interactions
Many examples of participants meeting up for coffee and other social occasions
The group grew organically and authentically, it became more a social group who danced.
Feels the group has a strong 'identity'
Feels the group very much now is run by the participants
Group developed satellite activities e.g., walking group, Belfast Ukulele dance sessions
Key decisions are discussed by the whole group and go to a vote if required

Table 7: What could be improved?
At times one GL felt he has too much to do
At times the GL has had to mediate in differences of opinion between group members
Make the aims of the Group clearer, share responsibility for group roles/tasks earlier – refreshments, attendance, fees, venue setup/take down
Not all participants were on WhatsApp, potential to for some to feel left out
Participants did not help much with group tasks to begin increasing the workload for the GL/DO/PF
The group became too large leading to formation of smaller groups/cliques
Volunteers and Facilitators would benefit from specific training/resource/pointers on how to interact with people who are lonely or isolated
Volunteers and Facilitators would benefit with an overview of PAL aims and objectives, perhaps just a handout or Power Point
Would benefit from more guidance on how to setup and manage the Group

Feedback from GLs and facilitators clearly paints a picture of vibrant, welcoming well-managed groups focussing on sensitively creating activities and opportunities for people experiencing loneliness and/or isolation. Improvements might include:

- Additional training to better understand the needs of people experiencing loneliness and or isolation
- Consideration of limiting group size
- Consider informing participants at an earlier stage the group remit, roles, and responsibilities

The PAL Steering Committee

A focus group consultation with the PAL Steering Committee (SC) demonstrates the members are aware of the purpose and role of the PAL Project in addressing loneliness and or isolation experienced by older people. The SC report the need for additional training on loneliness and how to address the issue and talk about it, they feel this would help them contribute more effectively to their role in the SC.

On initiation of the PAL Project, it was hoped that the SC would be stand alone and, in a position, to take more of a lead on project direction, promotion and process referrals. However, at the early stages, it was apparent the group was not in a position to carry out this role. It is recognised a professional member of staff is required to lead the overall direction and management of the PAL Project with support of a Steering Committee. It is recognised that while many members of the SC were capable of running groups and addressing loneliness, professional expertise is required to manage the system to recruit people who have experienced loneliness, assess their individual needs, and enable their successful joining of groups. For future iterations of the programme expectations on what the PAL Steering Committee could achieve need to be more realistic.

4.3 Other Feedback

As part of ongoing evaluation throughout the project the following letter copied below from one of the participants is felt to be relevant. This participant also participated in *The John Toal Show on Radio Ulster* on 25th May 2019 to talk about the PAL project – click this link to the recording <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07bbtwj>. The Participant also featured in a newspaper article copied below and also wrote with feedback. MB: participant made an error with the charity name mistaking the name for Age Concern.

Case Study: Female, 86 years of age.

The daughter of the Participant contacted Engage with Age as her mother had been experiencing depression following a bout of pneumonia which had made the Participant housebound. The daughter noted that the Participant had lost confidence, had lost interest in activities and meeting people, and the mother's mental health had declined over two years.

The Development Officer spoke to the Participant over the phone. The Participant had had a very active and creative life, had run a Pub with her late husband, was a costume and theatre designer, and had previously been very interested in the arts. The Development Officer then met the Participant in person to discuss their likes and interests.

The way in to encourage the Participant in was a visit to the Strand Cinema in East Belfast to watch a classic film. The venue was acceptable to the Participant as they had visited the cinema many times before in earlier years. The group was modest in size and non-threatening. This first encounter was a very positive experience for the Participant. The Participant then started attending other groups. Her participation in the Creative Writing group was a particular success and encouraged attendance at Tai Chi and the KIT Group (Keeping in Touch Group).

At the KIT Group it was notable that the Participant became an active contributor to the group. The Participant became part of the welcome that other group members experienced, offered other attendees tea and coffee, and was very active in striking up conversations and ensuring that other people were included in social engagement.

The daughter of the Participant has reflected that Participants overall health has significantly increased. The depression has abated, confidence and wellbeing has improved, and the Participant was getting involved in other social activities outside of Engage with Age.

The Participant agreed to participate in media interviews to promote the PAL Project service. The Participant said it was her contribution to letting other people know that there is hope.

In the following pages is a letter written by the Participant and an article published in the Northern Ireland edition of The Daily Mirror.

1

65 Rose Park
Belfast BT5 7RR

In January 2019 I had ^{an} ~~pre~~manic. It was few months before I got rid of the symptoms. The after effect was extreme physical and mental fatigue. Coping with it was very difficult. My daughter Ethna knew I needed help. She phoned "Age Concern" and from there my journey to recover began. Ethna spoke to Martin Fox who organised for me to go to Steward General. I don't drive so Martin arranged for a taxi to call for me. During the next few months I went to the cinema and

2

enjoyed it. Martin asked me would I like to join a writing class. It sounded like something I would enjoy so I went the following Monday morning to The Old Ropent College which I knew well. It was a group of six or seven. The room was the old library so it was a perfect venue. I have been going ever since and my brain has started to function again. There was a relaxed comfortable feeling in the group and all our writings were quite personal and intimate. We had a rule that anything said or written would never

3

go outside the room. There was a mature and positive response to the stories every one wrote. It was informal quite unlike a teacher (tutor) approach. Each person felt responsible to the group. Loyalty and friendship came naturally because of our mutual respect for each other. Our motto could be called concern "age" or maturity being the vital words. This feeling was also felt in the next class I joined. It IT. I really never learnt to use a mobile or tablet. When Martin suggested this class I tried it. The atmosphere in this group is

4

informal. It is one to one tutoring. We sit round in a group and anyone needing help just asks for it. There is a ^{loose} ~~loose~~ fair attitude which suits this informal class. The third class I attend is Tai chi. This is a formally structured class which suits its needs. Steward is the Tai chi master like we have the traditional student teacher role. A well structured disciplined class that suits the purpose. Here as in the other classes concern for the age of the students fitness and ability are taken into

consideration. Every step and action is well within the ability of the class. Timing is of the essence, the tutor proceeds that at a pace that the class can enjoy. I have had ~~artistic~~ arthritis in my knees these classes have helped me greatly. The atmosphere in the group is congenial and Stewart is a master of his art.

All the activity with 'Age Concern has given me a new lease of life, I feel mental and physical alive again, I hope it brings other people who join the same benefits. Kathleen Roddy

Cumulative Evidence from first and second year evaluations

The findings from this evaluation report corresponds with much of the evidence from the Year 1 and Year 2 evaluations as part of Comic Relief reporting. Year 1 and 2 evaluations are copied below for completeness.

Year 1 and 2 - INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS AND EVALUATIONS

Interviews with individuals yielded useful evidence:

“I still have bad days but things have improved as I’m attending groups or socialising. I’ve tried new things such as T’ai Chi that helps my mental health.”

“Attending the group definitely lifts my mood.”

One daughter of a participant, who completed an evaluation, stated: “Mum has Alzheimer’s so remembering names is impossible for her but she knows faces and associates people with emotions so when she sees someone she has connected with she may not know their name but she recognises the good feeling that she has when she sees them, and it’s like this in her group. When I ask her if she has had a good time she can tell you what they chatted about and that it was fun... Mum can feel very isolated in her home and her group is a real lifeline for her...”

A daughter of a different participant said: “My mothers mental and emotional health has transformed in the last year. She is much less depressed and less anxious, less neurotic and significantly less pessimistic. As well as being happier, she visits the doctor much less often. She complains less of her ailments and seems being distracted from being in pain... Thank you for giving us our mum back.”

A sector health worker who makes referrals into the project stated: “ The person centred approach, empathy, and assessment completed to meet the person’s needs are truly making a difference to address social isolation and aloneness, while re/building the person’s confidence and self-esteem. I’m also impressed with the variety of classes and activities provided while utilising community centres etc. within the local community.”

Year 1 - FOCUS GROUP COMMENTS

Groups highlighted the importance of friendliness and also confidentiality. Everyone feels safe and everyone trusts each other.

Sharing experiences and sharing feelings is an important element of the activity. For the focus group participants being heard and acknowledged makes them feel good.

For some groups, like the creative writing group, writing skills and communication skills are improving.

Transport is an ongoing issue. If taxis were not provided there is doubt if some participants would attend the group, and this has issues connected to funding and financial sustainability.

Focus groups highlighted increases in confidence as a result of attending the various types of groups formed through this project.

In terms of feeling safe and comfortable, one focus group proposed: “it takes 2 or 3 weeks before someone feels comfortable. It feels good when someone feels comfortable enough to get involved.”

Recurring comments included references to the group being very friendly and welcoming.

4.4 Interview - Director of EWA

Given that the DO is not available to take part in this evaluative process due to end of contract, the Director of EWA provides a summary overview.

The director is clearly enthusiastic and proud of the progress achieved through the PAL project, it has delivered well on the expected outcomes, and he feels it has made a difference to the quality of lives of people experiencing loneliness who participated in the programme. He notes there are many successes some of which are:

- Creation of over 14 ongoing groups with over 200 people benefitting sustainably.
- Positive engagement in the project from older people experiencing loneliness
- Pitch of activities are at a good, appropriate level
- The relationship between EWA and participants is very authentic and two-way
- It is clear the participants have created friendships and important relationships that did not exist before the project
- The DO had successfully created an open, welcoming, and relaxing atmosphere; in addition, observations of the groups demonstrated a low pressure environment where all were accepted and valued for who they are
- The ‘Welcome Factor’ at all stages and levels of the project was very important
- The ‘Positive Failure’ approach allowed us to try a range of different activities, some worked some didn’t, but we learned from each one.
- The Slipped Disco whilst it was expected to be a referral route into the groups turned into a group activity in its own right. Two Local Authorities are looking to deliver the Slipped Disco using our method and approach.

Welcome Factor

“So, when I dropped in on groups, people welcomed me, teased me, played with me, joked with me, I got cups of tea made, people asked who I was, I came away from groups feeling good about myself and the groups.”

Positive Failure Approach

“You get a group of unconnected people together and then you have to try make something out of it like a group and that is the kind of alchemy the DO had to work upon and sometimes they didn’t work but often it did work. Everyone was ok when group formation did and didn’t work.”

Role of Staff Involved in the Project

The director notes the following in relation to staff and project delivery personnel:

- The DO is a critical role, the job has an extensive remit and is responsible for:
 - promoting the service within the sector,
 - taking referrals,
 - meeting referrals on a one-to-one basis where the aim is to soften the landing between an individual who is lonely and then attending a group,
 - match person to activity, some referrals are very complex (health, past, mental health etc).

The DO is required to be sensitive to barriers and challenges a participant may present, this requires time and a level of persistence. The DO's challenge is to create a group matching the person to an activity, this is by a process 'trial and error'. The DO also needs to manage legal, health and safety and participant disagreements. It is a hugely important role and critical to the success of the project.

- Paid facilitators are there to help 'give a leg up to the groups initially'. Given the number of groups it was not possible for the DO to attend and support every group. The paid facilitators were used to help share the workload and make sure the activity took place. Facilitators utilised on the PAL Project were a good fit given the sensitivity of the work. For further delivery of the PAL project a separate budget for facilities would be recommended.
- Group Leaders are critical in this model, the idea is that we find one or more people willing to take on responsibility for the group and all that entails. We noted that some group leaders were happy to take on some of the responsibilities and others who took on all required to run the group on their own.
- Group leaders are volunteers, this is a key feature as a key issue is sustainability, we are always thinking what happens when the grant finishes. We see that the groups aim is to move forward on voluntary commitment.
- It is difficult to find such leaders, however, we did find a number of high quality group leaders who took on everything, however we did not encourage enough supporting volunteers who could stand in at times when required.

Challenges Experienced

The director notes the following in relation to challenges experienced on the PAL project:

- We experienced more demand than we could deal with – given the size of the project it requires at least 1FT staff plus back-up personnel or additional 0.5 FT staff.
- Making sure that peer health organisations understand what it is you are doing and can make appropriate referrals, for example we had a lot of referrals from people who were not suitable for the project – that is they did not meet the project criteria,

especially in regard to the key criterion that the participant can make their own way to the group venue.

- The use of taxis as incentive to start attendance of the activity sometimes meant participants became reliant on this form of transport.
- It is sometimes difficult to find venues easy enough for people to travel to by bus – transport for participants overall was found to be barrier to attendance.
- There is the ongoing challenge of finding group leaders who can create self-sustaining group – we may be able source leaders via Volunteer Now and similar groups.
- We got very close to a lot of the groups becoming sustainable which included training and capacity building for the group leaders. However, it proved very difficult to deliver formal training on a scheduled basis. So, we found that training was delivered on an informal one-to-one setting, meaning the DO was duplicating time and effort. We had planned one or two collective days which would act as team building but were unable to deliver due to group leader time commitments.

What would you do differently?

- We would definitely do the project again; we feel there is a useable strong transferable model or template which could be rolled out easily again. We are finding particularly after Lockdown there is an increased demand for these types of groups.
- We would encourage formal group structure at an earlier stage – e.g., agree who covers all tasks and roles – we would take a sensitive bespoke approach to this.
- The aim was to create fully functioning groups or unincorporated associations⁹. This did not completely happen as participants did not want to be obligated to form and help run a group. Also, group leaders did not want to take on full responsibility of the group. Their preference is for EWA to retain responsibility for the group. However, we feel EWA developed a degree of sustainability for a lot of the groups, where EWA helped with Health and Safety assessment, code of conducts and safeguarding. We found if we incrementally brought group leaders along the 'operations and procedures pathway' to be more effective than 'giving all at once' as this can be over whelming.
- So, the end point was that the group was more or less independent and self-sufficient but still receive supervisory support from EWA staff. So, the vision is every year we would get a number of groups forming, the DO manages these groups until they can be handed across to other long-term staff of EWA for supervisory support. This is therefore an ongoing process of community development where the links with communities become stronger, it is easier to reach out to people, pass on health promotion materials and initiatives etc.

⁹ Unincorporated association - Two or more persons bound together for one or more common purposes, not being business purposes, by mutual undertakings, each having mutual duties and obligations, in an organisation which has rules which identify in whom control of it and its funds rests and upon what terms and which can be joined or left at will." Wikipedia

- Measure and evaluate better – The Older Peoples Outcome Star was not appropriate for this project; we would find better alternatives to monitor and evaluate at all stages of the project
- We'd like cascade this project across South Belfast and the rest of Belfast as people dealing with loneliness and isolation is an ongoing issue for the whole city.

Value for Money

"The largest cost is staffing cost – if you divide the total investment by number of participants it works out about £300 per participant. This does not account for cost savings to health services. There are so many examples of social prescribing projects that demonstrate large cost savings to health services. All funding for this project is from Comic Relief, all of the savings are total, and we will have reduced the reliance of the participant on support from elsewhere in the sector. We will also have averted the health conditions that are linked to loneliness and isolation and reduced the number of people ending up in GP surgeries for A&E or having to deal with social workers etc. The return on investment we feel has been very strong" *Director of EWA*

5 Discussion and Recommendations

5.1 Were Project Aims Met?

This evaluation clearly indicates that overall, the PAL Project is an effective delivery model that provides people experiencing loneliness and isolation authentic opportunities to develop and maintain social connections and friendships. The PAL project does this by creating welcoming, people-centred, potentially self-sustaining activity groups. These create an environment which facilitates social connections both during and after group sessions. Participants consistently report these social connections and friendships are highly valued and have become embedded in their everyday lives. It is well known that reducing the feeling of loneliness and isolation can lead to improved health outcomes; many participants reported significant positive changes as a result of group attendance. Participants report that group attendance has allowed them to reduce their feelings of loneliness and symptoms of depression and increase their feeling of self-worth and purpose.

It is becoming widely accepted that it is not the number of social interactions one has but rather the quality of these interactions – interviews with participants show the PAL project facilitated, encouraged, and supported an approach that allowed for the experience of fulfilling social occasions and interactions as Participant 9 (F)¹⁰ reports:

“It [the group activity] fills you up for the rest of the week and you can’t wait till you are back the next week ... when you walk in the doors [to the group] you know it is going to give you a lift to the next week”

Research and analysis as part of this service evaluation of the PAL Project validates that it has made real and heartfelt positive differences to the quality of participants' lives. Both the qualitative and quantitative analysis supports that overarching outcomes 1, 2 and 3 are met with outcome 4 in progress, see below for a summary:

Outcome	Status	Evidence
1. Older people who have experienced loneliness and/or isolation develop improved health and wellbeing	Met	Qualitative interviews Quantitative survey result
2. Older people who have experienced loneliness and/ or isolation develop improved social connections	Met	Qualitative interviews Quantitative survey result
3. Older people who have experienced loneliness and/ or isolation exert increased control over their social connections	Met	Qualitative interviews Quantitative survey result
4. There is increased awareness of the impact of loneliness and/ or isolation within the	Ongoing	N/A

¹⁰ Participant 9 (F) is in her sixties, a fulltime carer who due to caring commitments had dropped out of friendship groups and social occasions, she

It is noted that this project successfully embedded key recommendations from EWA HOPE project as Guiding Principles informing how the project is delivered. These Guiding Principles are:

- Deliver a person-centred approach.
- Ensure participants feel “safe” in order to engage, particularly if they have been isolated or felt lonely for some time.
- Invest time in engaging with people who are isolated and/or lonely recognising the challenges involved.
- Facilitate participants to authentically “own” and have responsibility for the group programme

5.2 Observations

What does loneliness feel like?

Though loneliness was rarely discussed at group activities, EWA was impressed in the way individuals articulated their feelings when interviewed. The descriptions of loneliness were varied and always personal, sometimes as a place where the individual is stuck. A recurring theme was the individual needing the right combination of circumstances and feelings to take action to address loneliness. Often individuals didn’t know what to do. Over the course of the two-year period, anecdotally, it appeared that individuals felt more willing to open up and discuss their feelings, though this wasn’t always the case.

The Importance of the Welcome.

EWA consciously planned that all groups had an open and welcoming reaction to new members. The HOPE evaluation highlighted that if the welcome did not work on the first visit then a new referral may not return. Basic courtesies of welcoming, introduction, seating new people with groups of interested people, and offers of tea and coffee were practiced and became part of the culture of the group. Feedback highlights that this initial welcome was often one of the key factors for a successful and long-term engagement.

Allow space for individuals to have ownership

The DO went to great lengths to allow space for participants to make suggestions, take on roles within the group, and to have responsibilities. While offers of opportunities were not always taken up, there was an overwhelming feeling that the participants in the groups felt authentic ownership. Again, this was part of a culture that was established by the DO.

Paying Up/ Paying for Transport

A key observation of the HOPE Programme evaluation was that EWA paying for everything through project funding reduced the ability of individuals to take on responsibility. This also created circumstances which could have led to groups stopping once funding stopped. With some groups individuals paid £1 or £2 per session, and this money contributed to the hire of the room or costs such as tea and coffee. Over a period of months small levels of funds developed which would help subsidise group outings. Paying a small manageable fee per week gave individuals a sense of investment and contribution to groups and helped strengthen groups. Allied to this is the issue of transport. For some individuals, if private taxi transport is not provided then they won't attend the group. The PAL Project continues to address the balance point between making sure a person will attend a group in the first place and not disabling the participant by providing all of the support to attend.

The Kitty-Cat Approach to Addressing Loneliness

There may be numerous reasons why a person who is experiencing loneliness will not engage with a service. These may be private, and sometimes with an individual it can be a feeling rather than anything objective that can be addressed. For the staff member or volunteer Group Leader, encouraging a person who feels this way may feel like trying to beckon a pet cat to enter a room. For the cat, the room may be unfamiliar, they may feel nervous, they may not be familiar with the person beckoning them, there may be other factors that no-one other than the pet cat is aware of. The challenge for the Development Officer or the Group Leader is to create multiple circumstances that offer safe invitations for the individual so that when the time and circumstances are right the individual will feel safe enough to move forward. The invitation has to be open yet understated; continually inviting the individual to activities if they are not yet ready may be counter-productive. It is a sensitive balance to achieve to keep invitations open and allow the individual to make the move themselves. The PAL Project experience has been that success is often linked to consistently making an understated effort and being consistent over a period of time.

5.3 Recommendations

Given the success of the PAL Project it is evident this model has the potential to be continued and further developed in East and South Belfast and in addition be rolled out in other geographic areas of Belfast. As a result of this evaluation process the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1) There is increasing demand for services such as the PAL Project which directly address loneliness, particularly with the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic and increases in isolation of older people. The PAL Project model is evidenced as successful. It is recommended to maintain and expand the PAL Project. There is capacity to extend more thoroughly into South Belfast, and also bring the programme into West and North Belfast where no such programmes operate. Expansion would require additional staffing and resources.
- 2) It is recommended to maintain and further embed the HOPE Evaluation Guiding Principles in all areas of the project. These guiding principles of a person-centred approach, welcoming groups, and authentic ownership of activities and groups is recognised to be critical in the overall success of the project. They ensure all groups and events are person-centred, safe, non-time pressured, inclusive, and sustainable. Expectations on the independence and sustainability of groups should be revised, particularly given negative feedback on the requirements of the NI Charity Commission on groups that formally organise.
- 3) Develop and employ a robust and easy to deliver method for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the activities on older people who have experienced loneliness. The Older Persons Outcome Star assessment tool promoted feelings of suspicion and examination, factors that worked against making participants feel safe and comfortable. A 'safer' and meaningful approach is required.
- 4) Review and refine operational matters including promotional strategies, staffing resources, and capacity building training.

Appendix One: The PAL Project Model

This is the model used to form and maintain groups PAL groups.

Language: keep colloquial, safe, but also clear. Use phrases like “are you not getting out and about as much as you used to?”, “have you been out in a bit?”. Be confident when talking about loneliness and say the “lonely” word, but it is useful not to dwell on it and concentrate more on enjoying activities. Participants want to be able to relax.

People who have experienced loneliness: Try to view from their perspective and also realise that the individual will be the only person who understands how they feel. It is important to make sure the individual feels listened to and heard.

The Kitty Cat approach - for initial encounters with staff meeting referrals and also for new people joining groups. Keep welcomes warm and open but stay understated and make sure the individual makes the move towards the group. Try not to overwhelm.

Setting up groups: Hold meetings with a group of participants to see what their interests are. Sometimes it is necessary to stimulate group formation by organising some activities or excursions but make sure groups know they will ultimately run themselves and take decisions. Find low-cost activities which could be replicated. High cost activities will require long-term funding which won't be sustainable or affordable for individuals. Identify potential groups leaders and a number of people to help support the group. Be mindful to give attention to quite group leaders as well as those that are more dominant. Be aware that a number of attempts may be required before a group coheres. 'Positive failure' is part of the process.

Getting the welcome right: Discuss openly with the group the need to welcome new arrivals. A good welcome will ensure new arrivals return and can make new friends. Make sure group members are briefed to welcome new arrivals, show interest in them, and welcome them into established groups of people.

Authentic Ownership: From the start ensure groups take key decisions, undertake key tasks, cover modest costs such as venue hire and refreshments. The building up of a small kitty can be aimed at for use for group excursions or a Christmas outing.

Long-term engagement: Supporting groups for a sustained period of time will enable the participants to develop a routine and make the group part of their life. It will also allow for periods when participants can't attend due to extended holidays, medical treatment or other reasons. Though, it is important to keep awareness of the longer term sustainability aimed for the group.

Group size: As volunteer run groups, it can be difficult if groups get too large and increase responsibilities on group leaders. Provide guidance and support if groups start to grow

Building capacity: Each group will have differing potential. Support groups to become as independent as they can and provide person specific support on undertaking tasks.

Appendix Two: Log of PAL monthly referrals with detail on promotional campaigns

	Pro refs	Self refs	Door-to-door	Total refs	Promo	Existing HOPE attendees	Additional referrals wanting befriending
Apr-June 18	6	4	12	22	Door-to-door	17	7
July 18	6	4		10			12
Aug 18	6	1		7			2
Sep 18	3	3		6			10
Oct 18	7	3		10			4
Nov 18	6	3		9			13
Dec 18	1	3		4			8
Jan19	5	7		12			15
Feb 19	5	2		7			2
Mar 19	5	12		17	Promo stand		4
April 19	8	2		10			6
May 19	2	6		8	Radio/ newspaper		4
June 19	7	8		15	Radio/newspaper		11
July 19	3	0		3			4
Aug 19	6	4		10			2
Sept 19	6	12		18	Radio/ newspaper		15
Oct 19	6	11		17	Promo stand		14
Nov 19	7	3		10			1
Dec 19	7	8		15			13
Jan 20	5	7		12	Radio/ newspaper		15
Feb 20	4	3		7	Promo stand		4
March 20	4	3		7	Pandemic		3
April 20				15	Pandemic		0
Totals	115	111	12	253		Additional 17	168

Appendix Three: Interview Questions

PAL Project Evaluation

Questions for Individuals that have taken part in PAL Project activities

Questions about addressing loneliness

NB: some of these questions are very personal so please ensure to reassure the interviewee before the interview begins. Feel free to extrapolate on these questions.

Were you aware that these activities were targeted to people who were experiencing loneliness or who were not getting out and about as much as they used to?

BEFORE YOU STARTED ATTENDING THE ACTIVITIES

Had you experienced loneliness?

Had you not been getting out and about as much?

If yes, on a scale of 1 to 10, for which “1” is not lonely at all and “10” is very lonely, how lonely would you have described yourself before you got involved in the activities?

If you hadn’t been getting out and about as much as you were before getting involved in the activities, how often would you have gone out?

How many friends would you say you had before you started attending the activities.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES

How did you make contact with Engage with Age? Did they contact you?

What was it like getting started? How did you start getting involved?

How did you feel that first day you attended the group?

How did the group welcome you?

What is it about the activities that you enjoy attending?

What is a typical activity session like?

What did you like?

What did you like less or what did you think could be improved upon?

Did you notice any changes in yourself as a result of attending the group?

If there were changes, did these affect you after the group when you?

What did we get right? What do we need to do more work on?

AFTER YOU STARTED ATTENDING THE ACTIVITIES

By March 2022

On a scale of 1 to 10, for which "1" is not lonely at all and "10" is very lonely, how lonely would you now describe yourself before you got involved in the activities?

After attending the group were you getting out and about more?

Did you make more friends/ did your circle of friends increase?

Did you start to go out or get involved in more activities outside of the group on your own?

If there are positive changes

Do you think the positive changes you have experienced in addressing loneliness is down to your participation in the PAL project/ activities or it would have happened anyway?

PAL Project Evaluation

Questions for Group Leaders

Questions about how the group operated

Intro question: Tell us how you got involved in the project and started your group?

Was there a division of responsibilities between you as Group Leader and Engage with Age and its staff? How did that work? Was there an appropriate split of responsibilities? Were responsibilities clear? Did the split of responsibilities work?

Did other members of the group/ participants become involved in helping out or taking on responsibilities? Was this a good thing (regardless of the answer)?

How did your group develop over the time of the project? Any milestones?

What elements of running the group do you think worked well?

What elements of running the group didn't work well and could be improved upon?

What were the strengths of the group?

What were the weaknesses of the group?

Was this model of working a good way to address loneliness and isolation?

Questions about addressing loneliness

Were you as group leader aware of the importance of the issue of loneliness?

Of all of the people who attended to the group, what percentage would you describe as being lonely and what percentage would you describe as being not lonely?

For those who attended who you identified as being lonely or isolated, how did they engage with the group to begin with?

Did you adopt any particular approach for ensuring those who were lonely/ isolated felt included in the group/ the activity? Did others get involved in this?

If you did, what worked, and what didn't work?

Could you identify changes/ improvements/ deteriorations in the wellbeing of those you identified as being lonely/ isolated?

What were the signs that someone was doing better or doing worse?

Having run the group, how confident are you in addressing the issue of loneliness/ dealing with people who have experienced loneliness?

PAL Project Evaluation

Questions for Eamon Quinn – Director of Engage with Age

1. What do think are the key successes of the PAL project?
2. Can you tell me about the personnel involved in the delivery of the PAL project? How much does PAL success depend on say the EWA Development Officer, Group Leaders, group facilitators, the service users/participants?
3. Tell me about any challenges you (EWA) encountered in delivering the PAL project? Were these challenges expected and was EWA prepared for them? Were some of these challenges beyond the control of EWA? If yes tell me a bit more why you think this.
4. What are you most proud of in the PAL project, is there a standout person/moment/event or something like that?
5. So, if you were to deliver the PAL project again is there anything you would do differently? If so, tell me a bit more about that.
6. Do you think the project results justify the project inputs – is PAL delivering value for money?

Appendix 4 – Referral Form

Appendix 5 – Sub-Outcomes for the PAL Project

- 1a. Older people report an improvement in their health and well-being
- 1b. Older People report feeling less lonely and/ or less isolated.
- 1c. Older people develop skills and capacity to address feelings of loneliness and/ or isolation.
- 2a. Increased frequency of social engagement.
- 2b. Increased levels of social contact external to the PAL Project.
- 2c. Participants report improvements in the number of friends and acquaintances they have.
- 2d. Increased frequency of social engagement.
- 3a. Individuals participating in the PAL project cite examples of what they have done to improve their own social connections.
- 3b. A percentage of the groups formed through the PAL project will develop sustainability and independence.
- 3c. Engagement of older people on the PAL Project Steering Committee and their role in decision making and influencing.
- 4a. Key stake-holders within the health sector report improved knowledge of the challenges facing lonely and/ or isolated older people.
- 4b. Key stake-holders within the health sector receive increased information/ research produced as part of the PAL Project.