



Finding Their Feet

An evaluation and research paper on Engage with Age's
PAL Project (People Addressing Loneliness).
Abridged report.

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Contents

Page 3: **Introduction**

Page 5: **How an Older Person Becomes involved in The PAL Project**

Page 7: **What We Did**

Page 8: **Activity Groups**

Page 9: **Evaluation Results**

Page 11: **Insights from Participant Interviews**

Page 15: **Case Studies**

Page 17: **New Models of Practice: The PAL Project Group Model**

Page 18: **New Models of Practice: The “Kitty Cat” Approach**

Page 19: **New Models of Practice: The Slipped Disco**

Page 20: **Learnings**

Page 21: **Achievement of PAL Project Objectives**

Page 22: **Key Findings and Recommendations**



Introduction to The PAL Project

The PAL Project is a programme to address the impact of loneliness and/ or isolation on older people. PAL stands for People Addressing Loneliness, because it is a people-lead initiative. Addressing loneliness has been a stated aim of Engage with Age (EWA) since formation in the year 2000. The PAL Project is the latest iteration of Engage with Age's work on loneliness, and is informed by a Queen's University Belfast evaluation "It's The People You Meet" on the previous EWA project, "The HOPE Programme".

The PAL Project's target outcomes:

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. Participants exert increased control over their social connections;
4. 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.

Over the course of two years, extended due to Covid-19, older people were engaged in peer-lead groups, undertaking activities directed by themselves, with the express intention of achieving the above aims.

The key learnings from the Queen's University evaluation "It's The People You Meet" included:

- Investing time and resources into the Development Officer role.
- Investing time in building relationships with participants, taking a person-centred approach.
- Being aware of varying tastes and preferences within groups
- Allowing participants to contribute actively, to have ownership, and avoid dependency.
- A good welcome helps retain participation.
- A good atmosphere and enjoyment are very important.
- Sustainability is a critical issue so that activity continues after the funding ends.

“It’s The People You Meet” directly recommended:

- Continuing relationship-based interventions – invest time on working with individuals.
- Investing time in the initial engagements with older people referred to The PAL Project.
- Work in true partnership so older people have authentic ownership.
- Promote sustainability.

A further recommendation of a dual pathway of support that includes befriending wasn’t possible in the initial PAL Project but has commenced during Covid-19. This research focuses only on the group-based activity.

Research methodology for “Finding Their Feet”:

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 Year One evaluation of the PAL Project and a wide-ranging survey carried out by EWA in March/April 2021 (delayed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic).
- Nine semi-structured telephone interviews with group participants.
- Six semi-structured telephone and Zoom interviews with group leaders and group facilitators.
- Four focus groups with the PAL Steering Group and other groups.
- One semi-structured interview with the director of Engage with Age.
- Case Studies.



How an Older Person Becomes Involved in the PAL project

Referrals

A referral is when an older person gets directed to Engage with Age, or “referred”. A referral can be made by a health professional, family member, or the person themselves. EWA has an active referrals and promotional strategy and referral numbers exceeded target numbers.

Referral form

EWA uses referral forms to capture the key background information that the staff and also group leaders may need to know. Information is given with consent and EWA ensures appropriate use and storage of information. EWA has a criteria for PAL Project engagement, working with older people who do not need additional support/ supervision.

Initial interview

The Development Officer undertakes an initial interview with participants to ascertain interests and likes, ability/ capacity, the intensity of the loneliness and/ or isolation experienced. The PAL Project is explained.

Soft introduction

A soft introduction can be to a one-off activity or invitation to one of the groups. The Group Leader will be aware of appropriate information to ensure a good welcome, which is a characteristic of these groups.

What attending the group is like

Groups differ depending on theme, such as walking groups, T'ai Chi etc. Common features include: consistent ongoing welcome; good accessible location; little or no cost; simple refreshments; participant involvement. Group Leaders receive training from EWA. Groups are mostly small enough to enable good interaction. Long-term engagement develops sustainably improved wellbeing and new social connections.

The mix within a group

Groups need a range of types of people. In any group will be a number of people who have experienced varying levels of loneliness or isolation, with a mix of extraverts, who may be as lonely as anyone else, and quieter group members. A group with fewer than five people is difficult to maintain.

How groups are formed

Older people choose an activity for a group, sometimes with a participant who has experience or knowledge. If there is no obvious choice, a group is stimulated by the Development Officer, such as a simple coffee morning or an excursion group.

Finding leaders

The Development Officer encourages potential Group Leaders - a gentle process of enabling individuals and small groups of people to take on group ownership and organisation. The point at which Group Leaders emerge varies.

Sometimes it doesn't work!

While this methodology has had a high success rate, sometimes it doesn't work for individuals who are referred. This can be due to a range of factors. EWA "keeps the door open" by keeping the individual informed to allow them to come back, and referring onwards to other organisations.

Positive failure with groups

Sometimes attempts to form groups will be unsuccessful. A lot of attempts will be tried to form groups that suit the participants. Not every idea will work and that's okay.

Older People Taking Decisions

The PAL Project benefitted from a PAL Committee of older people who were involved in running activities and leading groups. The Committee directed the project, ensured older people's perspectives informed the approach, and it was actively involved in promoting the programme. The Committee met monthly.





What We Did

The PAL Project had a target of working with 200 people who have experienced loneliness and isolation, working through an estimated 20 new activity groups.

Engage with Age exceeded participant numbers with 253 people engaging over two years.

Table 1: Summary of PAL active referrals for Year 1 and Year 2

Type of referral	Year 1 2018 - 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
Additional referrals wanting befriending	77	91	168
Grand Totals	198	223	421

EWA's Referrals Strategy mixed structured promotion using a network of referral agencies that included: Connected Community Care Hub (BHSCT); GP Surgeries; Local Health Centres; Social Workers; Peer Agencies; Peer Referrals; family and self-referrals. Sector promotion and public promotion took place over structured periods. In addition, EWA undertook recruitment events which included shopping centre promotions, promotion at sector networking events, and promotional events like afternoon teas, Halloween and Christmas parties, and a new event The Slipped Disco.



Activity Groups

Table 2: List of Groups formed during the PAL Project

(NB some participants attended more than one groups)

Group	Established	Size	Status/Notes
Creative Writing Group	Summer 2018	8	Continued through to mid-Pandemic, independent, restarting
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, restarted 2021
Choir	Spring 2019	8	Lasted 2 months
The Tea Party (dementia group)	Summer 2019	8	Lasted 8 months but lacked sustainability
Walking Group	Autumn 2018	6	Ongoing
Book Group	Autumn 2019	8	Ongoing, independent
"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	Ongoing
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 and are ongoing.
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	

There are also other recruitment events such as large scale Afternoon Teas, parties, and dances.

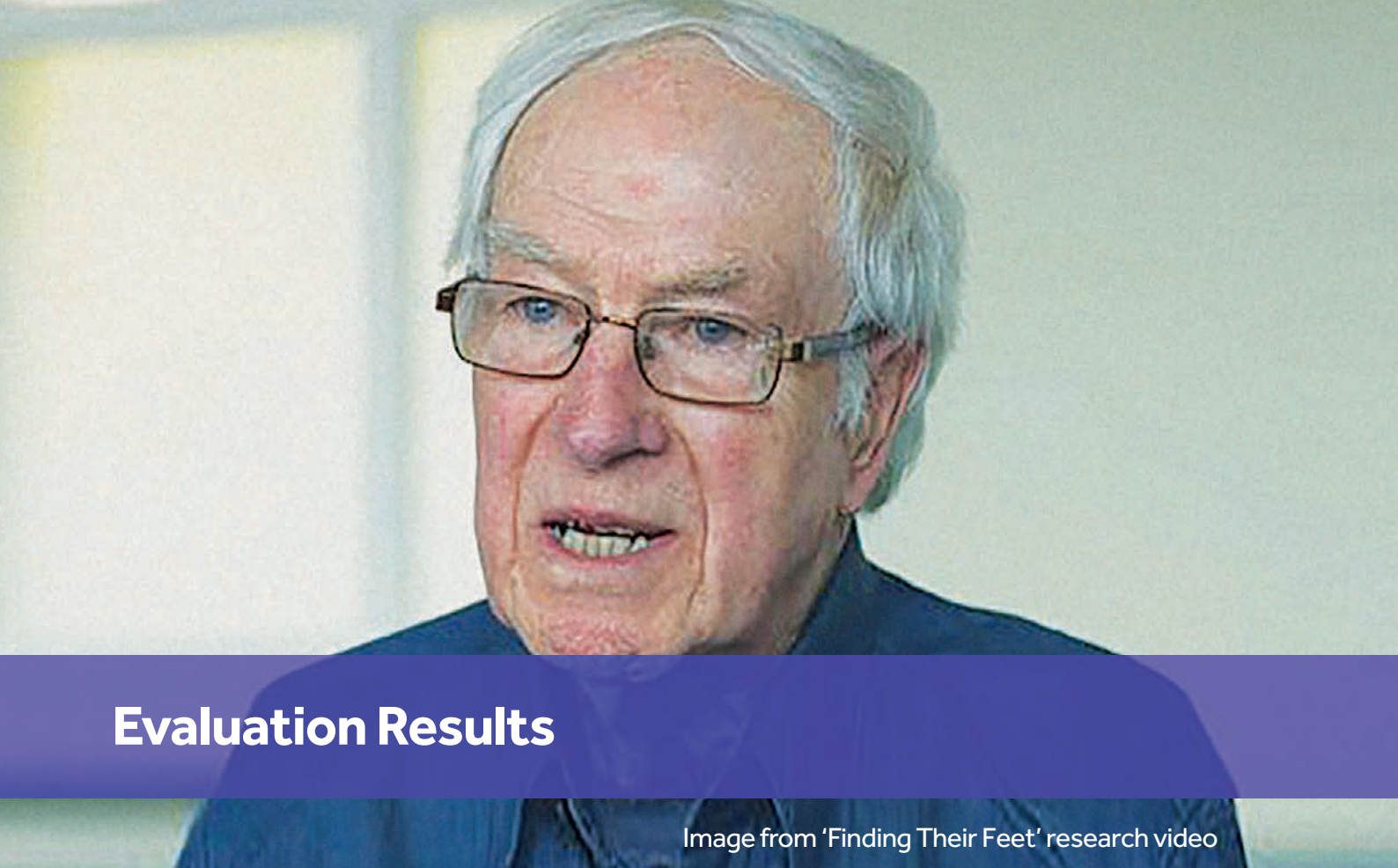


Image from 'Finding Their Feet' research video

Evaluation Results

A range of evaluations took place to ascertain if the PAL Project activities met the project's objectives:

Year One Evaluation Results, May 2019

Mix of surveys, focus groups and one to one interviews.

92 people participated in the evaluation, though not everyone answered every question.

- 48 people reported improvement in wellbeing (target was 33 people)
- 44 people reported feeling less isolated (target was 33 people)
- 53 people reported developing skills and capacity to address their loneliness (target 33 people)

Participants said:

"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."

A daughter of a different participant said: "My mother's 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."

- 64 people reported increased frequency of social engagement (target 33 people).
- 54 people reported increased social engagement outside of the PAL Project (target 33 people)
- 46 people reported increases in number of friends and acquaintances (target 33 people)
- 37 people cited examples of what they have done to increase their social connections (target 33)







Participants said:

"The involvement in the PAL Project has been very significant as I had no friends in Belfast East where I live. The impact is I now have good friends."

"One daughter of a participant stated: "Yes, my mother has definitely made friends through Engage with Age. This has been so important as she has lost lots of her peers, both family and friends. She really loves meeting a wider section of the community, something that she never really had an opportunity to do before. This is so important in a divided community like Northern Ireland."

"Yes I've made new friendships and met people outside of the project and activities. Before attending the PAL Project I cared for my wife and had no social networks."

EwA Survey, March/April 2021

Table 3: Participant Survey Summary		
Question	Result summary	Outcome indicator
1. How useful do you find Engage with Age PAL Project activities? (n=103)	76 % found PAL activities 'Very Useful' or 'Extremely useful'	 NA
2. Does taking part in Engage with Age PAL Project activities make a difference to your life, such as exercising more, meeting more people, or feeling better? (n=99)	76 % found PAL activities 'Very Useful' or 'Extremely useful'	 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 Project 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

Evaluation of The Slipped Disco, January 2020

75 respondents in total, though not all answered every question.

85% of respondents had met new people through the event

62% had made new friends through the event

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.



Insights from Participant Interviews

Image from 'Finding Their Feet' research video

Engage with Age undertook nine semi-structured interviews with participants.

Table 4: 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)	<p>"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> <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)	"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."
Participant 4 (F)	"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."
Participant 5 (F)	"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."
Participant 6 (F)	"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"

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."</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)	<p>"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 Development Officer and it was like the Development Officer 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."</p>

Table 5: Group Ethos - Feel Welcomed? (Guiding Principles 1, 2, and 3)

Participant 1 (M)	<p>"Ah absolutely yes, loved it, I walked in there started talking to a lot of people, you know it filled in the day."</p> <p>"I found everyone willing to talk, but then I'm a talker anyway!"</p>
Participant 2 (F)	<p>"They were very easy [to join] because the counsellor accompanied me to EWA office, and I met the Development Officer and that made going to the groups easy."</p>
Participant 3 (F)	<p>"Oh yes there was always somebody there to speak to you, take the lead and to have a one-to-one."</p>
Participant 4 (F)	<p>"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 and I was feeling a little bit unease 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."</p>
Participant 5 (F)	<p>"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."</p>
Participant 6 (F)	<p>"I would talk to anyone; I am a very sociable person ... I just get straight in there and muck in"</p> <p>"I was just so glad to get out again, get involved in stuff, do stuff and meet people"</p>

Participant 7 (M)	<p>"I didn't find it hard to get involved with it. I just automatically went along."</p> <p>"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."</p>
Participant 8 (M)	<p>"It was brilliant, everybody was very friendly. My social worker brought me over and I got talking to the Development Officer 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."</p>
Participant 9 (F)	<p>"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..."</p>

Interviewees/Participants describe the changes they experienced:

Participant Comment	Change Experienced
"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."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less lonely • More friends
"I found the groups were the only way to stop my really bad depression."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced symptoms of depression
"It [the groups] help a lot with my depression and everything."	<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 miss work."</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 • Control over circumstances
"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."	<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 • Control over circumstances

<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> <p>“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.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives a mood lift which sustains through the week till the next session
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Analysis of achievement of outcomes:

Participant	Changes Experienced
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’
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
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.
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
Participant 5 (F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoys group activities • Developed strong friendship with one other participant
Participant 6 (F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet people of her own age • Meet more often develop friendships
Participant 7 (F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found group activity intellectually stimulating • Less lonely whilst attending groups
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
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



Case Studies

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. 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 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 Participant attended a visit to the Strand Cinema in East Belfast to watch a classic film. The venue was a safe location for the Participant as she 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 T'ai Chi and the KIT Group (Keeping in Touch Group). At the KIT Group it was notable that the Participant became an active contributor. The Participant became part of the welcome that other group members experienced and was very active in striking up conversations with new people.

The daughter of the Participant has reflected that Participant's 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.

Male, early 60s

This Participant has a history of mental health problems requiring hospital treatment on a number of occasions and is currently not working. Whilst in hospital the Participant was assigned a social worker who sign-posted to EWA who were able to encourage him to attend the KIT group. The Participant

had an interest in mobile phones, iPads, laptops, and desktop computers. On joining the group the Participant became quickly known as the 'go to guy' for anything to do with phone/mobile devices.

He joined the T'ai Chi group reporting a continued increase in confidence and self-esteem feeling he can take part in group discussions. The Participant reported *"In the past I haven't been able to do that [chat with new people], I'd just stuck to myself, whereas now I can go in and chat to people because they're so welcoming."*

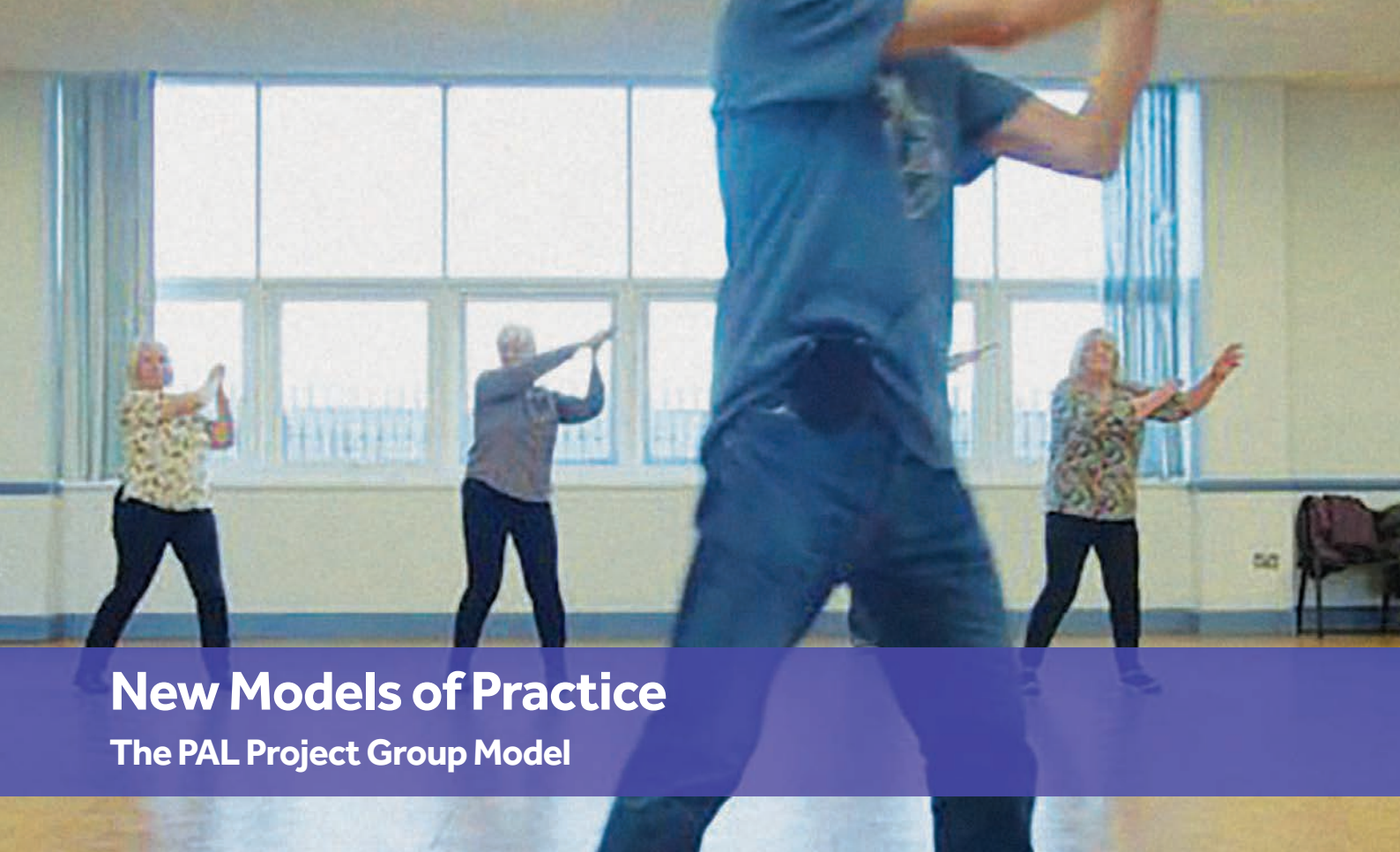
Given how the Participant has changed as a result of the group activities, EWA has encouraged and supported the Participant to join the PAL Steering Committee, allowing him to develop further social interconnectedness, skills and experiences that can potentially allow a return to the workplace or other volunteering roles. The Participant has now taken on a role running some of the groups.

Female, early 70s

This participant has been a carer for her daughter for most of her life and has been isolated due to this for most of her adult life. She has lost connections with friends, and states she had lost social skills and was having difficulties with her mental health. She lives in supported housing. She found out about The PAL Project by spotting a leaflet in a local community centre. She self-referred herself, was interviewed by the Development Officer, and accepted an invitation to attend a group. She reflects that attending the group the first time was daunting but received a welcome from another participant that made her feel comfortable. Soon the participant started attending other groups. The participant states that The PAL Project has opened up a new world of friendships, "better than any drug". The participant has developed in confidence and improved wellbeing, and is now a volunteer with EWA's Telephone Befriending service. She has volunteered for this as she feels she wants to help someone else the way she was helped by attending The PAL Project.

Male, early 80s – The Slipped Disco

The individual's partner had long-term declining health and the partner 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. The earlier failure to connect with this individual was due to him not being 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.



New Models of Practice

The PAL Project Group Model

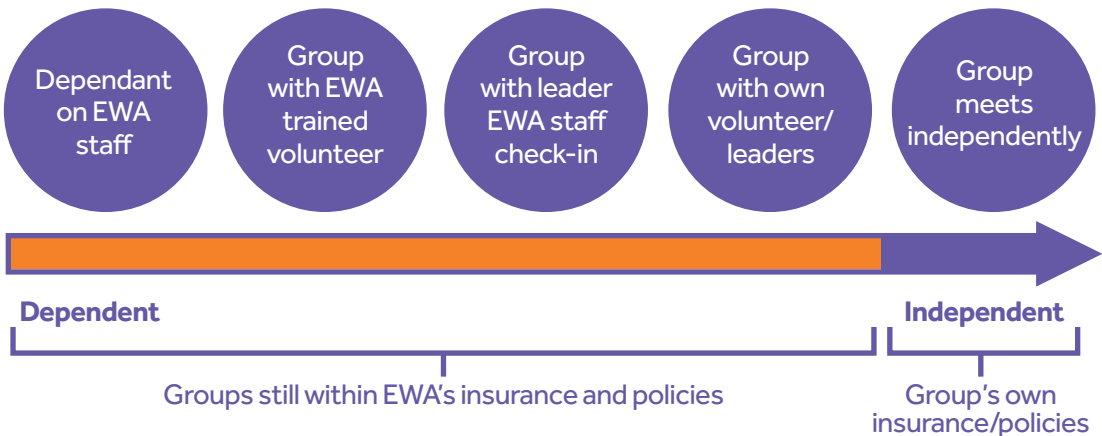
A particular type of participant-lead activity group has emerged and is successful in addressing loneliness long-term, and welcoming the engagement and ownership of older people. The activities of The PAL Project groups are determined by participants. Either an existing older person has an interest or an expertise which forms the basis of the activity, or the Development Officer stimulates a group to form and enables opportunities for the participants to decide what activities to undertake.

The key features of the group are:

- An easily accessed location/ venue, good public transport links.
- Low or no-cost activities.
- Phone calls/ texts/ emails reminding people to attend.
- A culture of welcoming new people and being open.
- A number of key group leaders and volunteers.
- Collective decision making about activities or excursions.
- Opportunities to check-in with members.
- Tea and snacks – chances to interact.
- Groups with 10-15 members, though some groups exceed this number.
- Sustainability and independence/ potential for sustainability and independence. Sustainability and independence is built in from the start.

With the PAL Project there were over 25 groups started and a significant number are continuing to operate to varying degrees of independence.

Varying degrees of independence - every group is different.





New Models of Practice

The “Kitty Cat” Approach

Making services available to people who have experienced loneliness can be difficult. Sometimes the service provider may not be aware of the causes of reluctance to participate. This scenario was compared in interviews to that of trying to coax a reluctant pet cat into a room when it is unsure about entering. From the participant, or cat’s, perspective, there may be something about the activity or how they feel that provides a barrier to getting involved. These may be factors the service provider can improve, or personal factors that only the participant knows about and which the service provider can do nothing to change.

The key features of the “Kitty Cat Approach” are to ensure the participant feels as safe as possible, to make an invitation to participate that does not overwhelm, and to leave space for the participant to move forward themselves at their own pace. There is a lot of person-centred, one to one empathy in setting this up but it is important to find the right balance and not overwhelm the new person.

In the invitation, the participant needs to know the activity is “safe”. This means a location and venue that isn’t daunting, an activity they can relate to, understand easily and enjoy, with other participants who are friendly and warm, and an overall atmosphere that is comfortable. The Group Leader needs to know to expect the new person, and have some appropriate background information so that the person is welcomed. There may be other factors that can be employed. Key among the approach is not to overwhelm the participant and allow the participant to move forward themselves or not. If the participant doesn’t get involved that’s okay; perhaps they may get involved at another time. It might be that the timing was not right, the participant didn’t feel good on that particular day, have a good nights sleep, or that the service provider is not the right group to provide support. In this instance the service provider maintains contact at a “light touch” level.

It is important for the participant to move forward and take part themselves. This is part of a relationship in which the participant is an equal partner and in which they have ownership over their own engagement. Once engagement has started the service provider and participant can work to build on the relationship for further authentic engagement.

Soft Landing events

Turning up to a specific group for the first time can be daunting. EWA has employed a number of types of “soft entry” events, including Coffee Mornings (everyone knows what a coffee morning is), Afternoon Tea events, and excursions. EWA has also developed “The Slipped Disco™”. At these events, not everyone will be isolated and lonely, but there needs to be a good mix of types people at any event to ensure the activity goes well. There is always preparation for new arrivals. Post event, new arrivals are followed up and encouraged to attend other activities.



The Slipped Disco™

New Models of Practice

The Slipped Disco

How it Works - *It's not just a disco but... it is also just a disco!*

For many of the people who attend The Slipped Disco it is just a good night out. For others, it may be one of the few opportunities they get to go out and enjoy themselves and meet other people. In this way, The Slipped Disco fits well in our schedule of work for The PAL Project, which addresses loneliness experienced by older people. It is one of EWA's "soft entry" events, which provide a safe way of getting involved without feeling exposed. People who have experienced loneliness can attend without too much pressure on them. There are certain elements that make it easy for someone to attend without them necessarily knowing so.

- Older people are the front face of The Slipped Disco - other older people react well when they see people similar to themselves.
- At the entrance door there are "Secret Greeters" who are there to welcome anyone who's coming along for the first time. A Secret Greeter welcomes the new person and gets them seated with other friendly people.
- Other attendees are prepared to welcome new people, ask them who they are, talk to them, ask them up to dance etc. Engage with Age has research stating a new person will come back if they receive a good welcome.
- There are people primed to get others on the floor and dance, like cheer leaders, to make sure the evening goes well and is fun.
- At some point the Secret Greeters will go back to the new people and ask if they want to get involved in other EWA activities and fill in a Sign Up Form.
- If it's yes, the Secret Greeter passes this info on to the PAL Project Officer, who then calls the new person within a day or so and gets them involved.

One previous attender who was a new person at the Slipped Disco said:

"My problem is not making many friends over the years... 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... 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. I put my handbag under the chair and I went up to the dance floor on my own, you know you could have done it and got away with it, and then other people were bringing you in to dance with them and I actually said do you mind if I dance with you and they all said no no come on ahead, so that was me away."



Learnings

The words of the older people interviewed have provided EWA with very valuable learning about loneliness, how to help, welcoming new people, and running groups. Below are “hyperlinks” to videos produced as part of The PAL Project to help inform peer organisations and colleagues as they also work towards alleviating the impact of loneliness.

Video 1: What is loneliness like?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UdWxcdsPLc>

Male: “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 who I could communicate with...”

Video 2: How to help

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTxvLY710tw>

Female: “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.”

Video 3: Getting the welcome right

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6W7iSgVgLI>

Male: “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.”

Video 4: Running Groups

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxo2aL0fL9A>

Female: “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 miss work.”



Achievement of PAL Project Objectives

There were four key objectives during the period of the PAL Project.

It is clear from the evidence above that the first three objectives were achieved:

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. Participants exert increased control over their social connections;

The fourth objective was:

4. 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.

EWA worked to improve awareness of the impact of loneliness through a range of forums, but EWA observes that a number of new initiatives concerning loneliness emerged during this period as well. EWA in affect was a contributor to a wider movement which saw the development of Belfast City Council's City-Wide Group on Loneliness, the All Party Group on Loneliness at the Northern Ireland Assembly, the introduction of the Campaign to End Loneliness in Northern Ireland, and the adoption of addressing the impact of loneliness as a priority within the Belfast Trust, Public Health Agency, Belfast City Council's Age Friendly Plan, and the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership. EWA can't claim responsibility for these initiatives but is a regular contributor to all of these campaigns.

There is a more detailed analysis of the performance of groups, observations from Group Leaders, and a consideration of the role of the Steering PAL Committee in the long-form report of "Finding Their Feet", available from the Engage with Age website on <https://engagewithage.org.uk/media/publications/>



Key Findings and Recommendations

Findings

Loneliness is personal – it varies from person to person, which is why a flexible person-centred approach such as the “Kitty Cat” approach is useful.

The importance of the welcome – our previous research told us that the first meeting between a group and a new person is crucial – “every contact counts”. There may not be a second opportunity to say hello, so a good welcome is important, and it is important the welcome continues as part of any group’s culture.

Allow space for ownership – groups appear to function better when there is authentic ownership by the participants. This means setting up the activities, having responsibility for sessions, and taking decisions.

Paying for transport is a difficult issue – up to now, EWA has subsidised transport for a small number of people with no transport/ can’t use public transport to attend. It is important to manage this so that dependency is not created, rather than encouraging independence.

Guide the growth of groups – one of the Development Officer’s key tasks is to guide and support groups as they operate. This means checking in to see how group dynamics are working, encouraging developing group rules, supporting leaders.

Reasonable expectations for group development – the extent to which groups can become independent varies. This requires judgement on the part of the Development Officer. It is worth cautioning on over-reliance on “super volunteers” to ensure groups are more sustainable with a good spread of responsibility.



Key Findings and Recommendations

Recommendations

1. Expand the programme. There is clear increase in demand for services to address loneliness and isolation. The PAL Project should be developed within East and South Belfast and also expanded into other areas including West and North Belfast.
2. Maintain and further embed the recommendations of the HOPE Programme research "It's The People You Meet". Ensure a person-centred approach, authentic ownership of groups, sessions that feel "safe", non-time pressured, and inclusive.
3. Develop a robust evaluation framework to better track the impact of the programme on the wellbeing of older people.
4. Review and refine operational matters including promotion, staffing, resources, and capacity building training.



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