



Key facts

CounsellingCare: Café Chat project

Isle of Skye

£14,612

of People's Health Trust funding through Health lottery Scotland

Main activities

Regular social groups and craft activities

Key outcomes

- Improved social links and ties
- Increased partnership working between local projects
- Individual and collective action

People's Health Trust: Active Communities case study CounsellingCare: Café Chat project

People's Health Trust believes in a world without health inequalities. The Trust funds small and local projects in neighbourhoods that are most affected by health inequalities with funding generated through The Health Lottery. Active Communities is one of its funding programmes and grants aim to support people to create or shape local projects that will help their community or neighbourhood to become even better, and require local people to design and run these projects. Typically lasting up to two years, the grants are between £5,000 and £50,000 for each project, or £40,000 since 2019. The programme's main intended outcomes are:

- **Collective control:** Ideas designed and led by local people. Regular participation of local participants, who are empowered to lead and take ownership of the project design, delivery and development.
- **Social links and ties:** Stronger connections between people. Decreased social isolation and loneliness, and improved connection, friendships and collective support networks among participants.

Drawing on interviews with projects leads, volunteers and the participants across two visits in spring and summer 2019, the case study explains how individuals have come together to shape and lead the [Café Chat](#) project. It also shares what they have learnt and achieved as part of the 2018-19 Active Communities evaluation.

About the project

The Isle of Skye is a rural island off the west coast of mainland Scotland. The population spreads across the island and many people live considerable distances away from the main village and town centres. Statistically, Skye does not experience particularly high levels of disadvantage. However, there are pockets where people are living on low income.

Café Chat is a two year project running from late December 2018 – early January 2021. The project aimed to improve and expand on existing services for adults with mental health needs to offer practical, social and emotional support in an informal group setting. The provision of mental health services on the island was limited, as was access to those services due to geographical distance. Café Chat provided a weekly meetup in Broadford on Skye, engaging local people looking for peer support and friendship. Once a month the project ran group activity sessions in various other locations on the island, such as basket weaving, collage making and yoga.

Between five and 12 people attend the groups each week, which are run by a consistent project team of two. Café Chat purposefully works with smaller groups to ensure that those affected by poor mental health feel able to engage and contribute.

“We want to make our community a better place to be, but we also want to create a group where people feel comfortable to come, particularly for those who might not otherwise come.”

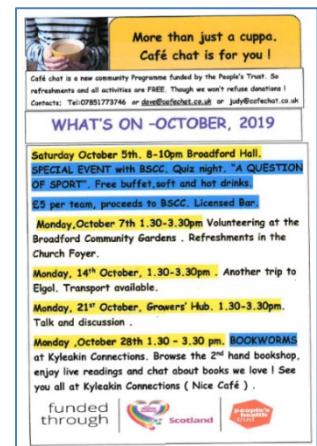
(Project Lead)

How did local people shape and lead the project?

The Café Chat project staff emphasised the value of participants’ ideas during an initial launch event for the project. They encouraged participants to co-create a collage about the positive and negative aspects of living on the Isle of Skye, and asked for ideas for project activities that could help address the challenging aspects of living on the island. The ideas were hung on a physical ‘ideas tree’.

At the time of the first case study visit, a steering group made up of volunteer participants led the day-to-day delivery and management of the project. The steering group included regular attendees, many of whom had been involved in shaping the project since its inception. They met together with the project lead and staff on a regular basis to discuss the planned and ongoing project activities and any changes or improvements to be made to these. Participants also contributed ideas informally, by chatting with the project lead and staff during or after project activities.

At the second case study visit, levels of engagement with the steering group had reduced. Project staff reported that they were struggling to find participants who were willing to take on responsibility for aspects of project delivery. This was attributed in part to lower attendance rates over the summer, when residents of the Island spend more time outside and working in the tourism industry. At that time, project staff continued to be committed to addressing participants’ needs by keeping their ideas at the heart of the project, and tried to maintain interest through outreach advertisements.



What has the project achieved?

Improved social links and ties

The geography of the island means that people live in very remote areas and particularly those who live alone and/or are affected by mental health problems can experience social isolation.

“I think I went two or three years with only the electricity man going into my house... It is very easy to get cut off [from social contact].” (Participant)

The interviews found that the activities provided participants with opportunities to meet new people and **develop social connections**. Participants reported the development of friendships that also extended beyond project activities. Café Chat became something that people had in common, so they could talk about it outside of the group when they bumped into each other in the neighbourhood. This demonstrates how the social ties developed within a group setting can transcend a project and contribute to increased connectedness in the local community.

“If you’re going to groups like this, you have more in common. I think I know my neighbour a lot better now.” (Participant)

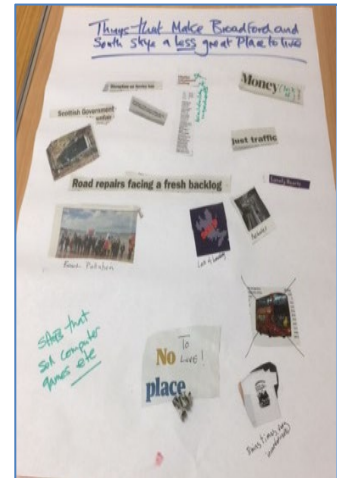
Importantly, the project brought people from different backgrounds together and provided a space for them to have **improved dialogue** with people they otherwise would not have met. Participants described an **increased tolerance** of each other and of different beliefs also resulting from the inclusive nature of the group. Participants felt able to express, share and discuss their opinions on topics they found interesting during project activities. This tolerant environment encouraged participants to feel confident in expressing their ideas without fear of being judged or criticised.

“People have given talks, for example, on how they see the world... and shared very different views...the nice thing is you don’t feel excluded from that. Anybody is listened to. If they want to talk about something, they can.” (Participant)

The research visits found that the activities helped to create an inclusive environment where participants felt comfortable to speak openly. In one example, a participant explained how she attended the Café Chat activities with her elderly mother who was suffering from dementia:

“It’s all very inclusive and very warm, so it’s lovely. That’s why I bring mum, she has got to know people and they’ve got to know her, they understand what’s going on. That’s reassuring to me because anyone who comes and talks to mum and understands is good for mum and good for me.” (Participant)

This participant highlighted how these social connections provided **a support system** for her in her role as a full-time carer for her mother, showing the contribution the project has made to the development of support networks. She felt other people in the group were understanding of her mother’s condition which meant that the group sessions provided social interaction and stimulus for her mother, and gave her a break from her own caring role.



“People are learning more about each other, in a sense creating a more inclusive community. If people have very different belief systems, that they are listened to and respected.”

(Participant)

Partnership working

A key strength of the Café Chat project was its integration with relevant local services through partnership approach to **developing relationships** with local people and services. The idea for Café Chat was essentially born out of local partnership discussion. The project lead's involvement in the mental health forum on Skye led to the initial idea around providing additional community support within the **local context**.

At the time of the first visit, Café Chat already had several delivery partners with specialisms such as specific crafts or yoga. To try to ensure that the **needs of local people were being met**, the project lead and staff ensured that these partners were locally based, often getting recommendations from participants who had attended their classes before. In addition, using local partnerships further supports the local community and its local economy by providing visibility and potential demand for local business or services. This demonstrated an increased connection to **neighbourhood services**.

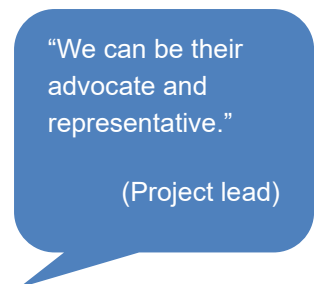
Several local organisations had related but different delivery aims. They attempted to build relationships with some of these organisations so that they could improve the continuity of their parallel offers, and provide **mutual support** and **more seamless delivery for local people**. This was particularly important in a small, isolated local economy where there could be a sense of competition between local organisations on the Island, in terms of funding and reaching participants.

Between the first and second visits, project staff had met with local NHS and mental health teams with the intention of encouraging referrals to the group from health services.

"We are getting invited to their [NHS] meetings now, I was at one this morning, which we wouldn't have a year ago. So we can voice to those sorts of things because we hear what the experiences are, that people tell us about, and then we can feed that back to relevant groups and the NHS. We can be their advocate and representative." (Project lead)

Frustrations were reported here. Project staff noted that NHS services seemed overstretched and so staff did not always have time to familiarise themselves with the existence of local community groups. They identified a wider need for more joined-up services to support the whole community, perhaps with a central referral point for social prescribing services to direct people towards available and appropriate activities on the island. At the time of the second visit, Café Chat activities were still operating independently from statutory services, but the project team continued to look for opportunities to collaborate. These efforts to create and maintain productive partnerships demonstrate how the Café Chat project has attempted to work, as part of a **wider system** of informal and formal organisations in the local area.

"It takes so long for it to come to the forefront of people's minds. In a way they shouldn't have to remember all the projects that are going on around here, there should be a central referral point." (Project staff)



Individual and collective action and control

Alongside improved social links and ties, participants to some extent **felt empowered** to take the lead with project design. There were usually at least two volunteer participants present at every activity and some participants were happy to step up and take on extra responsibilities as needed. However, the project staff identified a distinction between participants who wanted to be more involved in decision-making, and those who wished to attend activities without further involvement.

“There are some ‘activists’, ‘drivers’ who are likely to be members of other organisations and driving those forward as well.” (Project staff)

Those who were keen to lead the activities were likely to be more familiar with co-production or consultation environments. It was therefore important that there were a range of ways for people to contribute, to respond to these varying levels of experience.

“I ended up feeling embarrassed because I kept coming up with criticisms. Things that I thought were difficult. I thought “oh no, I should have kept my mouth shut”, but in fact it was appreciated, then later I was asked onto the steering group. I thought it's something I can contribute to.” (Volunteer participant)

This shows how positive responses from the project staff and other participants had made individuals feel **valued** and encouraged to take control by increasing their contribution to decision-making. Relatedly, participants demonstrated increased **confidence** in social situations.

Another volunteer participant had the idea of starting a book club as part of the Café Chat project, because they thought it might be attractive to more and different types of local people. The idea was developed within the steering group and began running as an activity. However, at the time of the second visit the project staff reported that finding sufficient volunteer capacity to help run the book club was an ongoing challenge that affected the sustainability of this and other activities.

Participants perceived **collective control** to be a significant element of the project as it allowed them flexibility with and ownership of the activities. One participant said that a more structured project might have felt imposing and less appealing.

Longer-term outcomes

Participants noticed that the dynamics of the group had **evolved over time**. Improved social links led to other positive outcomes including **increased confidence** and team working skills.

“It is much more chatty than it was. I think people's confidence is growing, and they are definitely working together more, and much better.” (Participant)

In addition, other aspects of the project are likely to bring positive influence to the **wider system** of informal and formal organisations in the area, over time. For example, the ongoing efforts to generate improved partnership working with statutory services, and also to raise awareness with statutory services of the need for a single point of information on available local community activities or island services.

“I thought ‘Oh no, I should have kept my mouth shut’, but in fact it was appreciated. Then later, I was asked onto the steering group.”

(Volunteer)



“I like to see the expression on their face when we have helped them to meet something that they have wanted to do. It could be to help wash up, something as small as that.”

(Project lead)

What has worked well?

- **Local knowledge informs the project delivery.** A strength of the project is that it is delivered by local people, for local people. Project staff and volunteer participants are all local people and they found it important that they were familiar with the area so that they have an awareness of life on the island.
- **The project activities are tailored to the target group.** The project staff always planned to maintain a smaller group size so that those affected by mental health and associated challenges might feel more comfortable attending. This has been significant for some of the participants, e.g. those who are sensitive to social or structured situations. This highlights how the project is successfully reaching and adapting the project model for the target group.

“I think people's confidence is growing, and they are definitely working together more, and much better.”

(Participant)

What are the lessons?

- **Geographical distances can be a barrier to participation.** The project was deliberately hosted at multiple venues in order to overcome this barrier and improve accessibility. However, the project lead noted that moving between venues could also present difficulties with attracting regular participants. Consequently the weekly social group was held in the same venue so that people knew where it would be.
- **There was a lack of diversity amongst participants in project activities.** The typical demographic of participants was generally older females. The project staff were aware of the limited diversity of the group and attempted to improve their outreach. For example, the staff are considered a partnership with a nearby ‘Men in Sheds’ community project, and are also planned a ‘Question of Sport’ event in a local youth centre in the hope of attracting a greater number of younger males. Another barrier was that the activities usually take place during the day and so those in full-time employment were less likely to be able to attend.



The future

The project did not have a concrete plan for exactly how project activities would continue once the funding period had ended. At the four-month visit this challenge was beginning to be considered, and at the second visit (eight months into a yearlong funding timescale) some efforts to establish sustainability were being made.

The project lead and staff are keen for the project activities to continue beyond the funding, and tried to think of creative ways to sustain the project. It was recognised that funding can be difficult to secure given that overall levels of disadvantage are low on the Isle of Skye, however there may be possibilities for small grants in the future.

Although the project experienced decreased engagement of volunteers over the summer months, project leads felt that there remained the potential for participants to take on increasing responsibility for facilitating the project and its activities in order to sustain the positive outcomes achieved by the project while funded.

“I think I went two or three years with only the electricity man going into my house. It is very easy to get cut off.”

(Participant)

The Trust extended Café Chat's funding for a further year in January 2020.