



## People's Health Trust: Active Communities Case Study

### Rainbow Sunshine Company: Moving On

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. The programme's main intended outcomes are:

- **collective Control:** Ideas designed and led by local people. Regular participation of residents, 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 a case study visit and interviews with participant volunteers in July 2019, the case study explains how people came together to shape and lead the [Moving On](#) project. It also shares what they have learnt and achieved as part of the 2018-19 Active Communities evaluation.

#### Rainbow Sunshine Company

Bedworth, Warwickshire

**£20,550**

of People's Health Trust funding through Health Lottery West Midlands

#### Main activities

Music; Dance; Drama; Activity sessions

#### Key outcomes

- Improved social links and ties
- Individual and collective action and control
- Improved individual wellbeing
- Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets

## About the project

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The Rainbow Sunshine Company (RSC) is an independent, volunteer-run charity in Bedworth, Warwickshire. The Moving On project consisted of weekly creative workshop sessions every Thursday morning for individuals with learning or physical disabilities, incorporating music, dance and drama-based activities. The group then performed several shows for local audiences. Participants came from the local areas of Bedworth and Nuneaton and represented a wide range of ages, from young adults to people in their seventies.

Weekly sessions aimed to give participants a space to make friends, reduce isolation and enjoy the opportunity to perform and learn new skills. Performances gave group members the opportunity to express themselves, display their talents and break down barriers and misconceptions about people with disabilities.

## How did local people shape and lead the project?

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The RSC has been operating for over 20 years, providing music, dance and drama activity sessions for local people with disabilities in the Bedworth and Nuneaton areas. The Moving On project funding enabled productions and facilitated outings and this extended the variety of activities offered to participants. The project also delivered an annual fun day for participants, inviting the local community as well as others in the area with disabilities.

The project itself was organised and run entirely by local volunteers giving their time to plan and run the sessions. These volunteers used the ideas and interests of participants to create workshops and shows that allowed people to express themselves and demonstrate their talents in a safe and encouraging space. Those attending the sessions had specific learning or physical disabilities: this meant the ways in which participants shaped and moulded the project to build a sense of ownership was left very flexible, varying in order to ensure that participation was accessible and everybody could express their own views on what they wanted to do, supported by the volunteers.

“The participants can take on roles where they can, even if it is just putting things out for the session. Bigger responsibilities are given for helping make props and decide what they want to do for performances ... we don't tell them what they want to do, we just help to facilitate the wishes of those that attend.” (Local volunteer)

In addition to this flexible facilitation of inputs, participants had the opportunity to shape and lead the project through taking on responsibilities, such as setting out the room or coordinating refreshments, and making decisions. Volunteers expressed a clear preference for the leadership of participants in making creative decisions and saw their role as to support individual participants to decide on the role they wanted to play, and to then help them do this.

“We always ask those that come what they want to do at shows – it is very much their show and we just help to make it happen. We have to help direct things and support everybody in what they are doing, but it is their creation from a creative perspective.” (Local volunteer)

“Everybody has their own individual needs. We get to know everybody, so that we can meet their needs and provide them with a space to be creative and do what they want,”

(Local volunteer)



“We all get involved in designing the activities and making props. We have groups of volunteers that will take responsibility for costumes and props, but we all respond to what [the participants] want.”

(Project lead)

## What has the project achieved?

The Moving On project was simple in its model of delivery, but far reaching in its range of outcomes and achievements. In addition to keeping participants active and entertained, the project helped people to improve their social links and ties, make friends, find and develop new confidence, knowledge and skills, and have the opportunity to have responsibility for and to take ownership of the performances and activities that they took part in.

### Improved social links and ties

Many of those that attended weekly sessions were quite isolated in their daily lives, and often did not interact with many people besides their support workers and direct family. Moving On gave participants the opportunity to meet new people, make new friends, and improve their social skills, which reduced isolation and the risk of isolation and improved social skills to interact with other new people.

“I don't think people always realise how isolated some of the individuals that come here are. They might not really speak to other people outside of their care worker or their family, which I think can be quite difficult. Isolation is often talked about as an issue for elderly people, but I think it is also an issue for many disabled people... so it is great that they at least get the chance to meet others and make friends whilst they are here.” (Local volunteer)

Participants also stated themselves that they had met many people and made friends by attending the group.

“I like coming here. I have lots of friends... it is my favourite thing that I do and there are lots of people.” (Project participant)

Making friends was a theme that came up across the interviews, and all volunteers mentioned the importance of groups such as the RSC for allowing individuals to achieve this.

“Making friends can be so hard for many disabled people, as they find it more difficult to integrate into mainstream society and need opportunities such as this to meet other people, have fun and make new friends. It is groups such as this that can then lead to other opportunities further down the line.” (Local volunteer)

### Individual and collective action and control

The Moving On project did not have specific objectives for individual benefits. Instead, it aimed to meet each individual's needs and desires for what they themselves wanted to get out of the weekly sessions, performances and activities. Volunteers concentrated on assisting and engaging participants so that they could fully express themselves and enjoy their weekly Thursday morning sessions. This required a flexible approach to the volunteering role that was relatively large in scope.

“The most important thing for the project is for everybody that attends to have fun. That is what we hope, and I think they do have a lot of fun. If they have fun, then all of the other things like building their confidence and learning new skills happen by themselves.” (Local volunteer)

“This is the only thing that [the participant] really does outside of sitting at home and watching television. He would be very isolated and find it harder to meet new people [without it]. It is not healthy for him to not be active and to not interact with anybody.”

(Participant Support Worker)

“This group is so inclusive and diverse and gives everybody something to look forward to, something that they can get involved with, take ownership of and have some pride in - it helps them so much.”

(Participant support worker)

The way in which volunteers engaged with and involved participants both in decision making, and in helping them to express themselves in whichever way they chose, was central to the project's success in developing collective action and control.

“For many ... this is the only real opportunity they have to contribute to something, and take control of something, even if it is just deciding which film they want to sing songs from or perform scenes from. There isn't anywhere else where they get the opportunity to make these decisions on things.” (Participant support worker)

Many participants took responsibility for tasks such as putting out chairs, or took on roles in performances by performing scenes that they had helped to create. The project lead and volunteers helped to direct and organise everything that the group did. However, these supporters considered it to be crucial that they did not 'impose' anything on the group, but that the group itself decided what to do.

“It is very important to engage [participants] and ask them what they want to do as we are here for them – sometimes we have to help steer the sessions and make sure things don't go over the top, but the initial ideas all come from them.” (Local volunteer)

### Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets

Participants gained new skills through attending the sessions. This was a key theme throughout the interviews and a key outcome of the project generally.

“[Project participants] have learnt lots of new skills in singing and acting and dancing, which has really helped them with developing their social skills and improving their confidence.” (Local volunteer)

Increased confidence was also a repeated theme throughout the interviews. Many respondents believed that the weekly sessions had been central to an improved sense of self and wellbeing for participants.

“You can see how the clients develop and build their confidence. They come here and they just light up, even if at the start they were a bit more timid. This group gives them the opportunity to be themselves, which helps them increase their confidence.” (Participant support worker)

There were clear outcomes too for the project support workers and volunteers, who reported the benefits to their own learning and assets development.

“They all learnt how to sing 'This is me' in Makaton' which was a great learning experience, not just for the clients but all many of us too.” (Participant support worker)

### Improved individual wellbeing

All those involved in the research saw the group as a positive space and beneficial to the wellbeing of those individuals that attended. One volunteer highlighted the safety that Moving On offered to local participants.

“I think this is a safe space. It is somewhere where [participants] can come and enjoy themselves, away from any stresses at home, and away from any stigma or judgement.” (Local volunteer)

Another volunteer reiterated this, suggesting that this 'safe space' gave participants the opportunity to relax and be themselves.

“When we put the shows on, we make sure to ask for suggestions for what everybody wants to do – we came up with a film theme and had things from the Mask, Star Wars and Jungle Book that we could mix with the things they wanted to do in the show.”

(Project lead)





“It is a positive and supportive place, and I think that comes off on everybody. Nobody is ever made to feel embarrassed or not welcome. Everybody is allowed to be themselves.” (Local volunteer)

One support worker described how much calmer and happier their client was while at the weekly sessions. This person spoke of the difference that the group made to their client, and worried about individuals that did not have the opportunity to attend similar groups.

“She looks forward to it all week. She calms down and relaxes when she gets here, and can be herself. I can see the positive impact the group has, and I do worry that there are so many more that would like to come to groups like this that can’t as there isn’t enough space.” (Participant support worker)

“I learnt to sing ‘This is me’ – I enjoy learning to sing.”

(Participant)

### Case Study

In addition to the regular volunteers that helped out at the Moving On project, the RSC also gained the support of volunteers from the local branch of Coventry Building Society. One such volunteer, Bri [alias] was amazed by the achievements and change that she saw in the time that she had been coming to the group.

“When I first started coming [the project participants] didn’t know me and didn’t communicate with me, but over time a lot of them have come out of their shells and got more confident. ... Self-esteem and confidence is so important. ... If you see them outside the group it can be like they are a different person, but when they are here they just light up. ... It has been amazing to see the change in confidence of one gentleman. He was attacked in the town and would not go out on his own, but from coming here he has boosted his confidence and now will come out on his own again. It is amazing really.”

Another important benefit of the group was the collective control and decision making that happens with input from the participants, Bri said.

“They [the project leaders] never tell anyone what to do. Normally [one volunteer] will come in with a topic, and then split off into little groups to do our own routines, and that is how the shows evolve, with the little groups becoming bigger groups and before you know it has become a play.”

In addition to observing these positive effects on others, Bri spoke about the personal development that she experienced herself. Positive personal outcomes for her included improved wellbeing, new skills and confidence, knowledge and greater breadth of social links.

“It has been fantastic for myself to come here as it is quite big stress relief. You aren’t judged for being here and can just relax and be silly. ... Personally I hadn’t worked with people with disabilities before, so learning to adapt to people’s needs has helped me, particularly with communicating with those less able to communicate.”

The only negative from Bri’s perspective was that the project couldn’t include even more participants.

“More sessions would be good, but it is about having the volunteers to be able to do that, as well as the space to be able to do that. Would mean more people can come as well, as there are many people that can’t come that would benefit if they could”

(Local volunteer)

## What has worked well?

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- **Being inclusive and engaging all participants in decisions made by the group.** Treating all of the participants as individuals and getting to know and understand both the needs and personalities of those that attended, helped to build a service to match the needs and desires of participants.
- **Engaging care workers in the activities.** Many participants trusted their care workers, and so when they saw them getting involved with the music, dance and drama based activities, it built confidence to 'have a go'.
- **The ability to work cooperatively and as a team.** Volunteers believed the key factor contributing to the project's success was the willingness of the volunteers, directed by the project leader, to work cooperatively and as a team. They worked towards a common goal of helping the participants and this created a friendly and engaging atmosphere for sessions.

"The project is sustainable for the future, but what we are able to do in the sessions and how far we can do more outings such as going to the theatre, is controlled by how much money we have."

(Project lead)

## What are the lessons?

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- **It is not possible to do everything for everyone.** The project leader and volunteers accepted that they were 'at capacity', and that extending the group further would reduce the quality of the sessions.
- **Trying new things can help increase the quality of the learning experience.** Trying new and more ambitious things such as going to performances in Stratford upon Avon and putting on productions in the Civic Hall had helped increase volunteers' confidence to be more ambitious in what they did with the group.
- **Volunteers also learn new skills and build confidence.** Many of the volunteers who had not previously worked with disabled people thought at the beginning that they were 'just' helping out, and 'giving something back'. Many were surprised at how much they themselves learned. Volunteers felt that if more people offered their time at sessions such as this, it would help build awareness and capability in the community for more inclusive activities.

"The folks that come here get so much out of it, so it is a shame that so many people cannot come and learn new skills, take on new responsibilities, build confidence and make new friends. I worry for the future, as there just aren't enough things like this available. It is hard for us to fill the gap left by cuts to local provisions."

(Local volunteer)

## The future

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The project lead and volunteers were confident of the long-term sustainability of the group. The organisation has been in existence for the last 20 years, and the weekly £4 membership fee that participants pay covered the rent costs.

"The money has just been the icing on the cake. We have been able to push things a bit further, with singing and dance tutors, which were things we couldn't really afford before." (Project lead)

The main concern moving forward was the very low number of similar opportunities for local disabled people to take part in activities. The limited capacity of the Moving On project had led to a long waiting list of potential participants. The project leader and volunteers were concerned that in the future, there would continue to be a large number of local disabled people without access to activities.

"The local authorities don't really provide anything. I cannot run a second group on my own, and I can't really ask all the volunteers for more of their time, so we would need more volunteers. We can't expand here because we don't have the space." (Project lead)