

Carers Music Fund

Carers UK's reflections: music and improving carers' lives

Carers UK has been delighted to be involved in the Carers Music Fund as part of Spirit of 2012 and the funding from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, by bringing insight into carers' lives and supporting the steering of the project.

The Carers Music Fund has been a fantastic opportunity to broaden learning about kinds of support work for unpaid carers. From our research with unpaid carers, we know that they are up to 7 times lonelier than non-carers¹ and 86% of carers providing substantial care have experienced loneliness as a result of their caring responsibilities.² They are twice as likely to experience ill-health if they are providing substantial care and this is even worse for young carers.³ Many take years to realise they are a carer, often missing out on vital support, remaining hidden.⁴

Pre-pandemic, carers already provided significant amounts of care valued at £132 billion a year.⁵ During the pandemic, this rose to £530 million per day⁶ as the numbers of carers increased by an estimated 4.5 million overnight.⁷

The Carers Music Fund projects demonstrates good evidence of what works and the value of participatory music making as a means of improving wellbeing, self-worth and reducing loneliness. Elements of the project did not shy away from setting really high challenges – trying to reach out and engage with carers who didn't have any other form of support and carers who had not been involved in participatory music before. Projects found creative ways to overcome these hurdles to deliver useful transferable knowledge, demonstrating that whilst identifying hidden carers is no easy task, it is very important.

The fact that this project also provides measurement of "additional benefits" is valuable. Carers are not just making music and improving wellbeing, there are longer term potentially sustainable benefits as well; friendship, greater resilience and stronger communities. This does not remove the need for the other areas of carers' lives that are vitally important that can affect wellbeing, such as well-funded quality care, an NHS that recognises and supports carers, carer friendly workplaces and education, and freedom from financial challenges, but it does play an important part in offering support.

One key element of the Carers Music Fund involved the Access Fund – funding for replacement care. For some carers, engagement was improved with replacement care. Good quality care or meaningful activities and being able to "leave" the person being cared

¹ Facts about carers 2019 Carers UK and Carers Week 2019

² The World Shrinks: Carers and Loneliness, Carers UK 2017 and Facts about carers 2019, Carers UK

³ From the 2011 Census in Facts about carers 2019, Carers UK and the GP Patient Survey 2019 and 2020.

⁴ Missing Out, Carers UK 2016

⁵ Valuing Carers: the value of carers' support, Carers UK and the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield, 2015

⁶ Valuing Carers: the cost during the pandemic, Carers UK 2020

⁷ The increase in carers during the pandemic: Carers UK for Carers Week 2020

for safely are key considerations for some carers, otherwise they cannot or will not engage. For others it was travel to reduce costs making it OK to attend or reducing time spent travelling – less time worrying and being away from the person being cared for. Finally, as the pandemic kicked in, digital inclusion became key and the difference to continuing the projects. The key take-aways from this are the fact that carers were consulted and listened to and the right solutions put in to make engagement work and to make sure that those least likely to participate because of significant hurdles, were able to.

There are many similarities with another project that Carers UK is involved in related to carers and physical activity, funded through Sport England by the National Lottery. In our small-scale pilot, carers who moved from being physically inactive to active improved their wellbeing, reduced anxiety and stress. Although making friends and connections was not a primary motivation, it was a highly valued outcome. Carers' motivations were also driven by different factors – whether they liked doing this alone, in groups or with the person they cared for. Having a range of options made a difference. Undertaken during the pandemic, the pilot also demonstrated the value and possibility of digital supporting carers participation and inclusion.

Both projects have underlined the importance of a range of options, including digital. Carers UK has been advocating systematic programme looking at carers' digital inclusion as a core means of support, which these projects show now have added value.

Carers UK will be looking at how we share and build on these findings in this project with carers and with our local networks. We already incorporated participatory music making into our carer support programme and we will be encouraging others to follow similar paths. We hope to see an increase in the number and type of opportunities offered to carers, whether from arts and music organisations or from carers and community organisations working in collaboration, to bring these options to carers to help reduce loneliness and improve lives.

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