

Connecting People pilot study

Outline of a research project
funded by the NIHR School
for Social Care Research

What are the most effective social care interventions for supporting service users to build social networks and engage with their local communities?

There is an increasing need for high quality social care services for adults in England. To this end, the Government aims to increase the involvement of local communities in social care and to improve the social participation and well-being of service users. As care provision diversifies, it is important for service users to be supported to develop social relationships and engage in their local communities.


Social care workers have some skills in helping service users achieve these aims, but there is little evidence about which approaches are the most effective or best value for money. This study will pilot the Connecting People Intervention which supports people to engage with their local communities and enhance their social networks. Working with people with mental health problems, a learning disability and older adults with a functional mental health problem, the quasi-experimental study will provide robust evidence of the impact and cost-effectiveness of interventions that aim to improve social participation.

This project

- will pilot and evaluate the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of the Connecting People Intervention in improving social participation and well-being.

It aims to

- assess the feasibility and acceptability of the Connecting People Intervention, including recruitment and retention rates
- assess how service users experience the intervention and their perceptions about how it could be improved
- evaluate how contextual variations in social care interventions influence outcomes for service users
- assess the leadership and workforce implications for social care agencies in implementing the Connecting People Intervention in routine practice to improve social participation and well-being
- obtain data about the Connecting People Intervention in preparation for a later randomised controlled trial.



Improving the evidence base for
adult social care practice

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WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

Within its vision of a 'Big Society', the Government aims to increase the role of civil society in the provision of public services such as social care. Communities are to be empowered to develop local arrangements for the care of vulnerable and marginalised people, facilitated by personal budgets. Integral to its aim of developing strong communities, the Government is also committed to enhancing individual and collective well-being, which means that individuals need to be able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society. There is robust evidence that positive and supportive social relationships are associated with well-being.

That said, vulnerable adults in need of care services are frequently marginalised in communities and have restricted social networks. Some social care workers help people to build relationships and strengthen their connections with their local community, but this is afforded a low priority by many in spite of increasing evidence of the importance of social capital for health and well-being. Evidence is also scarce on which interventions are most effective and most cost-effective.

The Connecting People Intervention has been developed out of an NIHR-SSCR funded ethnographic study of social care practice in England which developed a new intervention model for social care workers to help people with psychosis improve their social relationships. The intervention trains social care workers in methods that they can use to help people connect with others and engage with their local communities.

It is anticipated that successful interventions in the area of social relationships will need to adopt a dual synergistic strategy. On one hand they must engage with wider social structures which constrain opportunities for accessing social capital; on the other they will need to enhance the capacity of an individual to build relationships. Hence their effectiveness will depend not only on the skills, knowledge and experience of the workers, or the social functioning of the individual concerned, but

The role of community engagement

Local communities are important for the promotion of well-being among marginalised and stigmatised people as they can facilitate social interaction, which in turn supports the development of social networks, social support and social capital. These are all important determinants of health and well-being.

Community engagement interventions have been shown to produce subjective gains in physical and psychological health, self-confidence and social relationships, but they can also cause stress and drain an individual's energy. Initiatives such as voluntary work and time banks promote social interaction and help marginalised people to enhance their access to social capital. However, the evidence base for community engagement interventions that promote well-being is slim.

also on having a receptive community that is willing to connect with marginalised and stigmatised people (see Box).

This project will pilot the new Connecting People Intervention in a sufficiently large and diverse sample to provide evidence about its effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. The work will be carried out across three social care user groups: adults with a learning disability, adults with a mental health problem and older adults with a mental health problem.

HOW WILL THE PROJECT WORK?

STAGE 1: Systematic and scoping reviews

There are no published systematic reviews of social care interventions that produce 'higher order' outcomes such as social participation and well-being so this project will start by conducting a systematic review of these interventions. Any social intervention or way of working that is, or could be, used by social care workers will be reviewed; psychological

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therapies or medical treatments with no social components will be excluded. Researchers will also carry out a scoping review of social care practice in England to identify agencies, projects and interventions that appear effective, or demonstrate good practice, in improving individuals' social participation and well-being. These reviews will inform the selection of interventions and participating agencies in the quasi-experimental study (Stage 4).

STAGE 2: Development of guidance

Building on the work of the earlier NIHR-SSCR funded study with people experiencing psychosis and the guidance produced, this project will develop two equivalent guidance manuals for workers supporting people with a learning disability and older adults with a mental health problem. These manuals will articulate the underlying theory of change; detail the training that should be delivered to workers; and provide clear guidance to workers about the content and delivery of the interventions. Researchers will carry out two sets of consultations to help ensure the guidance is fit for purpose, one with service users and family members, and one with service providers, commissioners and support planners.

STAGE 3: Fidelity scale

A fidelity scale measures the extent to which a standardised intervention is being delivered. This project will develop such a scale to measure organisational structures, organisations' engagement with local communities, workers' practice, and service user perceptions of practice. The fidelity scale will include both expert appraisal and self-report. For example, a questionnaire will be developed to measure the extent to which workers are following the guidance. A fidelity scale is essential because the project involves a pilot over multiple sites (Stage 4) and will be essential for later evaluations in a randomised controlled trial.

STAGE 4: Quasi-experimental study

The Connecting People Intervention will be piloted in diverse settings to allow the project to: assess its feasibility and acceptability; calculate recruitment and retention rates; provide information for a future sample size

calculation for a randomised controlled trial. The quasi-experimental study will pilot the Connecting People Intervention in teams who are working towards improving the social participation and well-being of their service users.

The project will invite twelve social care agencies across England to test the Connecting People Intervention. Of these twelve, four will be working with adults with learning disabilities, four with adults with mental health problems, and four with older adults with functional mental health problems. In total, 240 newly referred service users will be recruited for the pilot. As much as possible there will be an equal representation of agencies from the north and south of England.

Participants will be interviewed when they start receiving services, and again 9 months later using the same questions so that the project can evaluate the extent to which the Connecting People Intervention helps people to improve their social participation and well-being and the costs of the intervention. At 9 months, the project will also interview in depth one supervisor and two social care workers from each agency about the interventions they have been delivering. The fidelity scale (Stage 3) will be used and researchers will discuss workers' experience of the implementation and outcomes of the intervention.

Analysis of the data will provide robust conclusions about the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of the Connecting People Intervention.

Project publications

A project website (www.connectingpeoplestudy.net) will provide full and accessible information about progress and outcomes, and social media will be used to communicate updates. Findings will be disseminated through presentations at practitioner and scientific conferences; articles in trade journals and newspapers; and publication of the three intervention manuals following their piloting. There will be at least one peer-reviewed paper from each module in high-impact journals and at least one in an open access online journal.

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HOW DOES THE PROJECT FIT THE AIMS OF THE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL CARE RESEARCH?

This study's high quality economic evaluation of the Connecting People Intervention will provide robust cost-effectiveness and outcomes evidence which is rarely available in social care.

The results will provide users of social care services with information about the extent to which the Connecting People Intervention is effective and good value for money in promoting their social participation and well-being. Users of social care services and their carers will benefit from the publication of online resources.

Practitioners will benefit from the practice guidelines contained within the Connecting People Intervention manuals which will help them to be more effective in their work and improve outcomes for the people they are working with. The project will also provide information to resource-constrained social care agencies about how the Connecting People Intervention can improve outcomes in terms of social participation and well-being at the lowest cost.

The Research Team

The project's co-principal investigators are *Dr Martin Webber*, Reader in Social Work in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York, and *Professor David Morris*, Professor of Mental Health, Inclusion and Community at the University of Central Lancashire's School of Social Work.

Dr Webber will lead on the empirical aspects of the project and Professor Morris will lead on the policy, practice and social inclusion aspects of the project.

Professor Paul McCrone, Professor of Health Economics at King's College London, will lead on the economic evaluation in the project.

Dr Martin Stevens, Research Fellow at King's College London, will lead on the adaptation of the Connecting People intervention manual and practice guidelines for adults with learning disabilities and older adults and lead on the qualitative aspects of the project.

Polly Kaiser, Consultant Clinical Psychologist at Pennine Care NHS Mental Health Foundation Trust, will advise on the dimensions of the project relating to older adults with mental health problems.

Peter Bates, Head of Community Inclusion at the National Development Team for Inclusion, will advise on the dimensions of the project relating to adults with a learning disability.

Project title:
Evaluation of the Connecting People Intervention: A Pilot Study

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