

# Engaging with Family Carers

## Using Drop-in events in Nottinghamshire

### Introduction

Shared Lives Plus (SLP) has been looking at ways to engage more productively with family and unpaid carers, especially those who are caring for someone who could benefit from using Shared Lives but would not normally be offered the service such as people with dementia, older people and people with mental health difficulties. Guidance and advice as been produced during the past year and links have been made with carers organisations nationally.

To progress this work, Shared Lives Plus has been working with partners to identify the best ways that local schemes can start to engage directly rather than relying on referrals from social workers and care management within their local authorities. To help further this work, Shared lives Nottinghamshire (SLN) agreed to host a series of drop-ins aimed at family and unpaid carers across the county to help see what works, what doesn't work so well and what lessons can be learned about this approach. These events would be supported and funded by SLP from funds to support work with unpaid carers.

### Setting up

A meeting was convened, hosted by SLN and attended by representatives from SLP, Alzheimer's Society, and Nottingham County Council Adult Services including the lead officer on carers. After lengthy discussion it was agreed to put on events in 3 districts of the county, Worksop, Mansfield and Newark. It was also decided to add an additional drop in in Beeston where a short breaks unit would be closing in 2015 and Shared Lives was being promoted as an alternative provider. This event would be targeted at the people currently using Kingsbridge Way so they would be able to come and meet the team and get more information about the service. The events would take place during two weeks in October to coincide with Shared Lives week.

### Format of the drop-ins

The drop in sessions would run from 11am to 2.00pm as it was felt that these were the times that people would be available, taking account of people using day care services and other forms of activities during the day. It was important to find well known community venues, so libraries were chosen as the places most people would be aware of and they had good community space. As there was no convenient library in Beeston, it was agreed to use the community rooms at Beeston Fire Station, which were well known to local people.

We felt that the way people were greeted was the most important factor and that they should be made to feel welcome at each event. Alzheimer's Society would have a stand and someone at each event and that there would be at least two members of Nottinghamshire Shared Lives to talk in detail to people about the scheme and what it could offer them. Refreshments would be available, tea, coffee and cakes to try and attract people and we would position people at entrances etc. if appropriate to ensure that people felt

comfortable coming in. We also thought it would be helpful if some Shared Lives carers were there to answer any questions.

### **Publicity**

This proved to be the most expensive element of the project as the leaflets needed to be produced in-house and to meet the county council's requirements. It also needed to have a lot of information including the details of each of the drop-ins, a brief introduction to Shared Lives and a statement regarding the need to have gone through a Community Care Assessment. We also wrote a Frequently Asked Questions sheet to be available for staff so they were sure of answers to some of the more difficult areas such as finance.

### **The Events**

The first drop-in took place in Worksop Library, where the room was straight off the main library. It was easily accessible with a Shared Lives banner in the entrance of the library and immediately by the door. Although there were a small number of visitors, we put this down to the poor weather and a clash with a number of other events involving carers which we hadn't been made aware of until the publicity had gone out. Nonetheless we had five members of the public come in to find out more, members of the Partnership Board and visitors from two local agencies, CAB and the Community Action Centre, neither of whom had heard of Shared Lives before.

The following day we moved to Mansfield library, a much bigger town and we had chosen a fine market day. However the room we had been given was on the second floor, part of a suite of rooms for hire, away from the general library and a place people would only visit if they had a distinct purpose. Because of this we had very few visitors, although a prospective user travelled some distance to find out more and get advice about her situation. We also had people call in from the district council and a new organisation, Compass, that was about to start a new support service for people with medium to severe dementia. This meant that although we had few contacts, they were of great value to the people who came and helpful in spreading the word about Shared Lives.

The next week we started in Beeston Fire Station, the drop-in that was tied to the closure of the short breaks facility next year. This was a comfortable venue, off the beaten track but known locally. Unfortunately, despite a push by staff to make all the carers aware of the drop-in and the importance of planning for the future once Kingsway had closed, we had no visitors. This could be due to a number of factors; there was great resentment about the closure and it had already been deferred. Carers may still believe that the centre won't close, may be simply putting off making decisions about the future or may have boycotted the drop-in. However an effort was made to engage with people affected and the Shared Lives team will continue to reach out to see if they can offer alternative services.

The final drop-in was in Newark library, just outside the main town area and unlikely to attract anyone unfamiliar with its location. The room was a very pleasant setting just off the main library with the main windows in the room facing the street, so people could see who we were. Again the number of visitors was very low, a mixture of people interested in the service and organisations, including the library staff, finding out more about Shared Lives.

## What we learned

This was not a cost effective way to meeting carers, either in staff time or financially although each contact had value and has spread the word about Shared Lives. The main things we learned from taking this approach were:

- Check out other events that are happening to avoid clashes, especially events targeted at carers
- Shared Lives is probably too small and too unknown to attract people on their own, even when focussed at family and unpaid carers. Network and join up with other groups with similar aims.
- It would be better to go to the carers rather than expecting them to come to us when they may already be struggling with their caring role
- Piggy backing on other events is a more timely and cost effective way to get the message out. Carers groups and training, memory cafes, flu fairs, community activities generally - where ever people interested in social care are gathering.
- Re publicity, there were a number of issues:  
Getting the publicity out in good time and widely distributed was difficult and relied on a number of people passing the fliers out. The organisers had little control over this.  
Shared Lives isn't well known, so we questioned whether a flier a good enough tool to introduce the concept and make people who had never heard of Shared Lives want to come to an event  
The fliers we produced by the council. Apart from the high cost, we wondered if flagging this up as a 'council event' put some people off from coming.
- Cakes and sweets are a great incentive and a way to break the ice
- Local knowledge both within the Shared Lives team and the wider organisation is invaluable if you're going to put on an event yourself – know your venues, where they are and how good the footfall is likely to be.