



Healthy Ageing Case Studies

Unforgettable Experiences

Unforgettable Experiences: making art, making memories

In the UK, dementia accounts for 40% of acute medical admissions in people over the age of 70. And yet research shows that access to art, culture and heritage can improve brain plasticity and delay onset of symptoms. So, with help from the Healthy Ageing Challenge, Unforgettable Experiences is on a mission to use digital technology to help older people living with the condition access art.

The big idea

Unforgettable Experiences provides personalised care and technical support to help older people take part in live, interactive artistic sessions online. The sessions are delivered by artists in nine disciplines – from photography and creative writing to history and music – and are based on cognitive stimulation therapy. The aim is to support older people with mental health issues, dementia and neurological conditions, as well as their carers.

The back story

The idea for Unforgettable Experiences came from Victoria Burnip and her husband Richard. Before they met, Richard survived a traumatic brain injury and had received arts therapy as part of his recovery. Meanwhile, Victoria had built up a wealth of experience helping older people, having worked as interim chief executive for Age UK and caring for her grandmother who had vascular dementia.

Originally, Victoria intended to set up a company that would help older people get out to art and cultural institutions. But when Covid-19 hit, those institutions closed and she realised that older people with dementia would be at greater risk of social isolation. Victoria believed she could create a completely digital experience, and in August 2020, won a Covid Fast Response grant from the Healthy Ageing Challenge.



Impact of the Challenge funding

The grant helped fund a small team of five employees and pay nine artists who developed the content and marketing for a pilot project in Darlington, northeast England.

Victoria designed the pilot with help from NHS Tees Esk & Wear Valley, Darlington Borough Council, Social Prescribing Network, and the Alzheimer's Society. She also had help from a couple living with dementia and their carers and Richard gave his perspective on brain trauma.

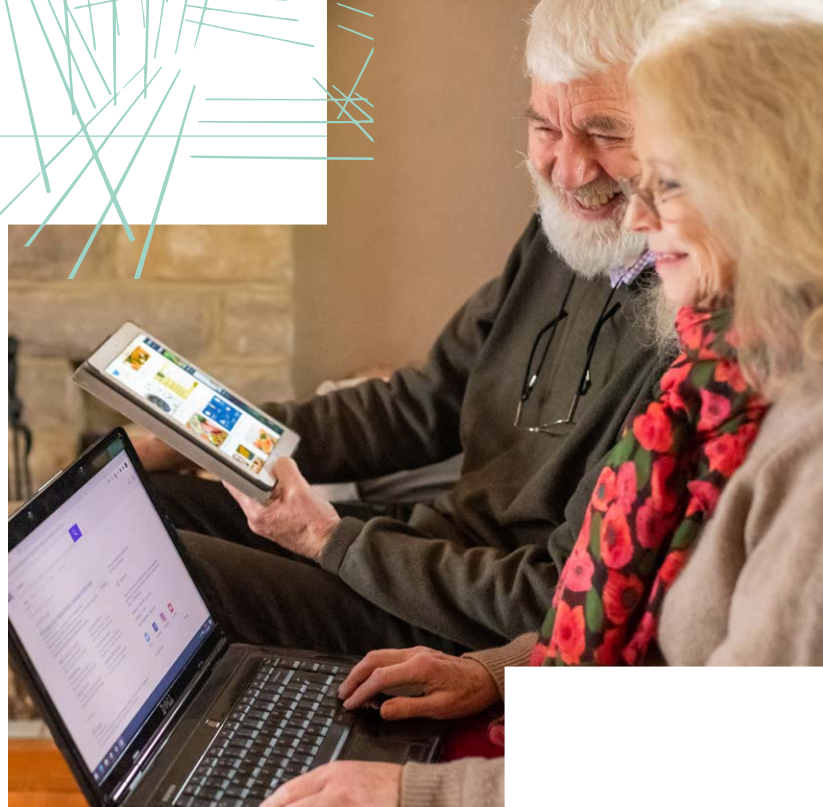
Working with Darlington Council's head of culture, the company selected nine artists from around 40 applications. All were chosen for their experience of working with people who have dementia. .

The six-week pilot programme was split into two one-hour sessions a week and run using off-the-shelf video conferencing tools. Meanwhile, groups were kept small - between five and eight participants. "While our pilot ran for six weeks, older people can access our services for as long as they want," Victoria explains.

Participants choose their preferred discipline, and sessions are designed to interact with everyday experiences or prompt memories. For example, on the songwriting course, participants explore the art of listening to music, writing lyrics, using chords and melodies and they write their own song using a memory, loved one or passion as inspiration.

Because sessions are delivered online, Victoria recruited 10 volunteer Digital Activity Buddies, many of whom come from IT backgrounds and provide complex technical support. "Getting the balance right between human interaction and the technology itself has been one of our biggest challenges," says Victoria. "People are lonely and sometimes they just want to talk, so our Digital Activity Buddies have provided befriending support as well as technical help."

To date, 70 older people have participated in the pilot. To help understand the impact that the sessions have, Unforgettable Experiences asks participants to complete a questionnaire at the start and end of the programme to help measure factors such as quality of life, loneliness and mental health. "We will have an independent evaluation report by the end of March 2021," says Victoria.



Meanwhile, feedback from participants shows just how much of an impact the company is having. For example, Janet's father Peter took part in song writing sessions. After one session he, "chose to play the keyboard without prompting...during COVID-19, it has provided a social outlet for him, which he otherwise wouldn't have had due to the current restrictions."

What's next?

While the pilot began in Darlington, it has since extended its reach, with people from across the northeast of England taking part. Victoria has big plans for the future: "We are planning to launch as a paid-for service for older people and their families, using a weekly subscription model. We're also hoping to pursue contracts with NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups and Adult Social Care commissioners. I've set us some ambitious targets and would love to be working with 1,000 people online in the next couple of years."

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Janet, carer for her father Peter