

Case Study

The Lightbox

Art in Mind



Age-Friendly

Since 2013, The Lightbox has been delivering 'Art in Mind' with people who are living with the early stages of Dementia and their carers.

We are particularly proud of the work that all our participants produce which is inspired every month by The Ingram Collection of Modern British Art. We also encourage carers to come along to the sessions, because caring for someone with dementia can be almost as isolating and lonely as the condition itself.

Different artworks are chosen each month, which enables us to work with clay, acrylics, watercolours or sketching materials, anything which lends itself to the original artwork. The sessions are not designed to have anyone feel that they are not capable or that they feel that they used to be able to do much more, it is about their new expression of creativity.

Our current participants come from a wide range of backgrounds some of whom have never picked up a brush or pencil before and others who have taken part in more art throughout their lives. Both of these work brilliantly in our sessions due to the very nature of getting everyone at some point out of their comfort zone.

How did it aim to reach or have relevance to older audiences? What impact did you want it to have on the size or profile of your visitor base?

There is research evidence that cognitive stimulation, such as engaging in arts activities, helps to override the stresses of dementia, can improve memory, thinking, social interaction, communication and can prolong the ability to play an active part in society (Milwain 2010; Woods, Spector, Prendergast and Orrell, 2012; Graessel, 2011). Challenging activity at inspirational arts venues can re-energise people in the early stages of dementia, and restore personal esteem, shared interests and reduce isolation (Reawakening the Mind, 2013).



We have a large demographic of older people in the Surrey area and so we wanted to work with the needs of our local residents to provide workshops which encouraged participation and learning new skills.

What tools did you use to measure this impact? What key indicator did you use to measure this impact?

We have mainly worked on anecdotal evidence of our sessions but also using elements of the Dementia Care Mapping reporting. The training we received for Dementia Care Mapping enabled us to think more person centred about their enjoyment and skills learnt. We found that the UCL Museums Wellbeing Measures toolkit was difficult to use with the group as they struggled with the phrasing and meanings behind the questions.

“Just wanted to email you to say thank you for this morning. It was so wonderful to see Robert engaged and doing something that he enjoys. As you may have gathered he has trouble with motivation and concentration, so for him to sit for an hour and a half and do a whole painting was really significant. I think it has been an encouragement to Sue as she hasn’t seen him like this for a long time. They’ve had a really tough journey just in getting the diagnosis, let alone the implications of it, so it’s lovely for them to be able to do something positive together, and get back a little of what he’s lost. And in such an accepting environment – I think Sue can find it quite challenging sometimes with him in public, but I think she could relax with you. It’s also so wonderful to have an activity for people with dementia that isn’t childish, as this is often the case with activities for the elderly and those with dementia.”

What other objectives were you hoping to achieve?

Each time we run a session and I see the joy it brings to all those involved, we know we are doing the right thing. Enabling people who are living with the early stages of dementia to learn a new skill and develop ideas that they may not have used before. Seeing how the family members, carers or supporters respond to their loved ones enjoying themselves and not focussing on any particular problem is worth its weight in gold.

Were there opportunities for this activity to be intergenerational?

This project works with family members and or carers specifically and so sometimes children of participants join in. We have been lucky to have a new grandson come to the workshops on occasion too, which is always a highlight for the participants.

What worked well, what challenges did you face?

The Art in Mind programme has been so successful that we now run two separate groups so that we can inspire and encourage more people to take part. We keep the groups to the same people until they no longer want/can come along any further. This means that participants are in a comfortable environment and that the carers also get to know each other, which as we know, being a carer can be isolating also. The challenges in the beginning were to encourage people to trust us enough to want to come to the sessions. We worked with local groups and the Alzheimer's Society to promote the programme, but bringing someone who has just had a diagnosis to a new place is quite scary for the carer aswell. Managing expectations from participants can sometimes be difficult too as Dementia does not have a one set fits all approach and so some can find the environment and what they are doing difficult.

What have been the most important things you have learned?

I have learnt that to be flexible and adaptable is key, alongside very good biscuits – they make all the difference. Talking to people and gaining their trust is an important part too, checking in with the carers just as much as the participants. Dedicated volunteers are an important part too and ensuring that they are able to meet the demands of participants.



What will you do differently next time?

In the beginning we tried to work much more with the local GP's but they simply do not have the time to dedicate to sending participants our way. Word of mouth as always is the best marketing tool, which does take time, so not to worry about it perhaps as much.

What “top tips” about engaging older audiences would you pass on to other organisations?

- Work with local established groups
- Ensure plenty of time for tea/biscuits and discussion
- Use their ways of searching for information - Libraries/newspaper (they might seem outdated now, but they still use them)

Heather Thomas
Learning & Engagement Manager, The Lightbox