

Good Practice

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SMALL CHARITIES

ANALYSIS

'You help two people and tackle two issues'

On the face of it, the Homeshare scheme is fairly simple: an older person who needs a little extra support in their home offers a room to a young person in need of somewhere to live.

In return for companionship and 10 hours a week of low-level practical support, the young sharer receives an affordable place to live, paying only minimal fees to the organisation that set up the match – often a charity – in place of rent.

However, Duncan Shrubsole, director of policy and care at the Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales, says the idea has been slow to catch on in the UK, although a few schemes do exist and it has had some success elsewhere in Europe. So Lloyds and the Big Lottery Fund teamed up to give it a boost.

The result, he argues, is a model that could help organisations such as small charities tackle a number of social issues in one go. "When we were discussing how to do something more innovative with our community projects for older people, everybody said this was an idea whose time had come," Shrubsole says. "It should be obvious: you help two people and tackle two social issues at the same time."

What was needed, Lloyds decided, was funding and infrastructure. So in 2015 it teamed up with the Big Lottery Fund to offer a share of £2m to eight organisations to run Homeshare pilot programmes.

They also brought together Age UK, the young people's charity the Foyer Federation, the Social Care Institute for Excellence and Shared Lives Plus, which works with young people with learning difficulties, to form the Homeshare Programme Partnership board, which offers guidance and resources for the schemes.

An initiative that pairs lonely older residents with young people in need of a room is starting to make its mark

The first pilot was launched in 2016 and the final evaluation report was published in May. Its findings were mixed.

The pilots had been slow to attract enough compatible participants, it said, with none of the projects making as many matches as they had projected. But the evaluation also found that, where matches had been made, the model had delivered the promised benefits and more, including better mental wellbeing for both sharers and householders, and intergenerational learning and skill-sharing. And, it said, word was spreading and momentum building.

Pilot project

Marian Pocock, Homeshare director at Age UK Oxfordshire, one of the organisations selected to run a pilot project, agrees that has been the case. The organisation, which had an income of £2.9m in the year to 31 March 2017, has made 14 matches so far, eight of which are currently in operation.

"Most of the matches have come this year and, of the enquiries we've had about the scheme, 50 per cent have been in the past couple of months – it's starting to snowball," Pocock says.

The Oxfordshire pilot, which was given initial funding of £172,400 over three years, needs to find more matches to reach the point where it's self-sustaining, but Pocock says she's quietly confident it will achieve those in the near future. The project initially took advantage of the flexibility of the

scheme and deviated from the standard model, in which the householder and sharer each pay between £125 and £200 a month to the Homeshare organisation that matched them.

The charity thought that in Oxford, where people are used to renting rooms to students, people wouldn't take to a scheme that required them to pay, so instead the sharers paid smaller amounts to the organisation and the householder. This meant the charity had to find more matches to become sustainable, but it quickly became clear that wasn't going to happen, so the charity reverted to the original model.

The range of people who have signed up to the scheme has been fascinating, Pocock says: householders who are keen to help people from particular professions such as teaching, and sharers who were facing commutes of up to three hours because of high rental costs in Oxford or who were themselves experiencing loneliness.

One of the most recent matches was between a young man with depression and a 96-year-old lady suffering from dementia, who wanted someone in the house overnight on top of the support from carers.

"They saw each other's profiles and not only did they realise how much they had in common, which was spooky, but they also connected with each other's mental health issues and felt they would be able to support each other," Pocock says. "The latest news is that they're going to get a cat, because they both like cats."

Ensuring a bespoke match was one of the most important elements highlighted by the evaluation report. "You need to think of it like a dating website," says Shrubsole. "You need enough people signed up on both sides so you can match people because they've got shared interests, not just because they're next in line."



Andrea, left, and Mary, 85, one couple paired up by a scheme in Harrow, north-west London

The relationship also requires ongoing management, the report says, to ensure both parties are communicating well. This is where smaller, locally based organisations come into their own, Pocock says. "We're never more than 50 miles away from anyone who's part of the scheme," she says. "We check in with people and we can be there very quickly if there is a problem."

After some teething problems, the project has established a good relationship with the council, which can see the benefits of keeping older people in their homes at a time of falling budgets.

Messaging, Pocock says, has been key, particularly about issues such as safeguarding; other pilot projects have reported problems convincing family members that the scheme is right for their relative. Small organisations might discover the scheme provides an unexpected solution for their beneficiaries, she says.

"It's been about finding good partners, other local voluntary sector organisations that could refer people to you," Pocock says. "It's not always the obvious groups. Sometimes it's small grass-roots and community organisations."

And for those looking to set up similar schemes, her advice is to get in touch with the Homeshare Partnership board and the schemes themselves: "Talk to existing schemes and the network. Don't re-invent any wheels or start from scratch, because the existing schemes are happy to share."

"It hasn't all been plain sailing. Resources are scarce, but we've found that we can be greater than the sum of our parts, and what goes around comes around. It's worth being generous." ■ RC

Like a dating website, you match people with shared interests, not because they're next in line

Duncan Shrubsole, director of policy and care, Lloyds Bank Foundation