



“When people talk, listen completely. Don’t be thinking what you’re going to say. Most people never listen. Nor do they observe. You should be able to go into a room and when you come out know everything that you saw there and not only that. If that room gave you any feeling you should know exactly what it was that gave you that feeling.”

Ernest Hemmingway, *Across the River and into the Trees*



The Mental Health Foundation

www.MentalHealth.org.uk

First published in Great Britain for the
Mental Health Foundation
Colechurch House,
1 London Bridge Walk,
London SE1 2SX

Design and layout courtesy of James Boast
www.JamesDillinger.co.uk
Photography courtesy of Kevin Ireland
Still Photography by Candy Worf

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housing&care21





PULLING TOGETHER

WRITTEN BY
CANDY WOLF
JOLIE GOODMAN
BEN PLIMPTON

PRODUCED BY
THE MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION



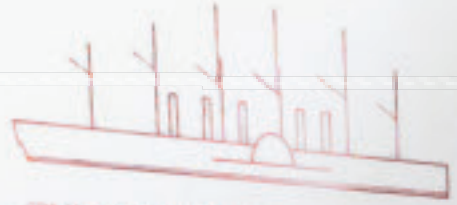
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GREAT EASTERN
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FOREWORD

The Standing Together project began in the summer of 2015 and lasted for two years and two months. During this time, we – Jolie, Ben and Candy – facilitated 19 peer-support groups in extra-care housing and retirement centres across Greater London. We partnered with two housing providers, Housing & Care 21 and Notting Hill Housing Trust, and worked with over 300 people from all over the world! We made our own fun co-producing creative initiatives with tenants, including publishing a collective memoir with a ‘Victory in Europe’-themed book launch, a tenants’ welcome pack, a digital photography activity, countless memory boxes, collages and art sessions, CDs, flower arranging workshops, pen-pal letter writing with local Girl Guides, and many smaller-scale workshops. We consumed, on average, around 40 mince pies across three holiday seasons and goodness knows how many cups of tea. More recently, we have written this handbook – to pull together and make sense of what we’ve learnt over the last two and a half years in what we’ve all agreed has been the best job we’ve ever had. We also want this to serve as inspiration to lead you in your endeavours should you ever choose to embark on this type of work yourself, whether as a tenant in a housing scheme, a staff member or a volunteer. You’ll find chapters to support you when managing conflict between group members, information on how to support a community when a member passes away, and you’ll even learn the importance of a cake break. The handbook’s aim is to be simple and practical. We don’t want to give the impression that our work requires a qualified public health professional... It can be the little things that make a difference. If you take away just one thing from this book, let it be an understanding of the importance of listening. Listen to your group members – the people you’ll be fortunate enough to meet. Listen completely.



We worked with over 300 people throughout the course of this project. They represented a breathtaking array of lived experience, and yet there were some strong commonalities. For example, we met no fewer than nine Margarets, nine Johns and nine Annes across the four cohorts. We also met seven Jeans, seven Peters and seven Davids, along with five Patricias, five Joans, five Arthurs and five Marys. There were also a fair few Michaels, Maureens, Roses, Barbaras and Georges.

Many of the people in the groups were born in London but came from neighbourhoods as different as Rotherhithe and Sutton, Brentford and Islington. Many people had also made London their home over the course of a lifetime, having emigrated from other countries. Well-represented places included Ireland, Spain, Jamaica and Trinidad, though we also had group members from Saint Lucia, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Mauritius, Iran, Iraq, Greece, Cyprus, Switzerland, Brazil, Portugal, China, Myanmar and Dominica. Conscious that the question 'Where are you from?' can be very othering – depending on who is asking and who is being asked – we tried to be broad in our celebration of different backgrounds through discussing culturally significant things like favourite foods. Our aim was always to emphasise what people shared (e.g. living in London), as well as the unique lived experience that each person brought to the group.

Most group members had worked their whole lives, often from a young age. We had factory workers, teachers, nurses, civil servants and dinner ladies. There was a shipping clerk, a chemist, a sports coach, a journalist and a jeweller. Some people hadn't worked, having struggled to find a job because of a disability, while others stayed at home and raised families.

One of my fondest memories is of a woman living with advanced dementia who had very little memory of her history or knowledge of where she had come to be. We were told she didn't speak except for on Thursdays, when our group was held. She wore two watches on each arm and carried a giant handbag full of wool. One day, I came to be in her flat and she found a big summer hat that she didn't recognise. She put it on and had me escort her downstairs to parade up and down, introducing herself to her neighbours as the new posh woman in her cockney London voice.

9 MARGARETS

7 JEANS

5 ARTHURS

5 MARYS

9 ANNES

5 PATRICIAS

7 PETERS

5 JOANS

9 JOHNS

7 DAVIDS

WE GOT
TOGETHER
AND...

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

This was a deceptively simple but highly rewarding activity! We made a grid on a piece of flipchart paper and wrote the group members' names down the left-hand side. Across the top, we collectively agreed on and wrote down six numbered categories of things that they wanted to know about each other. We then asked each member to roll a die, going around the room until we had filled in the grid with people's information.

FILM QUIZ

We printed out A3 images of film stars from years past and then split the group up into teams, making sure each team picked a name for themselves. We then asked each team in turn to identify the film stars.

SHOW AND TELL

We invited people to bring along something of significance to them. It could be anything: a photo, a memento, etc. We went around the group and gave people the opportunity to describe what they had brought and why it was important to them.

BIRTHDAYS

We made a list of everyone's birthday, and found out their birthstones and star signs. We found that a good discussion point was to ask what people liked to do to celebrate their birthday.

SPRING CLEANING

When April and May rolled around, we bought some cleaning products, wrapped them up and put them on a table in the middle of the group. We invited people to select items one by one and then try to guess the item by touch. Once everyone had had a guess, we unwrapped the items and discussed these and spring cleaning generally.

SUMMER HOLIDAYS

We put some items in a box that represented seaside holidays or different summertime activities. We went around the room and invited people to pull items from the box and then discuss them.

MENTAL HEALTH DAY

We felt this was a fantastic opportunity to broach the subject of mental health. We used a quiz to invite people to consider their ideas around this, bust myths, and celebrate truths about what mental health really is.

GENERAL QUIZ

We found that a pub quiz book was handy for this, or you could search online. We tried to mix up the subject areas so as to tap into different people's expertise.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

We tried to find out the meanings of group members' names. This proved a useful method in helping to support group members to learn and remember one another's names, characteristics and histories.

READING A PLAY

We had group members collectively decide on a play they would like to read aloud and then made copies of it. We then had people pick their roles. It's okay if it takes several meetings to get through the whole thing.

DEAR BABS

We had the group play the role of agony aunt by responding to fictional letters in which people presented problems. There was a lot of collective wisdom in the group, as we hope you'll discover too!

ROMANCE

At the start, we put a flower on everyone's chair. This prompted the group to talk about important people in their lives, be they friends, partners or family members. Often, people talked about their first love.

FRUIT AND VEG

We bought fruit and vegetables at the supermarket, being mindful of getting some familiar and culturally relevant items, as well as a few that people might not know so well. We put them in small cloth bags, split the group up into teams and had each team feel in their team's bag without looking and try to guess what the fruit or vegetable was. This is plenty of fun, you'll find, due to the double entendres that abound!

MUSIC QUIZ

Based on the ages of the group members, we came up with a playlist of songs that would have been popular when they were in their teens and 20s. We then split the group up into teams, played a song and had each team guess the artist.

FASHIONS

This was a great opportunity to celebrate fashion throughout the ages and to talk in depth about the experience of getting older and what differing styles are appropriate. We printed images of various later-life models and held a frank discussion about the fashion of today.

WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

We brought along an enormous map of the world and generated a discussion about where people hailed from and where they had been. We were often left with a map filled with pins and noted the great deal of geographical knowledge and experience held collectively by each group.

JUKE BOX JURY

Based on a popular television show of the 1950s, we asked the group to deliberate on whether each song we played them was a hit or a miss for them personally. This is a fun activity that usually has everybody dancing.

WORKING LIFE

We printed images of various occupations, including those that time has since eroded such as bus conductors and gandy dancers. The groups would then discuss the jobs they'd held and the impact this had on their sense of identity.

CONNECTIONS

We introduced a topic (seasonal or cultural) and used a ball of yarn to map similarities between group members. Somebody would offer an anecdote about their favourite summer activity, somebody else would share their interest and eventually we'd have a full web of shared interests.

TV IMAGE QUIZ

We printed out A3 images from different television programmes, trying to cover a few decades of programming. This became an opportunity to trigger memories and prompt conversation within the group – the point of the quiz not being to have a winner but to have a winning conversation.

TV THEME TUNE QUIZ

Streaming music providers will often have lists of television show theme tunes. We asked the teams to take turns in guessing each theme tune. We then gave them time to discuss their memories of each show.





THE THEORY BIT



THE MHF

The Mental Health Foundation (MHF) is a UK-wide charity that was established in 1949, specialising in public mental health policy and research. Good mental health is fundamental to thriving in life. It is the essence of who we are and how we experience the world. Yet, compared to physical health, so little is commonly known about mental ill health and how to prevent it. That must change. The MHF is the UK's charity for everyone's mental health.

With prevention at the heart of what we do, we aim to find and address the sources of mental health problems.

We co-produce initiatives across the life course that support people to thrive through understanding, protecting and sustaining their mental health. Over the past decade, the MHF has become a key UK innovator in the development and implementation of programmes focused on self-management and peer support. These programmes have used the best available evidence in their development. The successful implementation of these programmes in a range of settings has, in turn, contributed to the same body of evidence.

With age can come a time of greater wellbeing, as responsibilities are reduced and there is more freedom to follow interests. However, this is not always the case, and many older people can face a range of issues that create risks for their mental health, including age discrimination, loss, long-term conditions and loneliness. Our programmes like Standing Together work in partnership with older people to help protect mental health in later life and ensure that people with conditions such as dementia can help shape services that will improve their lives.

PEER SUPPORT

Over the last decade, the MHF has had a strategic focus on peer support and self-management initiatives. We have worked with a range of participants across the life course,

We had the pleasure of meeting a woman who once worked selling ice cream at the Royal Albert Hall. She used to question where she'd been and wonder why she knew all the answers in our quizzes around classical music. She had fantastic rhythm and used to sing to us.

from schoolchildren to people in later life. Peers are people with similar experiences. In the Standing Together project, the participants were over 55 and neighbours in retirement and extra-care housing schemes. In peer-support groups, facilitators lead sessions that explore what people have in common and concentrate on how people can use their common experiences to help each other. Giving and receiving support has proven mental health benefits.

OUR THEORY

*“This group
has brought
me out of my
flat after quite
a long time”*

The Standing Together team talk about wellbeing rather than mental ill-health, and setting up the groups provided an opportunity to reflect on good and poor mental health. We work from a social rather than a medical perspective; this means that we are interested in what’s happened and is happening to participants, rather than what’s wrong with them. We were given very little information about the participants before each new group began, and instead got to know them over time. When somebody shared their distress, we were validating and inclusive, and were able to promote this culture within the groups. An example that stands out for us was a woman in a scheme in Shepherd’s Bush who was sometimes very upset and heard negative voices. We were able to explore this in a group setting and talk about how upsetting this must be for her. She found this helpful and was then able to participate fully in the activities.

The Standing Together project began with a pilot scheme aimed specifically at people living with dementia. A handbook was produced for this, which outlines the activities engaged in and how they can be used again. The link is listed here:

www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/dementia-self-help-group-guide

The pilot was so successful that other tenants who didn’t have memory issues wanted to be involved. Standing Together up-scaled the pilot project to include people with mental health issues and learning disabilities, and those experiencing loneliness. The structure of our groups was born out of the original pilot and is surprisingly rigid for a reason. The groups had a routine, which became familiar over time

and was helpful for people with memory issues. Sessions began with a warm-up activity and then moved to a main activity, with a break for tea. We tended to check in and out with people, finding out how they were and what sort of week it had been. We always asked people how they found each session and co-produced the next week's session with them, which could be based on something that had come up that day. Standing Together groups happened once a week for up to six months. We ran four cohorts of groups, working with 20 schemes and facilitating 19 groups.

SUSTAINABILITY

Groups ran in 19 schemes, and 10 of those were sustained beyond our involvement. Five continue to meet – three with paid staff, one with a volunteer and one being facilitated by tenants. In another scheme, tenants continue to meet but very informally. We have found that sustaining groups has been a challenging part of the project. We have had some fantastic volunteers, but it can be difficult for people to stay in unpaid work for very long and therefore volunteers have a tendency to move on. At the start of the project, we anticipated that there might be opportunities to enlist peer facilitators, with tenants facilitating meet-ups in a different housing scheme from the one in which they lived. It was not possible for this to happen due to ill health and frailty. In future projects, it is likely that we will create a Community Engagement post that will focus on sustainability.

CORE VALUES

As the project progressed, we became aware that we were working in very particular ways. We therefore developed a set of core values upon which we based the facilitation of the groups.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Being flexible

It's important to recognise that events are unlikely to go to plan. As facilitators, we worked to establish a balance between adapting to meet people's circumstantial needs and keeping the essence of the original planned structure and intentions.



Being present

As a facilitator, the most important thing you can do for somebody is to listen to them. This can become difficult if you're distracted by issues affecting you personally or if you are very upset or overwhelmed. In these cases, it is not appropriate for you to be facilitating. For the hour and a half you're running the session, you need to be present with the group, listen, and be validating. Keep a watchful eye as people respond to the discussion and immerse yourself.

Providing sustenance

Eating together can be something people do less of if they live alone. Often, people tell us that the tea and cake break is their favourite part of the whole session. Some tenants will pop in just for the tea, though they tend, over time, to stay longer.

Being listeners not fixers

It can be tempting to want to offer solutions to people's troubles when they're aired in the groups, but this is not the role of a group facilitator. We are there to listen, to find out how people deal with these experiences, and to clarify the problem and help the group member to better understand what they're dealing with. We might, upon reflection, encourage the person to open up about the problem to the rest of the group to see if others have similar lived experiences and to see what they would do. This, for us, is a big part of peer support.

Prioritising your own wellbeing

You should always debrief with a colleague after every group meeting. Working so closely with people can elicit a strong personal emotional reaction, and sometimes a participant's distress will impact upon you. The debrief offers time to reflect on that, look at what went well, think about what you'd do differently in the future, and discuss honestly if particular participants bring out strong reactions in you.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Briefing the staff

It's important to inform staff about the group and to give them the opportunity to develop knowledge about the ethos of the project, how the space is being used and the fact that people may be talking about personal issues. If staff come to the group meeting there is an expectation that they will sit alongside participants, not outside of the circle, and that if they need to take a phone call they will leave the room. We have produced A4 information sheets to let all staff know the importance of this.

Building an atmosphere

The space should be warm and welcoming. Chairs should be arranged in a circle, with spaces for people using wheelchairs. Facilitators tend to sit next to people who have access issues so as to meet those participants' needs in the best way possible. As the sessions progress, we sometimes encourage people to sit in different places. We try to keep the environment simple so as to avoid any confusion.

Co-producing ground rules

Early on, we worked together to co-produce a set of simple ground rules. These rules are about thinking through the types of actions that will keep the space safe and pleasant for the group. We always include a rule about respecting each other's differences in ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality.

Naming the group

The groups belong to the participants not the facilitators. A way to illustrate this is by allowing the participants collectively to decide on a name for the group. The names chosen by our groups are included here:



THE CHATTERBOX GROUP
THE SMILEY GROUP
THE THURSDAY GROUP
THE FORGET ME NOT GROUP
THE DYMOND HOUSE DIAMONDS
THE ROTHERHITHE BABES
THE ALL SORTS
THE COME ON DOWN GROUP
THE FAMOUS PENFOLD GROUP
THE RICHARD SHARPLES GANG
THE MEET UP GROUP
MILD MAY MISFITS
THE GET TOGETHER GROUP
THE CHEVIES
PRINCE MICHAEL'S PRINCESSES
TURNBERRY TEARAWAYS

Giving people autonomy

Some group members will have very limited control over many aspects of their lives. We give people agency to make choices, even when other participants might disapprove of them. People choose to stay or not to stay and where they sit. We found that some group members chose to sit on the peripheries to begin with, and we respected this. We have found that, with this flexibility, people will tend to stay if they are able.

Self-help group

Coming to your Cou



housing&care



Mental Health
Foundation

BIG
LOTTERY
FUND



os
art!

Nottin' Hill

re21



While we worked on the Standing Together project, several group members passed away. They were people we'd expected to see, and when we arrived we received news that they'd gone. Their deaths resonated as a considerable loss to the community we had been building. Different housing schemes had varying procedures and, at some, we were told that the tenants would be kept guessing about the whereabouts of their neighbour due to data protection concerns. One group concluded that a group member must have passed away, because they saw their furniture being removed from their flat (the impact of this was acknowledged by both partners* and was culturally resolved). Sometimes somebody would pass away and their funeral would be held in another part of the country or even the world, and there would be no sign or word of them again. Sometimes somebody very young (in the context of the group) would pass away unexpectedly, stirring up anxieties in people about their own mortality. Yes, death is a constant and an inevitability. In later life, the news of death comes more regularly and people are expected to have built some resilience around this although this is often not the case. Part of our work in facilitating conversations around loss is supporting people to grieve.

FLOWER ARRANGING

It is customary to send flowers to the families of those who pass away. It's a simple, affordable and kind gesture and one that enables us to act at a time when we feel powerless. We felt it appropriate to incorporate flower arranging into our facilitation of conversations around loss after a group member passed away. We have found that, through this quiet and tender work, group members are able to find a meditative space to be in the moment and think about the emotions that this sad happening has unearthed. The conversation is casual. We bring a photograph of the deceased group member and play some of their favourite songs. After that, the conversation is natural and unstructured. We find we get lost in the work ourselves. There's no art or pretension to this – it's just sharing in grief.

In some groups people share a lot and in others there is mostly silence. A death is evocative; it can bring forward feelings and memories that may have been buried: memories of loved ones

*Housing & Care 21 and Notting Hill Housing Trust.

who passed away years ago. It may be that at that time, while we were trying to be strong for others, we didn't process these feelings or speak about them to anyone.

For some people, life in later-life housing can be sedate – mostly spent in an armchair, alone. Heading back to one's flat with an unexplored bereavement in one's head can be unbearable. It's important to talk. This is where being in a group of your peers is helpful, as many of the other group members will have shared the same experiences and it can be good to know that you are not alone.

"It was a beautiful way to talk about someone that has passed away. People enjoyed it because it was different. There aren't a lot of spaces where you can talk about a tenant passing away."

Group member

We might ask people how they feel about the session, we might ask the same again the next week, and we would keep a dialogue open. As a result, the groups seemed more tightly pulled together, as the participants have given something more of themselves by this point. They have seen one another a little more closely.

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

The Second World War is very much over, and life for its survivors has slowed down considerably. For those of us younger than a certain age, it's almost impossible to imagine what it would have been like to see conflict on that scale and to face constant danger and social upheaval. Group participants had vivid memories of the war. The trauma of witnessing the bombing of London left deep emotional scars, which some group members acknowledged in our meetings. People shared childhood memories of low-flying planes, and recalled seeing the faces of pilots. The destruction of Sandhurst Road School was a collective sorrow for many tenants in a housing scheme in Lewisham. As facilitators, it almost seemed to us that traumatic memories of the war were re-emerging for people as they aged. Some spoke about neighbours pulling together and a strong sense of community, which they felt was now largely absent from their lives.

One of the most tangible pieces of history that we can discern today is the prevailing message of the propaganda

of that time: to keep calm and carry on. This sentiment is now mass-produced on coffee cups and wall hangings, and we tend to take for granted the weight of the burden that this carried: 'Keep calm, don't show emotion, keep going, it's your duty.' Part of our ethos (and moreover the collective thinking regarding mental health in general) behind the Standing Together project is that it's okay to feel bad and to talk about it. Convincing each of our groups of this was one of the biggest challenges. With people having kept silent about the experience of losing loved ones, hiding from bombings and leaving parents, we found that they didn't afford one another the opportunity to vent petty frustrations like the shopping coming late or the hot water permanently being tepid.

After a time, we became aware that there were variable limits to group members' individual levels of empathy and that group members abandoned those who were willing to share their grief. If somebody became embittered and angry, or if they repeated a story of some injustice done to them, the rest of the group would start to pull away, talk over them or smile and recount a happy memory as if to distance themselves from the negativity. Sadness is as infectious as happiness can often be. People know this and sometimes they're doing all they can to keep moving forward and account for some of this behaviour. There's a divide to be managed between those who want to delve into their past and those who have closed the door and want to keep it locked.

Right-on Rose (as we knew her) was an incredible Irish Catholic woman in her late 80s and the sister of a minister. She would vehemently defend minority groups in her smoky voice, often looking over to another group member and remarking: "No. You can't say that. They're people too." During music activities she always requested Nancy Sinatra's 'These Boots Are Made for Walking' and would sway her legs with the beat.

CONFLICT

There is always a potential for conflict in any social gathering, but for people with restricted personal mobility living in later-life housing, arguments or tensions with neighbours can be especially prevalent. Often, tenants will find little more in common than the street name they share. In peer-support meetings, group members often find more that ties them together, but of course there will be those who are completely different, whose ideas are vastly separate. These discrepancies have a



FLEXIBILITY

TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF

PROVIDE SUSTENANCE

LISTEN

DON'T TRY TO FIX

CO-PRODUCE

BE PRESENT

LET OTHERS BE THEMSELVES

tendency to air themselves and, believe it or not, this can be a positive thing. When group members argue, they are demonstrating a trust in the safety of the group. They know that we as facilitators will mediate and keep the disagreement constructive.

Sometimes, as facilitators, we found arguments between group members to be uncomfortable for us – especially when vulnerable individuals were targeted or ignored. When arguments occur, especially in close quarters, there is the sense of a return to the schoolyard, where cliques and outcasts are common and where people are excluded and publicly denounced for petty mistakes. How, then, do we mediate this? We can facilitate the relationship within the group and, for example, keep people sitting apart, but, as neighbours, outside of the group meetings people may fight, be excluded and become distressed as their loneliness is exacerbated.

ON THE SAME PAGE

When group members imagined themselves in a place and time that did not align with what we as facilitators were experiencing, we tried not to make it our primary task to wrest them back into our version of the present. It was our objective to improve the wellbeing of our group members, and constantly pecking away at someone's perception of reality is not any way to achieve that.

One group member at a specialist dementia unit at which we worked would attend the group in heels, a skirt and a blazer. It was her understanding that she was late for work and she'd frequently check the time and attempt to excuse herself to begin her commute. In the same breath, she'd comment that she was dreading returning home to see her bothersome brothers. It became clear to us that this woman imagined herself to be much younger than her chronological age and living at home with her family. Another woman at a different scheme was enthusiastic to demonstrate her razorblade-swallowing skills at a show for

Staff told us that they felt a woman who had struggled to engage positively with staff and tenants significantly changed her attitude to other people as a result of her engagement in the Standing Together groups. This woman, who wasn't always easy-going, asked Ben and Jolie to tell Candy that she was missed when she was away. The participant loved films and was central in choosing a film for a cinema afternoon. Staff said that they felt it was in part because she had been treated so very sensitively by the Standing Together team that she was now friendlier and more relaxed with other tenants and staff.

"It was difficult to do this activity following a painful experience, but it was helpful. I felt relieved and shared some of the pain."

Group member

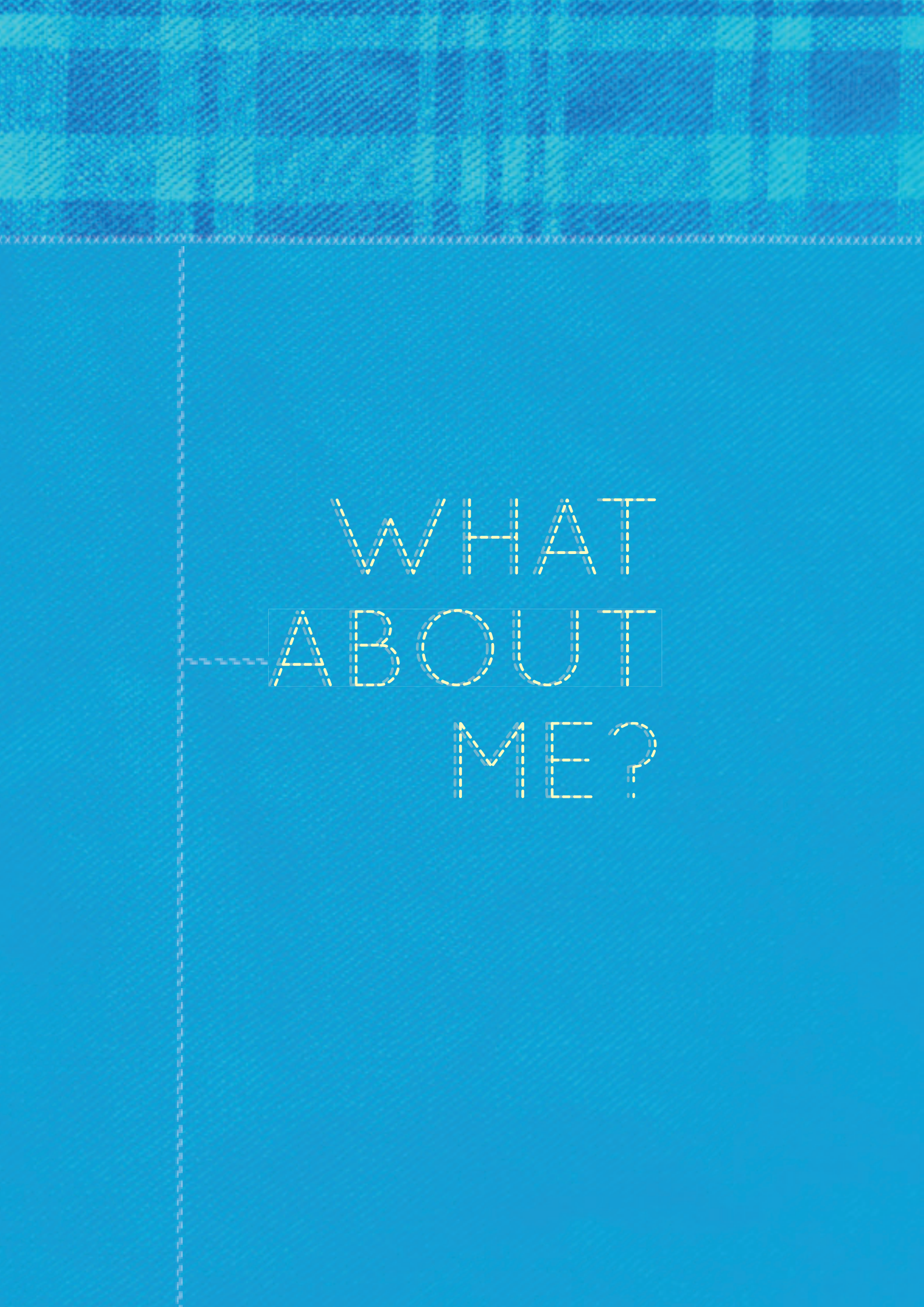
her fellow tenants, but would also speak to us about how busy she was at her civil service job.

While we wouldn't directly collude in these perspectives, neither would we refute them. The questions we asked were more focused on accessing group members' subjective experience in the present, rather than scrutinising the details of those perspectives. This is based on our learning on this project, but also aligns with best practice as recommended by the MHF.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

We came to conceive of Standing Together groups as a means of effecting cultural change within a housing scheme. We did this by challenging stigmas, stereotypes and prejudices among tenants and staff in the extra-care/retirement housing sector. Our aim was always to foster an environment that respected the difference of people's lived experience, acknowledging the pain that sometimes characterised that experience and encouraging people to express their authentic selves.

Implementing and measuring cultural change in any context is difficult. You are not always going to bring everyone with you, and the benefits may not always be immediately apparent. We are keen to continue effecting this change in later-life housing, driven by the values outlined above. An expression of this is our plan to work with other marginalised groups of people in later life, including people from the LGBTQ+ community and convicted prisoners.



WHAT
ABOUT
ME?

As facilitators we need to be sure to take care of ourselves. We can protect ourselves with adequate boundary setting, but we must also employ certain rituals of self-care.

We would routinely debrief among ourselves after each session. This provided an opportunity to capture and record our learning, but also to discuss anything that we might have found upsetting. In the groups, people would sometimes vividly discuss the distressing circumstances of their lives or traumatic experiences from their past. This included parental suicide and several accounts of childhood sexual abuse. These stories had the potential to haunt us in our own daily lives if not aired and explored. At the MHF, we have been fortunate to have access to counselling services. But we found it important to acknowledge how impactful each session had been, even just briefly, before seeking confidential support. We think that it is essential that anyone engaged in this work has access to a similar structure of support.

Throughout our first cohort, we often met tenants in their flats to escort them down to the group. We found that sessions could be emotionally demanding enough without also having to deal with the reality of people's (sometimes distressing) living spaces, and so we decided to refrain from doing this from the second cohort onwards. It was decided that this might spare us from the negative feelings these encounters provoked, and could ensure we spent equal amounts of time with each group member.

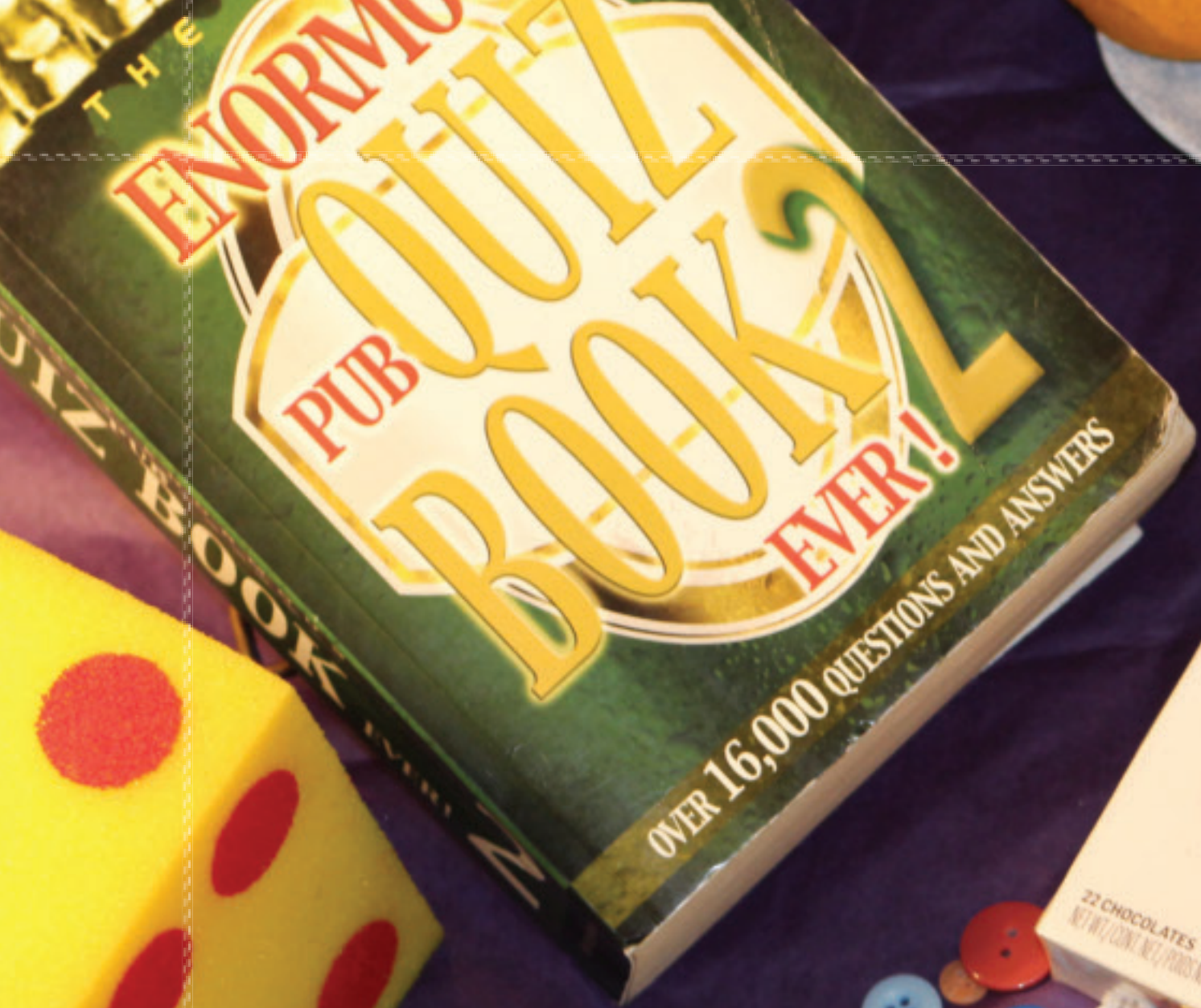
Finally, it is important to have a good knowledge of safeguarding, because it is everyone's responsibility. We came across few safeguarding concerns over the course of the project, but it is always better to know how to deal with any potential issues should they arise. This is obviously for the wellbeing of group members, but also for the peace of mind of facilitators.

MAKE YOUR
OWN FUN



It's good to work as part of a team, to contribute to something, to think creatively and to offer what you have learnt and see it turn into a finished, tangible thing you can hold onto and share with others. It's something that we do as facilitators when we plan a programme of events and activities, and we wanted to share this satisfaction with group members in the Standing Together project.

We often hear clinical phrases when in conversation about the work that we do: 'user-led services', 'co-produced programmes'... it all sounds awfully technical. All this really means is that, when you facilitate a group, it isn't all about you (shocking, we know!). It's about the community and the unique ideas that develop from time spent getting to know one another. A few months into each cohort, we began to get a better sense of the people and their interests. There would be something significant that the conversation kept returning to, which would begin to build into an idea, and we would spend the next few months creating something new.





Artisanal Belgian Chocolates

Fine Artisan Chocolates
with Natural Flavors
Fine Belgische Chocolades
met Natuurlijke Smaakstoffen
Van Schoon
Bittere Suiker en Melk

Fine Belgische Chocolades
met Natuurlijke Flavors
Fines Chocolates Belgiques
avec Saveurs Naturelles de Aromatisants

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COLLAGES

We sometimes observed on first arriving in later-life housing schemes across London that the lounges, corridors and communal spaces appeared empty and unused. Occasionally, the clocks had stopped or were wrong, lending the disorientating impression of a world where time had stopped or where no sense of time was present. The chairs were spaced apart against the walls in an arrangement that would prohibit conversation, there were padlocks on some of the fridges in the small communal kitchens, and old donated puzzles that never came out of their boxes collected dust on the shelves. Some people told us that, from the time they'd come to live there, they had scarcely ventured out of their flat and had never had the opportunity to meet their neighbours.

We wanted to encourage people to come out and to remain visible – to use the communal kitchens to take tea with their neighbours and enjoy conversation outside of the groups we'd established. We knew that the space needed to feel lived in and usable. We bought a giant picture frame for very little money online and encouraged group members to produce artwork and poems and to share their photographs and hobbies. We brought imagery representing each of the subjects we'd discussed, along with images of the group and of people enjoying the activities. At the end of the group sessions, the housing manager displayed the collage in the lounge to encourage people to continue to use the space.

"It's good to be seen and to take up space."

MEMORY BOXES

Memory was a recurring theme in our groups. We spoke at length about what we remembered of our respective pasts and, when working to strengthen the bonds of the group, we developed sessions that fostered a sense of our shared histories. These included: cultural norms and historic events remembered by all, the great British summer holiday camp, factory work in uniform, evacuation, emigration, bathhouses, first loves, and our relationships with our siblings and parents. We wanted to establish a way to capture and preserve these memories and support group members to explore and share them.

As a group, we chose to create memory boxes. It's a simple and inclusive idea and group members can utilise this to whatever extent they like. We spent a whole session decorating the boxes with illustrations, plastic jewels and feathers. We knew that their presentation would be personal and important and we carefully considered where they'd be displayed. Some people had decided to use the boxes for general storage or as a jewellery box; others regarded them as heirlooms to be passed down to relatives.

When we explored the items that we might preserve in the boxes, we found that some people had moved to later-life housing after a long stay in hospital, and that many of their possessions had been disposed of when they were evicted. Others had hundreds of significant trinkets to choose from. This disparity was difficult for some and we talked about what it feels like to lose something important. Some people told us it was liberating for them to start again without the clutter they'd accumulated over their lifetime.

Photographs were the main entries into the boxes. We were trusted with small, sun-bleached photos of family members we'd heard a lot about, of group members as young parents in the garden with their children, and of group members as children themselves pretending to drive their fathers' cars or reading at the dinner table. We tried to bring some of the colour back, and enlarged them up to four times their original size. We often talk about the profound effect this had on one group member, who almost cried at the sight of a large picture of her with her twin sister who had passed away some time ago. She said it was like seeing her again after a long time apart.

WELCOME HOME

Throughout the project, we talked at great length about the experience of moving from home into later-life housing. One of the first groups we ran back in the summer of 2015 raised this topic at an early stage, and people volunteered stories of the circumstances and events that led to their arrival at this particular housing scheme. Some people disclosed that they had been evicted by their landlords during an extended stay in hospital and that they were moved to a space where nothing

and nobody was recognisable. We saw an opportunity for the group to take some of the power back and write a letter to be given to new tenants when they arrive.

We began by brainstorming some basics: what did you want to know when you moved into this new community? What simple piece of information eluded you? We started with 'Dear new tenant', and group members began to speak over one another in their urgency to share their sentiments: "Welcome and don't worry", "This has been hard, but the people here are friendly" and "We'll help you to settle in".

From here, people began sharing more practical information – e.g. about the price of a haircut in the in-house salon, the time to be ready for lunch in the dining hall, and who has access to the day centre and how to be put on the waiting list.

This letter began to evolve, from a welcoming one-pager to an induction pack. We asked if the group had been given anything like this and they said that there was only a glossy corporate-looking pamphlet and that the information wasn't particularly relevant. There was something really powerful for people about the process of co-creating a document that would serve to welcome new members to their community. We agreed on the sections that were relevant, collected people's quotes and spent a whole afternoon colouring to create the front cover. It evolved into a very mindful and relaxing session.

We launched the book at an event for World Mental Health Day and invited the Chief Executive of one of our partner housing organisations, who went on to praise the efforts of the group and acknowledge that there was a need for greater consultation and tenant-led initiatives. This was a validating experience for everyone. The next week a new tenant arrived, and the group made a special effort to welcome her and to hand-deliver the pack they'd made.

MUSIC

It has been scientifically proven that music has a positive effect on our bodies and our minds. It reduces stress and can improve our sleep through its effects on our heart

"Lewisham Home Library Service have been an immense help to me as they come to meet with you to talk about books and to deliver the ones you chose, all free of charge."

"Getting a phone set up was important to me. I didn't have a phone for weeks when I came here, and I wanted to call my neighbour to let her know where I was."

rate and breathing. It's therefore not surprising to find that group members often reflected most fondly on our sessions around music. Over the last two and a half years, we have facilitated sessions including Hit or Miss, based on a popular 1959 BBC television programme called Juke Box Jury; Name That Tune; Name That Theme Tune (to popular TV shows); Name That Film Score (from cinematic classics); and even an Elvis Presley dancing and lip snarling competition!

*Come along, it's Wednesday
Have a cup of tea
Meet new people, friends together
You're in good company
Always laughing, parade your voice
We're feeling free!
At Dymond House Diamonds
At Dymond House Diamonds.*

We also hired a musician to come and facilitate musical workshops, and one group was supported to write their own theme song called 'The Dymond House Diamonds'.

At the end of the cohort, we worked with groups to develop a playlist to be recorded on CDs for use within the housing scheme.

This was based on the personally significant songs from each participant's past. We asked people to nominate a song and, if they felt comfortable doing so, to say what memory they associated with that song. People recounted significant life events such as first loves, children being born, happy holidays and going to a show. This served as a souvenir for group members at the end of our time together, and was used to trigger memories and discussions as the groups were sustained by volunteers.

MEMOIRS

The self-titled Rotherhithe Babes are an extraordinary group of women in their late 80s and early 90s who have lived in Rotherhithe their whole lives. They welcomed us to an existing coffee group that they had self-facilitated for many years, and allowed us to run sessions around their interests and to use the resources we had to introduce new conversations they hadn't considered before.

We soon learnt that the group had a wealth of knowledge to impart and that we needed to make the best of this opportunity to record their stories. We developed a book that detailed a collective history of growing up by the Thames during and after the war, and about the experience

of being a woman and managing a household and a marriage during the 1950s and '60s. We felt that this would resonate particularly strongly for other groups of women of their generation. We held a book launch at the Brunel Museum, which is very local to the group, and decorated the space to appear as a VE Day celebration. The book will be interesting for future generations unfamiliar with the experiences of women at that time.

DIGITAL CAMERAS

We have used photography as a creative means for our group members to record and self-curate an image of their daily lives. We did this two times over the course of the project – firstly as an experiment with the Rotherhithe Babes, who worked with disposable Kodak cameras to take photographs of the changing faces of the towns they grew up in. The best pictures were taken outside in the sunshine and, despite utilising the camera flash, the quality of photos taken inside was poor. People said that they found the cameras easy to use and some of their photos were enlarged and displayed at an exhibition at the Brunel Museum. We extended this activity to include the fourth and final cohort and invested in digital cameras.

To introduce the cameras, we held a warm-up discussion where we asked group participants to share their first memories of having their picture taken. Stories were shared about first communions under white veils, summer holidays on English pebble beaches, and bearing fake smiles before being evacuated. We saw snapshots of these memories presented in dusty photo albums brought to the group. But often there was little record of more recent times. It seemed that, at this point in their history, group participants were extremely unlikely to populate those empty pages at the back of the photo albums, and we wondered why.

The five simple digital cameras, which we bought online, had three buttons: one to turn the camera on, one to take a picture and one to view the photographs after they were

One of the first people we met who participated in the pilot and then again in the first cohort of groups used to say softly, “I’ll sing for you now” before giving a beautiful rendition of ‘When I fall in Love’ by Nat King Cole. Other group members were over familiar with his singing and were often a little jealous of the attention he stole. We were enraptured by him and used to try to avoid eye contact with one another because we were so teary!

Our ups and downs

Growing up and getting on with the Rotherhithe Babes



taken. We brought them to the groups and everybody was understandably sceptical. For some, this was the first piece of digital technology they'd engaged with. We took just a few minutes to sit down and explain the piece of technology and everyone took turns photographing one another.

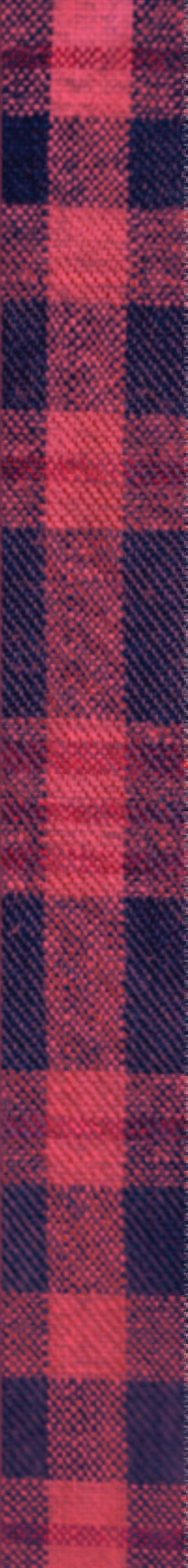
They photographed us, the cleaning lady, the builders on the scaffolding outside, their cups of tea and their wedges of cake. Some group members were short-sighted and concentrated intently with slow, deliberate movements, describing each step aloud. Two group members had Parkinson's disease and their hands were shaky, which blurred their pictures. None of these setbacks was a deterrent from their taking many megabytes worth of photographs.

The assignment was simple. We were not looking for conventionally beautiful, well-framed photographs. Rather, we encouraged them to take selfies, to show us what they see every day, what they do when they get up in the morning, what the view is from their window, what really annoys them, and what they love to see and do. We told them to be as creative as they liked.

Participants had two weeks to take their photographs, with a check-in halfway through. We excitedly flicked through the pictures on the cameras on our journey home on the tube. The images are a privileged glimpse into the reality of people's lives as they grow older in housing schemes in London in 2017. Some of the photos include:

We were invited into the home of a woman from Hong Kong, and were amazed to find it furnished with hundreds of paintings she herself had painted of islands in China where she'd spent her teenage years. This woman had an incredible fashion sense and would often wear elaborate jewellery she'd made, along with a tweed skirt suit and football boots. She would never let us leave without taking a snack from her treat box.

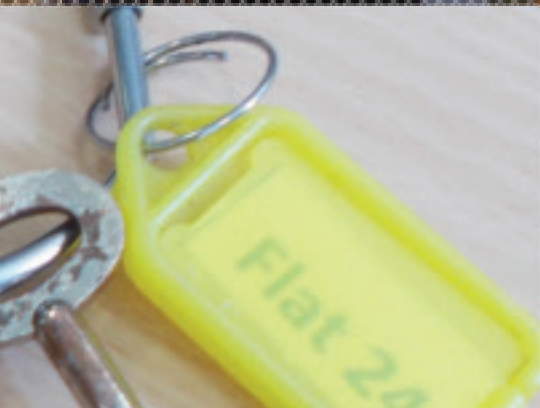
- THE CONTENTS OF A FRIDGE, RADIATING WITH THE GLOW OF ORANGE FANTA BOTTLES AFTER A WEEKLY SHOP HAD BEEN DELIVERED
- PARTICIPATING IN A 5K RACE

- 
- A MUG OF TEA BESIDE A MICROWAVABLE BURGER WAITING TO BE NUKED
 - A CLOSE-UP SHOT OF A SQUIRREL (GOOD WORK!)
 - A SELF-PORTRAIT IN THE MIRROR, WITH FAMILY PHOTOS REFLECTED IN THE BACKGROUND
 - SOME UNMADE BEDS
 - A FEW ACCIDENTAL SHOTS OF PEOPLE'S FEET
 - EXERCISE SESSIONS IN THE COMMUNAL LOUNGE

People gave their consent for us to use the images and we are hoping to exhibit them in due course. The cameras were a means for people to be active and share their own narrative about the everyday in their lives visually. This is important at a time of life where sometimes people can feel that they are just recipients of care, that too much responsibility has been taken away and that there is very little choice in their lives.

In one group, a tenant passed away unexpectedly. There are photographs of him at a Standing Together group a week earlier. These photos were important for those that were close to him.

The use of digital cameras brought something of contemporary culture into the participants' lives. People are photographed less and less as they age. The Standing Together photography activity gave people the opportunity to try something new and outside of their comfort zone. This gave them the chance to be both the photographer and the subject of their own and their neighbours' photographs respectively.







ARE YOU
MAD?

It has been the nature of our project that every six months we say goodbye to our four groups and start again, with a brand new cohort, in different parts of the city. We introduce ourselves to lots of new people and introduce Standing Together all over again as a project run by a charity in Central London... We don't broadcast that this charity is the MHF. We give a nod to loneliness and people are willing to acknowledge that there's lots of that around. We say we want to improve people's overall wellbeing through good conversation and fun activities. This is true, and we have found this to be palatable and socially acceptable enough to encourage people to attend. But then there is the wider community of sometimes more wily tenants, who have seen the logos on the posters and start to spread rumours about the group members: "People call them the mad club," they say, "We're not like them." "We're not coming in there." "Don't talk to me, I don't want to be seen talking to you." "You're here for the mad club." "I ain't got dementia. There's nothing wrong with me."

"There is something I can do."

"The phrase 'mental health' makes people nervous."

"Talking about mental health and talking in general helps you to feel better, even if you didn't realise you were feeling bad to begin with."

"Even the royals have mental health problems; we all have."

We're mindful of being respectful and of the fact that people don't like to offer their experiences around mental health very readily. They may have already experienced a sense of stigma from coming to an 'old people's home', from needing more support to do day-to-day things, or from having received a dementia diagnosis. Instead, we try to introduce the subject gently and often rely on an MHF initiative: a national event in October called Tea and Talk, which is an opportunity for communities to come together and raise some money and have a natter specifically about looking after your wellbeing.

We celebrate this day with extra-special cakes and a quiz that asks questions that we hope will challenge people's ideas of mental health and break down some of the stigma. We try to invite people from outside the groups to come along and share in the excitement of the event.

People tell us it's good to talk about it.

PUT THE
KETTLE ON

There are some very practical, simple steps required to run a peer-support group. Of course, there are skills to be honed and you'll need willing participants. You'll need to impose a loose structure, as people like to know what's coming next. And you can't forget the crucial ingredients: a pot of tea and good cake. We know it's not advised by health professionals, but (as we try to communicate early on) we're not health professionals. We brought fruit to accompany the cake, strawberries and cream in the spring, and large helpings of mangoes and grapes. Some group members told us they enjoyed this, though largely the fruit was ignored in favour of the jam sponge and lemon drizzle.

A cup of tea made for you by somebody else is a pleasure. Everybody enjoys it. A nice slice of cake and time to chat or even just to listen to the familiar sound of idle conversation is important. It provides an interval in the time between structured activity and wrapping up to return home. It's a space to relax. It's as important as any preparations you'd agonised over back at the office or on the tube that morning.





WHAT'S
NEXT?

We are keen to ensure that our work is continued and that we can support organisations and individuals across the UK to hold Standing Together groups and to develop similar projects. We are seeking funding for many exciting new initiatives, including a Welsh Standing Together Cymru project, and for Standing Together groups for the wider community of people experiencing isolation living in their own homes across London. We are excited for the start of a new project we've written called Assume Nothing, working with LGBTQ+ people in later life, and we are also co-producing a toolkit with more practical step-by-step information to support facilitators to set up and facilitate their own groups. In a nutshell, you have not heard the last of the Standing Together project.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



JOLIE GOODMAN

Jolie is an artist who has been working in mental health for the last 20 years. Her experiences as a mental health service user and her creativity as an artist shape the work she does. Her favourite part of the Standing Together project has been building relationships with people and having the privilege to learn about people's lives and the things that have been important to them. At the start of the project, Jolie chose the image of dahlias. They reminded her of her father, who used to grow them. Dahlias come in diverse varieties, but they are all part of the same flower family. This seemed like a good metaphor for the Standing Together groups.



CANDY WORF

Candy has a great passion for writing, reading and oral history. She previously co-founded a women's safety NGO in her home town of Medway, and more recently she heads up a project tackling hate crime against people with learning disabilities across the UK. She also facilitates groups on another peer-support project for young mothers and their families in London. Her favourite part of the Standing Together Project was having the opportunity to be creative every day, and learning from so many ordinary, fantastic and fascinating lives.



BEN PLIMPTON

Ben is originally from the USA and was a volunteer on the pilot project for Standing Together. He previously worked on the Big Lottery-funded Virtual Support Project at the LGBT charity PACE, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Psychology part time at the University of Hertfordshire. His favourite part of the Standing Together project was learning about people's lives, and helping to create a space where they could feel seen and acknowledged for their experience and contribution.

THANK YOU!



We would like to say a big (huge!) thank you to each of the following people:

For your tireless efforts in fundraising for later-life mental health projects, thank you to Ralph Coats and Toby Williamson. Without you, the Standing Together project would never have taken place. Thank you Cindy Glover for your expertise and all of the learning you applied in the pilot project, as well as for contributing in our advisory group.

Thank you to our two project partner leads – Vanessa Pritchard-Wilkes for Housing & Care 21 and Pamela Sinnott for Notting Hill Housing Trust – for your continued support during the project.

Thank you to all of our advisory group members for being a sounding board for our ideas at each stage of the project, and especially to the tenants who attended our meetings to lend your views. Thanks also to Jeremy Portis for promoting the project.

Thank you to Steve Smith for your fantastic music workshops, and to Kevin Ireland for your wonderful photography.

Thank you to the MHF staff for your enthusiastic support and for coming to co-facilitate groups and lend your experience. Special thanks go to Antonis Kousoulis and Jo Ackerman.

Thank you to the housing-scheme staff, who were instrumental in supporting us to organise the space by making tea and supporting people to access groups, including Evon Nyahuye, Florentina Kasabagi, Christine Tjero, David Butlin, Helen Calvin, Lisa Birchall, Kathleen Forest, Catherine McKim and Donna Robertshaw.

Thank you to the incredible volunteers we have worked with on the project, including Nora Kavsinyte, Tasha Driver, Susana Martins, Mlaeky Shnnes, Vic Sharma and Julie Burchil, and to Mandy Wooster for supporting with the recruitment of volunteers.

Lastly, and most importantly, thank you to all of the 300+ tenants we had the pleasure of meeting over the last two years. Thank you for making the project what it was.

NOTES ON

COHORT	A way of organising the groups into four periods of time.
CO-PRODUCE	Work in equal partnership with people who are participating in a group.
COLLUDE	To plot secretly with someone.
ETHOS	Value system.
EXTRA-CARE HOUSING SCHEME	Housing designed with the needs of frailer older people in mind and with varying levels of care and support available on site. People who live in extra-care housing have their own self-contained homes, their own front doors and a legal right to occupy the property. Extra-care housing is also known as very sheltered housing, assisted living, or simply 'housing with care'. It comes in many built forms, including blocks of flats, bungalow estates and retirement villages. It is a popular choice among older people because it can sometimes provide an alternative to a care home.
LEGACY	Something that carries on after the Standing Together project has ended.
MARGINALISE	To treat a person, group or concept as insignificant or peripheral.
PEER	A person of the same age, status or ability as another specified person.
PREJUDICE	A preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.
RESILIENCE	The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.

LANGUAGE

RETIREMENT HOUSING SCHEME

A person living in this type of scheme has their own flat or bungalow in a block, or on a small estate, where all the other residents are older people (usually over 55). With a few exceptions, all developments (or 'schemes') provide independent, self-contained homes with their own front doors.

SELF-MANAGEMENT

Self-management is about the methods, skills and strategies we use to effectively manage our own activities towards achieving certain objectives. For those of us who live with long-term mental health conditions, this means concentrating on interventions and developing training and skills to take care – and gain direct control – of our lives.

SHELTERED HOUSING

See 'Retirement housing scheme'.

STEREOTYPES

A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.

STIGMA

A mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person.

STRATEGIC

Relating to the identification of long-term or overall aims and interests and the means of achieving them.

USER-LED SERVICES

A service run and controlled by people who use health and social care services, including people with physical or learning disabilities, mental health service users, and older people and their families and carers.

WELLBEING

The state of being comfortable, healthy or happy.





