



'Stories to the Door' – Straeon i'r Drws

and

'Stories by Phone'- Straeon trwy Ffôn



EVALUATION REPORT DECEMBER 2020

A creative approach to tackling loneliness

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A creative approach to tackling loneliness

'Stories to the Door' initially sprang out of People Speak Up's (PSU) involvement with The Carmarthenshire United Support Partnership (CUSP)(1) and also the Campaign to End Loneliness (2). The project was also supported by Llanelli Town Council, who had identified a problem of increasing isolation in Llanelli & Carmarthenshire.

PSU designed this creative pilot project to tackle loneliness and isolation amongst older people. Stories to the Door (STTD) was launched in May 2019, taking referrals from the organisations in CUSP. Thanks to good results from the pilot, Beyond the Border stepped in to fund a relaunch of the project as 'Stories by Phone' in April 2020, diversifying delivery to overcome the constraints of lockdown. As the pandemic continued, and increased isolation still further, PSU secured funding from the ACW Stabilisation Fund to continue and develop Stories by Phone independently, as one of their raft of community arts for health & well-being projects (3).

- (1) CUSP includes: Carmarthenshire Association for Voluntary Services (CAVS), Carmarthenshire County Council, Hywel Dda Health Board, Tir Coed, Carmarthenshire Carers Trust: Crossroads Sir Gâr, Care & Repair, Sense, British Red Cross, Age Cymru Dyfed)
- (2) <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/campaign-end-loneliness-pembrokeshire-carmarthenshire/>
- (3) PSU currently run a number of projects for the community, further info at <https://peoplespeakup.co.uk/current-projects/>

Aims of the project

To employ a creative, non-digital way of communicating with older people who are lonely and isolated. To create time and space for older people to feel connected and to enjoy intellectual engagement with another human being. To help combat the negative effects of isolation by valuing each person's individual story, building social contacts, providing intellectual stimulation, creating positive experiences, and encouraging creativity. An underlying aim of all PSU's work is to help people 'find their voice', to create empowerment and resilience.

The project uses the unique power of 'story' to stimulate creativity and to work on a therapeutic level in a gentle, indirect way to increase feelings of self-worth and to increase our sense of connection with a wider community.

Another overall aim was to make an early intervention where isolation and loneliness had been identified by the referring agency, in order to prevent the decrease in mental health that frequently occurs in such situations, leading to more serious mental health issues, such as long-term depression or chronic anxiety. PSU was able to use the experience gained from a previous project working with the Alzheimer's Society to benefit those referred to the storytelling project who were experiencing dementia.

Methods of Delivery

Stories to the Door (May to Dec 2019)

Isolated older people, referred through the CUSP partnership, received a personal visit to their homes from a storyteller (paired with a volunteer or other project worker). After building rapport with the individual, the storyteller would offer to tell them a story. This became a dynamic, interactive process, following a different course with different individuals, but frequently led to the person themselves telling stories, reminiscence, discussion of stories, other creative activities such as poetry or inventing new stories together. With some of the clients experiencing dementia, depression or other mental health issues, the storyteller worked sensitively to tailor each session to suit an individual's interests, needs and abilities, to provide intellectual stimulation and always, as is the ethos of PSU, to recognise and value the person's own contribution and creativity, to build their self-esteem.

The sessions are creative, participatory, engaging and designed to meet the individual needs of each person. Speaking to the referring agency and/or family members is an important part of the preparation, delivery and follow-up. This enables project workers to gain background knowledge, gain the trust of participants and build rapport with them. Storytelling brings people together by sharing the moment in time. Reminiscence, autobiographical storytelling, traditional stories, myths and legends all connect people with each other, those around them, their past and the present. Each storyteller uses their intuition and skill to find 'the right story' to tell, often one that is triggered by the conversation or by the stories the participant chooses to tell.



In addition to the one-to-one visits/calls, because PSU runs a number of mental health and well-being creative arts projects, our project workers were able to increase the participants' level of social contact by connecting them with other projects. Some STTD participants took up opportunities to join the 'Saturday Gatherings' in person, before covid, and some, during lockdown, were able to connect with a small number of others through facilitated zoom sessions.

Stories by Phone (April 2020 to current date)

This project continued the same approach but now making contact with individuals by phone, respecting the need to observe the covid-induced constraints on physical contact. Where the individual had the ability, interest to do so and necessary equipment/internet connection video-calls were used.

Besides individual one-to-one phone calls, in some instances the Storytellers worked with small groups, connecting by Zoom, e.g. a group of up to 6 residents of a care home. One person living alone at home enjoyed their stories so much they invited another friend by zoom and 'a story party' was formed. (4)

- (4) Short video about Stories By Phone <https://youtu.be/LrEXpyRfOIM>



Examples of how the project works – Participants’ stories as told by our project workers:

(All these stories are anonymised: we have changed people’s names and taken out any geographical references that would identify them)

Greg’s Story

Something that became very apparent when we first visited ‘**Greg**’ was that he needed to be truly listened to, something he totally lacked, and he was just sitting alone at home and drinking. Unable to leave his house much, he had no-one to tell his many stories to, which was a shame, as he had some fantastic stories. The progression during the visits was that at first he would share many stories and would talk at us rather than with us. However after a few sessions he began asking general questions such as ‘how have you been?/ what have you been up to?’ This progressed into Greg asking us questions during his stories such as: “do you know what that is? Have you heard of one of them before?” He was welcoming us into his stories by ensuring we fully understood them, and demonstrating empathy with us. We showed we valued his stories by recording them and then playing them back to him later, which he really appreciated. These recordings also gave him a stimulus to expand on the memories he was sharing, as it led to more conversation and questions. He even left the house twice for PSU events e.g. Llanelli Voices – an intergenerational spoken word and visual projects. His recorded stories and photographs were part of the exhibition. He met the older people’s commissioner of Wales at our Christmas gathering, then to crown it all went on to win a national photography competition.

Elizabeth’s Story

Before Covid, ‘**Elizabeth**’ ran a dementia group and during the lockdown was keen to talk about that and how societal attitudes to dementia had changed during her lifetime. During our chats, she became very interested in coming to our PSU ‘Sharing Saturdays’, so we explored stories from her childhood and her working life that she wanted to share, helping her shape them for public telling. She showed us photographs from her life which acted as a stimulus for the stories she told us. The stories Phil told her were also a starting point for her to share other memories. This gave Elizabeth some ‘food’ for her still-active mind and gave value to the contribution she had to make with her unique stories.’

Marigold’s Story

‘**Marigold**’ suffers from dementia but, unable to leave the house often, she had no stimulation or interaction outside her family. We were asked to provide creative sessions for her, to provide an outlet for her considerable energy and also to give her family a break.

During our visits, it was important to focus on interacting with her, based on asking questions about her life and particular moments of her life that were important to her. At first, Marigold was reluctant to speak about her life, expressing the sense that we would not be interested. Within a couple of sessions, she had gained confidence and was sharing stories about her life growing up in her area and what it was like, in comparison to now.

At first, she would only speak about where she grew up and what it was like. We thought about ways we could find out stories about particular things that had happened during her childhood. The storyteller suggested telling a story and seeing if that would spark anything new for her to talk about.

This worked, as Marigold immediately brought up fresh, interesting stories that we had never heard. She went into detail and shared the story from start to finish. This showed us that there are many stories that

could be unlocked, with the right story told as the original stimulus. This encouraged us to go further down this path to see what other memories could be unlocked.

The idea was to build on these stories and voice-record them to share with others through PSU's Sharing Events, giving Marigold a reason to communicate and a chance to reminisce about more positive times.

Four fuller case studies – participants' individual stories:

Betty

'Betty' was referred due to being isolated, lonely and in a low state of mind, becoming increasingly silent and uncommunicative. Betty's daughter 'Dot' said her mother, whose career had been in the field of science, was sceptical about a 'visit from two storytellers' and doubted if it would be of any use. At first Betty said she didn't want to hear a story, that she wasn't interested. But after getting to know us more, she was willing to 'try' a story ("Oh, alright then") and then, to her own surprise, became really interested. She asked us to repeat parts of the story and gave detailed feedback on what she thought about it. Later, Dot said that her mother was normally uncommunicative and she just couldn't believe she had talked with our two project workers for over an hour. She said that was the most Betty had laughed in a long time.

Next time, Betty shared many stories about her youth as she said the story told her the week before had brought old memories back. We did an exercise where she created the end of a story. At times she would be fast to come up with an answer and other times we would all work together based on prompting questions such as: What would you do? Where did she go next? This allowed her to step into her imagination and reconnect with a creativity she had not used for a long time.

Jean

The timing of the pandemic and the first lockdown could not have come at a worse time for 'Jean', who had only just lost her husband. When he died unexpectedly Jean was in a state of shock. She and her husband had done everything together for over fifty years so she felt utterly lost without him.

When our 'Stories by Phone' storyteller first contacted Jean, she was still in this state of shock and deep grieving. Her sense of loss and loneliness were deepened by the enforced isolation of lockdown, as no friends or support agencies could visit. Jean did have a particular friend she was keen to contact but her state of mind was so low and so all-encompassing that for her there was no future only this dreadful grief-stricken present. So, because there was only the present, and fearing rejection, Jean was afraid to phone her friend in case they were too busy to talk to her just then.

Contact from our storyteller has been very important to Jean. Naturally, he had to be very sensitive in his approach, given what a dark place Jean was in – literally dark too, as she was so low that she could not even raise the motivation to open the curtains and sit alone in the dark, in silence. Not being able to face the bedroom she'd shared with her husband, she was sleeping in her chair or on the sofa.

Gently our storyteller built a rapport with Jean, by demonstrating understanding of what a deep grief she was experiencing, and sensitively opening up a channel of communication, ensuring that she was not completely alone with her loss. In talking to somebody else about her fears of phoning her friend, Jean came to see that she could avoid feeling rejected by asking when it might be convenient to have a longer call or to meet up outside? She did, and a time was arranged. It was first chink of light in the darkness.

Over the weeks, Jean began to talk about her feelings. Slowly, during the conversations, Jean would move a little way from despair towards engaging with our storyteller, and gradually began to think about other things she could do to help her cope with her loss and make her life less lonely – getting a cat, returning to her hobby of painting. She was willing to listen to a variety of carefully-chosen stories over the phone, which gave her a distraction and fresh point of interest in the week.

Slowly, she even began to make plans, thinking about moving, discussing her ideas and her fears with the storyteller. We were even able to give practical and emotional help by putting Jean in touch with someone who had already moved to the kind of sheltered accommodation Jean was considering moving to, helping to make the possibility more concrete.

Over the weeks, a sense of ‘who Jean used to be’ before her bereavement emerged. Currently her confidence fluctuates and she has up days and down days but she always ends the call saying she feels brighter than when the phone first rang. Having got to know her, our storyteller commented that he thought she was ‘someone who would have a lot to offer’ at normal times, and that hopefully, when she began to emerge from this low place, PSU can continue to reduce Jean’s loneliness by inviting her to participate in other activities, such as the ‘Spoken Word Saturday’ and putting her in touch with other social networks.

Holly and Angela

We piloted an ‘inter-generational’ element within the project by arranging a sharing of stories between two older participants and our ‘Young People Speak Up’ group, to the benefit of both.

‘Holly’ had been calling Age Cymru, as she had no family nearby and felt very lonely. This was leading to depression and feelings of anxiety and fear. Our storyteller began phoning, and had the idea to help overcome Holly’s sense of isolation by connecting her with our the young people in our YPSU group.

The young people came up with questions about childhood and life in general to ask ‘Holly’ over the phone. The young people began to explore Holly’s life by drawing what they imagined she might look like, and creating her as a character in poetry and stories, which really interested Holly. The young people are creating a scrapbook for her that has lots of pictures of themselves, messages, art, stories and poetry. Holly has also given me ‘words of wisdom’ to pass onto the young people, drawn from her life experience.

‘Angela’s’ daughter was worried that Angela, who suffered from dementia, was going to deteriorate quickly as she was having no visits and no interaction. We could see that Angela needed stimulation and to have some sense of control to steer her way through her condition. Angela used to love writing stories when she was young. Dementia has given her short-term memory problems but her long-term memory is great. It took quite a while to win Angela’s confidence but eventually she felt comfortable enough to share childhood memories. Now she shares stories on every phone call without needing a prompt. The storyteller uses Angela’s stories to create a new story or poem to share with her in the next call.

Our young people again sent questions for her, then created a story based on her life but with fictional changes. Angela really enjoyed this and seemed to feel connected to the young people, asking many questions about them. She sent her love to them and added that she hopes “we all get to meet one day”. She asked for the story to be written down and posted to her. Now the storyteller is working on how she and Angela could do some new creative writing together.

Participant comments about their experience of the project:

“I felt a lot better after talking to you.” Greg

“That is the most my mother has ever laughed in years.” Elizabeth’s daughter

“It’s lovely to hear my wife laugh again and be herself” Marigold’s husband

“I really enjoy our phone calls.” Ursula

“These calls are such a blessing; it’s great to hear Ursula laughing. And I can get essential cleaning in her room done while she’s on the phone.” Ursula’s carer

"My mother really enjoyed it, it really cheered her up" – Betty’s Daughter

Evaluation phone calls to ‘sample’ project participants

We arranged for the project evaluator to ring a sample of participants directly in order to have an independent person to elicit feedback about the value of the ‘Stories By Phone’ calls.

Here is some of the feedback obtained, in the participants’ own words:

It's nice to have a little chat. She seems really interested in my memories - like the doll I had as a child. We talk about the past and I remember all sorts of things.

It's different to family and friends calling as we talk about other things: it's a happy sort of chat.

It's a totally different kind of communication. I liked the fantasy.

It was thought-provoking. One of Phil's stories stimulated me to write a short story of my own. Phil's a really good storyteller and it was really lovely to be able to share things with Phil too.



Changes observed and recorded by our storytellers during the visits/calls:

'By the end of the session, (the participant's) mood had improved – less angry, more focussed'

'They seemed 'lighter' somehow'

'More present'

'Faces relaxed; anxiety levels clearly dropped'

'Anger slowly, slowly dropped away until they were able to be neutral, showing in their tone of voice, speech slowing, pitch dropping etc.'

'Losing inhibitions about speaking about themselves'

'Asking questions for the first time'

'Much more communicative – and began to ask for stories without waiting for the suggestion'

'Smiling and laughter'

'Opened up more about their life'

'Much more commenting and reacting'

'Less comments that no one is interested in hearing about their life'

Feedback from Beyond the Border Wales International Storytelling Festival

“It’s very moving to read these case studies of real impact, and to see direct evidence of how careful and sensitive listening by skilled storytellers, and a really responsive story offer has boosted individual self-worth and community connection at such a challenging time and in so many different ways. I sat in on one of the zoom parties between young and older people and the sense of joy and fun across the generations was palpable. PSU’s excellent management of the work, being responsive to people’s individual needs and creating gateways into other support, mirrors the way human story-sharing offers people multiple routes - towards healing, escape, allowing emotions to safely surface and be heard and recognised. We’re really glad we could support this innovative and creative project, and we wish the project every success as it continues.”

Naomi Wilds, Artistic Director, Beyond the Border Wales International Storytelling Festival

Outcomes for the participants:

- Reduced isolation and loneliness
- Increased amount of social contact with other people
- Increased feeling of connection with others and with ‘the wider world’ outside the home
- Increased intellectual stimulation and mental activity, including creative activity, reflection, conversation and discussion
- More opportunity to make a contribution: increased sense of self-worth
- More opportunity to be in control, to ‘steer’ the content rather than just be a ‘recipient’, (e.g. to choose the type of story told and heard) increasing the sense of empowerment
- Increased amount of communication, social interaction
- Increased opportunity for laughter and moments of enjoyment
- Increased access to the arts through professional storytellers brought to them
- Improved mental health and well-being
- Increased resilience

Outcomes for families, partners, carers

- Short period of respite for carers while the visit/call takes place
- Improved mental health of the participant had a beneficial impact on the carer (sometimes short term, sometimes a more lasting effect)
- Reduced anxiety for distant families unable to visit due to covid (as they knew their loved one was at least getting some social contact during lockdown, from a trusted organisation)

Outcomes for the organisation / creative arts sector

- Increased Work opportunities for creative practitioners during the pandemic . This project provided critical paid work opportunities to storytellers whose ability to earn a living had been badly affected by the cancellation of live performance work.
- Increased the 'reach' of PSU to a new group of isolated people in the community, enabling them to bring their services to more people in need of them
- Benefited the member organisations of the CUSP partnership by taking referrals
- Benefited the CUSP partners by demonstrating the way the creative arts can work to improve mental health and well-being and giving them access to a wider range of therapeutic interventions. Statutory partners could see the benefits of forming partnerships with the creative arts organisations in the third sector to achieve health and well-being outcomes.

Additional outcomes

Beyond the outcomes PSU had set out to achieve through this storytelling project, there were additional positive outcomes:

- **Intergeneration contact**

Due to the fact PSU runs a number of mental health and well-being creative arts projects, our project workers were able to increase the participants' level of social contact by connecting them with other projects.

- **Professional Development and Progression into Employment**

Another 'side' benefit was that one of the project workers, with qualifications in drama but fairly new to storytelling, said they were able to learn additional skills in a one-to-one setting. Having joined PSU as a newly-graduated volunteer, they gained additional skills and work experience and successfully progressed into paid employment.

Another project worker said an unexpected benefit of this one-to-one work had enabled them to further hone their listening skills, commenting that storytellers already needed to have good listening skills, but that the one-to-one work with these particular participants had required very close and careful listening.

- **Accessibility**

Another outcome was that we found the storytelling project made storytelling more accessible for some participants than it had been normally. One participant had a hearing impairment and said she could not hear properly in groups or gatherings, so would not have participated in any of our group projects or storytelling in a venue with an audience. The 'stories by phone' gave her new access to oral storytelling.

How receptive were the participants to the Storytelling basis of the project?

Some were immediately receptive: others, who may not have encountered storytelling for adults in their usual lives, or who hadn't been especially interested in stories, books or the arts generally, were more 'neutral' about the story element but willing to 'give it a go'. Once the stories were introduced they were valued and enjoyed by all these participants and they would proactively ask for a story each week.

A minority were initially unsure or negative, expressing scepticism that 'stories' would interest them. In this case, the storytellers would spend more time initially in general conversation, gauging the participants' interests in order to choose stories they might be more receptive to, or just building rapport in general before introducing the story element. The two most sceptical participants ended up proactively asking for a story each week and demonstrating real interest.

The Storytellers adapted their approach to suit different individuals and interests, using a range of stories (e.g. stories from real life; traditional folk tales, myths and legends; improvised stories using objects, photographs or other prompts). As the pilot progressed and the pool of storytellers was increased, the Project Manager also began to match tellers and participants, choosing those tellers whose approach and interests might best match the recipient of the stories.

What specific benefits are there to the ‘Story’ based approach (as opposed to the more usual ‘befriending’ services)?

The storytelling project taps into a deep human need: be a person 8 or 80, there seems to be a need to be told stories, and the project serves a need that no-one else would meet, with a one-to-one personal telling just for them. For many participants, this would be the first time they had experienced this since they were children. Something deep in our collective subconscious craves stories, and this is why the project works so well. Traditional stories are things that have lasted for centuries for a good reason: because they serve a purpose. Shared stories like folk tales also connect us to our community and so they are an ideal tool for reducing the sense of loneliness when age, dementia, coronavirus or other issue has led to isolation.

Stories explore many human dilemmas (such as dealing with illness, death and loss) in a non-threatening, indirect way, and can allow for emotions and memories to surface and be expressed in a cathartic way. Folk and fairy tales ‘have no agenda’: you can just tell the story and ‘leave it there’.

Stories can bring about emotional healing at a subconscious level without someone’s individual ‘issue’ being discussed directly, or they can be used as part of a discussion if the person wants to talk about something in their lives.

Conversely, where lives are lonely and difficult, fictional stories can provide a welcome escape into the world of fiction.

By inviting the participants to tell stories of their own, or to ask for a type of story, this enabled them to ‘steer’ and influence the exchange, rather than being ‘led’ by questions etc, producing a more empowering effect. It gave them the chance to tell their stories and to feel valued as people, which is vital to combat the way our society often fails to value elders and those experiencing dementia, often seeing them as ‘in need’ rather than having something still to offer.

The stories added stimulating intellectual content and a fresh point of interest for those unable to leave their homes and proved a means of ‘reaching parts’ that just ordinary conversation could not have reached, stimulating memories and stories that participants had otherwise forgotten. The unusual content of some folk tales and myths triggered forgotten life stories (eg. a ‘wise woman and hedgerow healer’ in a folk tale reminded ‘Ursula’ about a story her mother had told her about visiting an old woman who made herbal medicines, whilst living in Africa – not something that would have just ‘cropped up’ in a chat).

Stories are an excellent tool for reminiscence therapy. They work on many levels and in different ways: not only do they provide moments of present enjoyment as people remember good times past, but they can help people be ‘present’ in their own lives, to connect with their own life-time story, to help them make sense of their own lives, remembering and reflecting on their own life-journey.

Number of project beneficiaries (up to 17.11.20)

Direct beneficiaries (combined projects) 24

Stories to the Door /Straeon i'r Drws – Personal visits

Number of individuals visited – 7

Number of visits – 28

Stories by Phone / Straeon Trwy Ffôn – Telephone calls or video calls

Number of individuals called – 9

Number of individuals living in residential care who took part – 6

Number of phone/video call sessions – 61

(Calls can vary from 20 minutes to over an hour, depending on the needs of the person)

Additional, indirect beneficiaries

(Benefits include respite for families/partners/carers or benefiting by respite, also by improved mental well-being of the beneficiary having a positive impact on the task of caring) - 15

(combined total of both stages of the project)

Did any participants *not* show any positive benefits from the project?

Two participants were not able to continue due to their overall condition deteriorating (eg needing hospital treatment or their dementia advancing). One participant was referred to an animal therapy project as her interests lay more in that direction more than in an arts project.

One participant began by opening up about his illness and feelings of isolation and engaged a little with the story dice - he then cancelled as he was not feeling up to it and then did not want to continue - he did not give a direct reason.

A further participant was very keen to get involved but a series of appointments clashed due to hospital appointments. Post-hospital, she was going to stay with family with no access to any tech, which prevented her continuing.

Summary and potential for the future:

The response from participants and the outcomes of this story-based intervention have been very positive in 20 out of 24 referrals (4 did not continue for the reasons outlined above). The majority of participants clearly derived observable benefits and asked for the visits/calls to be repeated and family members/carers/partners similarly valued the visits/calls and commented on improved mental well-being and other benefits (see Case studies and Comments section). It should be noted that the work was carried out by skilled professional storytellers with experience of working in the field of therapeutic arts in a community and/or health setting and that their ability to use a sensitive, flexible, person-centred approach was deemed to be critical to the success of the project. The matching of storyteller with participant was another skilled task, carried out by the project manager, based on comprehensive referral notes and her knowledge of the project workers' experience and approach.

Potential for the future:

- This approach could be successfully replicated in other areas if Local Authorities commission PSU to work on developing this working model within their health and social strategies and/or if other funding can be secured. *
- The possibility of some participants 'swapping' storytellers has been discussed, as a way of extending the number of different people the participants get to 'meet' and to increase the variety of the creative and social content
- Taking the last point further, it might be worth exploring the further development of 'marrying up' some individuals, using a sensitive matching, where video calls are being used, and where appropriate. This could extend the reach of the budget, facilitate friendships between participants and expand their circle of contacts and support. As happened organically with one of the video calls, it might be possible to create small facilitated groups by joining several participants together. In some instances, as a final stage, one could explore the possibility of some small groups getting together to exchange stories independently, without paid facilitation, to be self-sustaining with just occasional 'check-ins' to ensure it was still happening and working well.

* Note re: Referral Criteria

The project as such did not set the referral criteria but accepted referrals from the CUSP partnership from support agencies who used their professional judgement as to who was in need of support and who might benefit from the story-based project. As the story project continues as an independent project run by PSU in Carmarthenshire, and/or expands into other areas, it might be helpful to have clearly-defined referral criteria agreed with referring agencies in case of increased demand and to ensure that those most in need and those who can most benefit are those accessing the service.

For more information, please contact and/or visit: www.peoplespeakup.co.uk/ info@peoplespeakup.co.uk

