

Celebrating achievements in Staffordshire and York

Silver Dreams OPTiC (Older People Taking Control) project



About OPTiC

OPTiC began in October 2012 to support older people with sight loss to manage the changes they encounter in later life. This 18 month project set out to reach isolated older people with or at risk of sight loss and support them to:

- have a better understanding of how to manage their eye health and to give confidence in seeking support
- increase awareness and take-up of support available to them
- make a difference to the lives of others through peer support or campaigning
- have improved confidence and self-esteem.

What we know

The risk of sight loss increases with age. There are almost two million people in the UK with sight loss and 80 per cent of these are over 60. Sight loss is one of the most feared life changes associated with getting older yet at least 50 per cent of serious sight loss in older people is preventable or treatable. Many people with sight loss remain unknown to health and social care services and miss out on support.

What we did

Together, Royal National Institute of Blind People, Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service, North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service, Age UK Stafford and District, Action for Blind People (Action) and York Blind and Partially Sighted Society (YBPSS) have supported older people in Stafford and York. We offered:

- eye screening and eye health advice to older people in the community
- user-led peer-support schemes, sharing practical knowledge and experience and providing emotional support to each other
- volunteer “buddying” schemes, providing practical support for transport, hobbies, shopping and other daily tasks which can be challenging for vulnerable older people
- “Change Exchange” self-advocacy groups – campaigning for improvements in local services and facilities, demonstrating that older people can change the way society views older people and sight loss.

What we achieved

- Approximately 30,000 people have been offered eye health advice and screening by all the partners to equip them to manage their own eye health.
- The Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service have referred over 1200 people to Action services and they are more aware of the range of support available.
- Over 2700 people with sight loss have engaged with support from Action and Age UK in Staffs and York BPSS.
- As a result of OPTiC hundreds of older people with sight loss have a better understanding of their eye condition and eye health, have improved levels of confidence and self-esteem and are actively contributing to making a difference to the lives of others through peer support or campaigning.





Reducing isolation

Personnel from Staffordshire and York Fire and Rescue Services were trained to use an eye screening tool. The screening offer was included in their existing home safety visits. If people declined eye screening they were given an eye health information leaflet. Age UK Stafford and District were also trained and they included it in their new client assessments.

This tool proved so useful the training was extended to other organisations including intermediate care teams, community falls teams, housing associations and occupational therapists. Partners then referred people for advice and to peer support to help with the practical and emotional impact of sight loss.

Case study: Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service

Irene was referred through to Action by the Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service after being identified by one of the technicians as having a sight loss. Irene had been struggling with cataracts for several years and her sight was worsening. She was aware that some cataracts can be corrected through surgery, but didn't know who could help her.

The OPTiC Project Coordinator from Action stepped in and helped Irene get in contact with the right people. Irene was eligible for corrective surgery. After successful cataract surgery, Irene said that she could see better now than when she was a child and she enjoyed reading her first book in she couldn't remember how long.

Empowerment programmes and peer support

OPTiC empowerment programmes included sessions on the emotional impact of sight loss, daily living, getting out and about, self management, goal setting and problem solving. Participants were able to support each other by sharing their own experiences thus building their own and each other's confidence. This is what they said:

“It made me feel more optimistic about the future.”

“Learning from other people's experiences.”

“Able to discuss problems with other people and know you are not alone.”

Case study: Action for Blind People

Joy was vaguely aware of what was available to her as a partially sighted person, but found it all very overwhelming. She attended one of Action's two-day empowerment programmes where she met other people who were going through the same experiences she was. Joy said the programme was, “so, so, so helpful emotionally” and appreciated how there was “knowledge on everything for your sight problem.”



Programme participants discussed how they might stay in touch and the idea of forming a social coffee group developed. Due to the confidence Joy gained from the programme, she felt that, with support she could help facilitate this group.

Joy, now runs a coffee morning session once a month with another volunteer from the programme welcoming blind and partially sighted people to come along and learn more about sight loss from their peers.



A variety of peer support groups were established including one for people with glaucoma, several technology support groups where people are able to try out technology to support their independence, cookery groups and RNIB's Talk and Support groups.

Case study: RNIB Talk and Support

A 90 year old beneficiary was referred to a Talk and Support peer group as he was interested in social interaction via the telephone. During the first group session it emerged that his wife of 40 years had died recently and he was not receiving support of any kind. He was very upset and it was apparent he needed emotional support. Talk and Support contacted staff at Cruse Bereavement Care (Uttoxeter) and they are now providing the support needed.

Case study: Technology peer support

Mr A lives alone and is registered blind. He came to three peer support events in York and for the first time was able to share with others the experiences of managing with sight loss. As a result of a tip shared by one of his peers he bought a single cup water boiler which he finds much easier to use than a kettle and liquid level indicator. With

support from a volunteer buddy from YBPSS Mr A was able to use an iPhone 5 with voice activated software and learn about applications to help him with paper money and colour recognition. Now Mr A has joined the games group and book group already in place at YBPSS. He has been referred to RNIB for additional technical support with his iPhone and to Action in Leeds who will assist him with moving house. Mr A said:

“My involvement with the OPTiC Project has been brilliant. It has given me a bit more of a purpose. I don’t always find it easy to get myself going, but the things that I have got involved with have really helped me.”



Case study: Staying active peer groups

After attending an Action empowerment course Mrs S was persuaded to try an Age UK Staying Active group. She now attends on a regular basis and looks forward to meeting her new friends who have helped her gain enough confidence to venture out by herself. Mrs S said:

“Meeting other people with the same problems has made all the difference to me as I now know that others with sight loss cope. Without the club I would never have gone out to the pub for lunch or socialised with others.”

Self advocacy

Some beneficiaries who participated in empowerment programmes felt confident enough to get involved in making their views known on local provision in order to change the status quo. Beneficiaries in Stafford took part in local action to make the bus company aware of the needs of passengers with sight loss and raised concern about the lack of an Information desk in Stafford Hospital eye department. In York beneficiaries met the Station Manager at York Railway to discuss facilities, made trips with British Transport Police and the Trans Pennine Group to make recommendations for more accessible train and bus travel, developed a petition for councillors about the dangers of “A” boards on pavements.

OPTiC legacy

- Empowerment programmes and peer groups will continue in both Stafford and York with input from beneficiaries who have been trained through OPTiC.
- Volunteers and buddies recruited will continue to offer their time.
- Firm and lasting relationships between the Fire and Rescue teams in each area have been formed and referrals will continue post project.
- The Fire and Rescue teams have committed to continue to give out eye health information.
- Fire and Rescue volunteers have been trained to use the eyes right screening tool and will continue to use it in elements of their work.
- Beneficiaries will continue to use equipment and resources developed through the project.
- New and lasting partnerships with other organisations have been developed.

With thanks

Thank you to all the many staff and volunteers in the project that have worked so hard over the last eighteen months to make this project a success.

For more information about the project or statistics in the document go to rnib.org.uk/research or email research@rnib.org.uk

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