



Optimeyes project: Final Evaluation report summary

Di McNeish, DMSS Research, May 2017

RNIB

Supporting people
with sight loss

Introduction

The Optimeyes project was funded for two years from April 2015 by the Big Lottery Fund's (BLF) Reaching Communities programme. It was a partnership between RNIB and six societies for blind and partially sighted people in York, Selby, Ryedale, Lincolnshire, Sheffield and Hull and East Riding.

Optimeyes aimed to help identify older people with or at risk of sight loss; to address its practical and emotional impact for people across both urban and rural areas; to help older people to better understand their eye condition, learn how to deal with sight deterioration and take control of their lives. It had the following four outcomes:

- Older people with sight loss better understand how to manage their eye health, seek support to prevent dependency, and report reduced isolation.
- Older people with sight loss demonstrate improved confidence and skills for independent living after accessing relevant information, advice and training.
- Older people with sight loss are able to actively influence local policies and practice via local campaigning groups.
- Local partners have increased capacity to identify and support older people with sight loss to take more control of their lives.

Evaluation was built into the project at the start and an external evaluation consultant was commissioned to provide an independent oversight.

What Optimeyes did

Optimeyes varied across the six areas but there were several common elements:

- The creation of the partnership between the six societies and RNIB.
- The development of stronger partnerships with other agencies in each area, including training and awareness-raising for professionals.
- The use of the Eyes Right toolkit.
- Development of new activities and support for visually impaired people.
- Training and confidence building courses for visually impaired people.
- Development of volunteering, peer support and campaigning activities.

What Optimeyes achieved

The partnership became a valued regional network of sight loss organisations, providing a space to share experiences and different ways of working.

Optimeyes enabled the expansion of partners' connections in each area. These stronger local partnerships:

- Helped societies develop and deliver new activities (some of them jointly with other organisations),
- Raised their profile and increased their reach to new beneficiaries, including those from 'hard-to-reach' groups
- Benefitted other agencies by increasing their awareness of sight loss and eye health, helping them to offer people a better service.

Awareness was also raised via the delivery of training to other agencies. Ninety-nine per cent of people attending training rated their course as excellent or good.

Partners extended the use of the Eyes Right screening tool to raise awareness of eye health among the general public and professionals.

Optimeyes enabled project partners to enhance their range of services and trial new activities. Having a dedicated worker enabled societies to provide more tailored one-to-one support, undertake more outreach work and involve more customers in shaping new activities. These have provided a wide range of social opportunities and peer support.

Almost all these new activities had their origins in what beneficiaries wanted. The involvement of blind and partially sighted people in the design of new services was seen by partners as crucial to their success and Optimeyes helped grow local societies' volunteer bases and strengthen their culture of volunteer engagement. Visually impaired volunteers have been involved in almost all the activities initiated by Optimeyes, with some taking on substantial tasks.

Partners have also offered a range of information and training for people with sight loss. Confidence-building courses include the Finding Your Feet and the Living with Sight Loss courses providing comprehensive information covering benefits, resources, social and emotional support. Other courses included IT and assistive technology.

In beneficiary feedback, 97 per cent rated their course either excellent or good; 90 per cent agreed that the course had given them a better understanding of the support available to them; 80 per cent that they had made new social contacts through the course; 86% that they felt more confident about managing their sight condition after the course.

Peer Facilitation training has enabled beneficiaries to extend their peer support with visually impaired volunteers also involved in campaigning, awareness-raising and providing information to other agencies.

Outcomes for visually impaired people

Baseline and follow up questionnaires completed by 51 beneficiaries provide convincing evidence that involvement in Optimeyes increased people's ability to manage their sight loss. Eighty-two per cent rated Optimeyes as being helpful in increasing their understanding of their eye condition and 96 per cent in improving their knowledge of what support services exist to help manage sight loss. There were substantial increases in people's confidence in going out alone and reported decrease in social isolation. Eighty-two per cent agreed that Optimeyes had increased their social contacts and support.

Focus group interviews highlighted the benefits of peer support, practical tips for daily life and opportunities for people to reclaim their interests and skills and develop new ones through participating in activities and undertaking volunteering roles.

“I have such a laugh with other people. My confidence is definitely improving. I've never had other people to talk to about dealing with sight loss... Optimeyes has made me so much less isolated.”

Learning and legacy

The biggest message from the experience of Optimeyes is that peer-led and peer developed services are valued and effective in meeting the needs of blind and partially sighted people.

Other lessons for the future include:

- The need for development time at the start – it takes time for a project to get established. Systems and processes such as monitoring and data collection also need time to develop.
- The need to keep challenging assumptions – to overcome preconceived ideas about what visually impaired people want and the support they already have.
- Overcoming practical barriers to access – including transport in rural areas.
- The value of trialling and testing new activities – to make sure that they meet the needs of visually impaired people.
- The importance of dedicated staff time and resources – for networking, training, activity development, outreach and individual support. Many of these could not have been achieved without the capacity provided by Optimeyes.
- External partnerships bring benefits (for joint initiatives and extending reach) but require effort and do not always go as planned.

Optimeyes will leave an important legacy across the region. For the smaller organisations, Optimeyes funding has been transformational, enabling them to start new projects and think about how to attract other funding to be sustainable.

For the larger organisations, Optimeyes enabled them to develop new services and reach areas and populations they would not have done before.

Each of the partners is committed to sustaining as much of the work as possible and have a range of plans for the future. For example: Selby District Vision has obtained funding to take the eye health message into 10 local schools and to pilot a wellbeing and life-coaching course; Sight Loss Ryedale is re-locating into the community library where they will be much better placed to be accessible to people with sight loss; York are continuing to develop their volunteers to sustain their activities; Hull and East Riding intend to maintain the work they've developed in East Yorkshire and plan to reach more black and minority ethnic groups in their area; Sheffield have been approached to develop new provision in Rotherham.

“We have achieved far more than we ever expected to...we have increased our reach, expanded our range of services and activities, we have increased the number of volunteers and collaborate more with local partners. The project has been a springboard for us and almost all of this is sustainable so will continue beyond Optimeyes.”

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