



Final Report

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Impact Consultancy & Research



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Photographs by : Peter Shacklady, Eleanor Healey and Mike Richards

1 Introduction

Feed the Birds is a project hosted by Shropshire Wildlife Trust and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, that connects lonely and socially isolated people with a volunteer who visits them on a weekly basis to feed the birds in their garden. The project was originally awarded £78,350 towards the total costs but received an additional grant of £19,522 in response to the pandemic (see * below).

Beneficiaries are provided with a bird feeder which the volunteer tops up when they visit and a bird identification guide so that they can record the different types of birds they have seen in their garden between visits. The project provides beneficiaries with a sense of purpose through observing and recording their garden wildlife and builds connections by offering them vital social contact with their volunteer.

Volunteers undergo training on practical issues such as safeguarding along with learning about bird feeding. They are then matched with a local beneficiary that has been referred via a health professional, social prescriber link worker, adult and social care services or another voluntary sector organisation.

The project is based on a pilot project that Shropshire Wildlife Trust ran in 2016 funded by Awards for All. The project is also replicated in Telford¹ using the same model of delivery but is located within the local authority's public health team.

The project is managed by a part time Project Co-ordinator who works 3 days per week. A part time Administrator was recruited in September 2020 to support the Project Coordinator until December 2020. The administrator post was secured through additional funding* from the National Lottery COVID Fund which aimed to support those disadvantaged by the Covid-19 crisis. This funding supported additional activity undertaken by the project to disseminate bird feeders more widely to disadvantaged communities during the pandemic.

The project was due to finish in July 2021 but received an extension to October 2021 due to the pandemic.



1 The Telford FtB project has trained 37 volunteers and currently has 22 live matches.

2 Project outcomes & targets

Feed the Birds has 5 key outcomes relating to both those directly receiving support through the project and volunteers. These outcomes are:

Outcome 1. Beneficiaries will feel less lonely.

Outcome 2. Beneficiaries sense of well-being will improve.

Outcome 3. Beneficiaries and volunteers will show increased care and concern for nature.

Outcome 4. The physical health of those participating in the pilot in care settings & hospitals, will be improved.

Outcome 5. Volunteers will have an increased sense of wellbeing as a result of their role as a Feed the Birds volunteer.

The original application for funding included a target of supporting 100 beneficiaries and 100 volunteers. A review of the project targets mid-way into the project resulted in a 20% reduction of the original targets to 80 beneficiaries and 80 volunteers.

Ultimately the project had 118 beneficiary referrals and 110 volunteer enquiries which converted into 57 'live' beneficiaries being supported through the project.

Whilst the final 'live' beneficiary and volunteer numbers are less than the project set out to achieve it is important to consider these figures within the following context:

- The original targets for the project were ambitious given the staffing resource allocated to the project.
- Relationships with many of the referral agencies were not established at the start of the project which meant time had to be invested in building these. Consequently referrals into the project initially were slow.
- Recruitment of both volunteers and beneficiaries was impacted by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The challenges of finding the right match between volunteer and beneficiary this was predominantly due to the need to match volunteers and beneficiaries in close proximity to each other. This issue resulted in some beneficiaries and volunteers remaining 'unmatched'.

It is also worth noting that this figure (57) is based on the individual referred into the project and does not take into account wider beneficiaries e.g. spouses of beneficiaries, supported through the project. **In future beneficiary numbers should be split into direct and indirect beneficiaries in order to reflect the wider value of project support to those caring for the beneficiary. Including indirect beneficiaries would bring this figure to 72.**

3 Evaluation methodology

The following data and feedback from a range of stakeholders and beneficiaries has been collected to inform the final evaluation of the project:

- Interviews with the Feed the Birds Coordinator and her line manager at Shropshire Wildlife Trust
- Interview with the Coordinator of Feed the Birds 'sister project' in Telford
- Interviews with family members
- Interviews with referral agencies and wider stakeholders
- A focus group with a sample of Feed the Bird volunteers
- An on-line survey targeted at all Feed the Bird volunteers
- Surveys undertaken with beneficiaries directly or completed by family members on their behalf.

The original evaluation methodology planned to measure the impact of the project on its beneficiaries via a survey (attached as Appendix A) completed by the beneficiary with support from the volunteer at 4 key points; baseline, 3 months, 9 months and 18 months. The purpose of the surveys was to measure 'distance travelled' specifically in relation to loneliness and wellbeing. Additional questions about their relationship to nature were also asked. The survey replicated the questions used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to measure loneliness and wellbeing. The collection of baseline data by the Project Coordinator threw up some issues with the survey questions with some beneficiaries being reluctant or unable to answer them. The onset of the pandemic further impacted data collection as volunteers undertook socially distanced visits and were therefore not able to sit with the beneficiaries to complete the survey. In addition, it was felt that the impact of the pandemic was likely to colour the responses to the survey questions. In light of these issues a decision was made to collect beneficiary feedback towards the end of the project via a questionnaire that was either completed by the beneficiary themselves or where this was not practicable the volunteer or a family member on the beneficiary's behalf.



4 Impact of COVID-19

“I don’t know how we would have got through the pandemic without X. She was an absolute lifeline.” Family member of beneficiary

At the outset of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic some of the face-to-face visits to beneficiaries were replaced with telephone calls in order to adhere to social distancing guidelines. However, this was quickly replaced by socially distanced visits with volunteers conducting their visits but remaining outside of the beneficiary’s home, often talking to them through a window or in some cases in the garden. In the minority of cases where volunteers were not able to visit the project was able to find someone to refill the bird feeders to ensure that the beneficiaries could continue to benefit from watching the birds in their gardens. Although the project was able to continue delivering throughout the pandemic the changes to delivery undoubtedly impacted on both beneficiaries and volunteers. For example, the befriending aspect of the project was more difficult given the need for volunteers to stay outside and in the winter months volunteer visits were inevitably shorter in some cases. However, continuity of contact during the pandemic for Feed the Birds beneficiaries was highly valued by both beneficiaries and family members particularly given that most other schemes or forms of support or contact with family and friends were curtailed during this period.

“My husband’s behaviour changed at the beginning of lockdown so I got in contact with the memory service. They couldn’t come but they put me in contact with Feed the Birds.”
Carer of beneficiary

“This scheme has allowed me to continue some distant contact with Norman his attitude is that at the age of 96 he would rather have contact & is feeling quite isolated. I now take the bird feed with me and top up his feeders in the garden without going near him or his house and we can have a wave through the window – he lists down the birds he sees between visits. He is now also supporting a great lively chirpy flock of sparrows and dunnocks which he enjoys watching.” Volunteer

For those beneficiaries and their family members living in remote rural areas the pandemic compounded feelings of loneliness and isolation. For some of these families the visit from the Feed the Birds volunteer was an important part of their week. One volunteer in the focus group talked about the impact of her visit on one family where the husband has a life limiting illness, which severely restricts mobility and communication and his wife is his main carer:

“The project for her was the only constant thing during lockdown. They are horrendously isolated and the husband went downhill a lot during this time, so for the wife to have someone that could take the pressure off her for a bit and talk to the husband was really important”
Volunteer

Survey responses show that the pandemic had a significant impact on the beneficiaries with the majority of people stating that the pandemic had left them feeling more isolated, less connected to friends and family and lonelier. Eight out of ten survey respondents said the volunteer visits had become more important to them during the crisis. All of which strengthen the importance of the project in such uncertain and unsettling times.

Whilst the outbreak of the global pandemic presented some challenges for the project it also presented some real opportunities which resulted in new avenues of activity and broadened the reach of the project into new areas both geographically and demographically. Feed the Birds partnered with Ludlow Pulling Together, a local initiative that was set up in order to provide practical support for the most vulnerable and isolated people during the pandemic. Through this partnership, Feed the Birds provided 330 bird feeder kits to vulnerable and elderly beneficiaries using a network of families. Additional bird feeder kits were also sent out to vulnerable and isolated individuals through established networks such as The Ludlow Wildlife Watch group.



5. Progress towards project outcomes

5.1. Outcome 1 - Beneficiaries will feel less lonely

It's evident from all of the feedback received through the evaluation that Feed the Birds has significantly reduced beneficiaries sense of loneliness and isolation. 90% of people surveyed said they felt less lonely as a result of the volunteer visits and all of the feedback received from family members and stakeholders referred to the value of companionship for the beneficiary. This is particularly significant given that the latter half of the project was delivered during the pandemic and that 70% of beneficiaries reported that the pandemic had increased their sense of loneliness and 80% reported feeling more isolated and less connected to friends and family. This highlights the important role the project played during this period in helping people remain connected to the world at a time when other forms of contact were prohibited.

Whilst it was not within the scope of this evaluation to quantify the cost-savings associated with reducing loneliness recent research commissioned by DCMS has monetised loneliness. The research² found that loneliness, whether infrequent or persistent, has large and significant negative impacts on wellbeing and that as the frequency of loneliness increases, its detrimental effect tends to increase. A conservative estimate is that the impact of severe loneliness is equivalent to at least £9,537 per person per year (although it may be as high as £17,043). In addition, the study undertook research into the impact of loneliness on healthcare costs. This shows that those who are afflicted by loneliness most of the time require £6,000³ in additional healthcare costs over 10 years, averaging at £600 per year (2015 prices).

Applying these figures to Feed the Birds based on supporting 57 beneficiaries and assuming a reduction in loneliness from severe to moderate and allowing for a 19% deadweight factor⁴ the monetary value of the intervention can be calculated as £440,324 with an additional saving of £34,200⁵ in saved healthcare costs per annum.

These figures are a powerful illustration of the potential savings these types of small, low cost interventions can make.

2 Loneliness monetisation report Analysis for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport June 17, 2020 Sebastien Peytrignet, Simon Garforth-Bles, Kieran Keohane

3 This figure is based on estimates on modelling carried out by McDaid, Bauer and Park at the Personal Social Services Research Unit of LSE. Results are applicable to individuals in the general population aged 65 or over. In this model the authors assess the additional healthcare costs specifically attributable to severe loneliness from various sources: GP visits, hospital admissions, emergency services and other types of outpatient care.

4 Deadweight factors in that a proportion of those who were helped by the scheme / intervention may have experienced a loneliness reduction anyway. Based on guidelines for community and social interventions, it is recommended to remove 19% from the total amount.

5This figure will be higher given it is based on figures from 2015.

Case study - Not just feathered friends



Emma has always felt it was important to help others. When she took early retirement she looked forward to spending more time volunteering in the garden of a local stately home. Unfortunately, back problems meant she had to give this up. But when she heard Diane Monether from Shropshire Wildlife Trust talking on Radio Shropshire about the Feed The Birds programme, she knew it was for her.

Diane introduced Emma to Joan, an 86-year-old lady from Shrewsbury who now lives alone. Emma soon found herself developing a special relationship with Joan who had been feeling lonely since her husband passed away a few years back. The Feed The Birds programme brought a new interest and new friend into Joan's life just when she needed it. "Joan is a very sociable and chatty lady but she really misses her adored husband. She often tells me he was her best friend and she loved passing the time of day with him," said Emma.

Although Joan has usually been very active, enjoying weekly tai chi and Mothers' Union meetings, COVID restrictions and a recent diagnosis of early stage dementia means that Emma's weekly visits or telephone calls have become a new lifeline for her. Filling the birdfeeder gave Joan a new activity during lockdown and she and Emma love to sit and watch the birds together. "Joan is very keen to point out the different birds and I can tell she gets so much pleasure from it from the enthusiasm in her voice," said Emma. As someone with early stage dementia, having a new activity that she enjoys immensely while challenging her recall ability at the same time must be hugely beneficial to Joan.

Emma also gets a lot out of programme and loves listening to Joan's life stories and watching the birds with someone who appreciates them so much. The two of them are now more like friends and both look forward to visits. Joan relishes spoiling Emma, often serving her tea in a little bone China cup and a slice of cake on a doily - always with a serviette of course! Joan also loves reminiscing about the past and life with her beloved husband. Emma said, "Joan is an amazing woman with a great sense of humour and a no messing about attitude. Her health isn't great but I never hear her complaining. She just gets on with life."

5.2. Outcome 2 - Beneficiaries sense of well-being will improve

"It has improved my wellbeing and confidence, I once again feel like I have rejoined society."
Beneficiary

There is overwhelming evidence to demonstrate that the project has had a significant impact on increasing beneficiaries sense of well-being. This is supported by responses to the survey with 90% of beneficiaries stating that they felt their general mental health and wellbeing had improved as a direct result of the project. This can be attributed to a number of key factors. All of the beneficiaries that took part in the evaluation stated that the weekly volunteer visits had **given them something to look forward to**, with these visits commonly being referred to as the 'highlight of the week'. In addition the project provided the beneficiaries with a sense of purpose. Through taking responsibility for caring for the birds this has encouraged them to clean and maintain the bird feeder which gives them a sense that they are caring for another living thing and making a purposeful contribution to the environment. This sense of doing something worthwhile comes at a time when they may otherwise feel a diminishing **sense of purpose** or value.

“He wouldn’t fill the feeder otherwise but he does it with X. “ Spouse of beneficiary

Improved wellbeing is also linked to beneficiaries having an increasing sense of self. Many of the volunteers and family members referenced that the visits had been an opportunity for the beneficiaries to talk about their past and to share personal stories with someone ‘new’. Many referenced the importance of the volunteer having dedicated time to just listen and show an interest in the beneficiaries as a person. It is also evident from feedback that the volunteer visits brought fun and laughter and colour back into many people’s lives which helped to improve wellbeing.

“Mum genuinely looks forward to the visit and has a lot of fun.” Family member of beneficiary

“She seems to be enjoying my visits. We have a giggle and a laugh.” Volunteer

Case Study - Bird void filled with laughter



Brenda is deaf and was born into a large family of hearing siblings in Barmouth. At the age of five she was sent away to a special boarding school where she learned sign language but she never learned to speak. She later married and moved to Shrewsbury. Her husband was also deaf and they had one daughter, who is hearing, and now lives in Manchester with her young family. Following the death of Brenda’s husband, her daughter contacted Diane Monether, Feed The Birds Project Officer at Shropshire Wildlife Trust, as she felt her mum was increasing lonely and isolated, which was compounded by her hearing impairment.

Diane got in touch with volunteer Karen Shaw who enthusiastically agreed to attend a sign language course so she could communicate better with Brenda. With a bit of sign language under her belt, Karen arrived at Brenda’s and set up a birdfeeder. No birds came so Karen moved the feeder various times but always to no avail! Despite this their friendship has developed and they both look forward to weekly visits. Brenda has taught Karen more sign language and they often find amusing ways of communicating. But when lockdown happened, Brenda’s sense of isolation increased. Karen remembers, “She said she felt as if she was in prison. I continued to visit, sitting outside and signing through the window. This was a struggle and neither of us had much news so we began to play games like bingo and 20 questions!”

Sadly, just before Christmas 2020 Brenda had a stroke and then she caught COVID. She is now confined to a chair downstairs and has trouble signing as she has lost the use of one hand. Their friendship, however, goes from strength to strength. “When I arrive, she is often asleep but her face lights up when she sees me. We spend a couple of happy hours playing Scrabble, Boggle and Hangman. There’s always lots of laughter. She always wants me to stay longer and I have to tear myself away,” said Karen.

Kathy and Alison's case shows that while the birdfeeder can often be a useful tool to break down barriers and make introductions, it is not always central to the benefits of the programme. Alison sums up, "Although the bird side of things hasn't taken off, the link up has developed into something far more important than either of us could have imagined."

In addition to the positive impact on the wellbeing of its beneficiaries there is strong evidence to show that the project has resulted in wider health benefits. For some beneficiaries the project has encouraged them to be less sedentary and spend more time in their gardens and get the therapeutic benefit of being outdoors in nature and connecting with the outside world. For some this has come at a time when their worlds have contracted resulting in an insular lifestyle.

"Feed the Birds expands horizons for people whose worlds have become very contracted".
Stakeholder

The project is also perceived to have played a role in helping to sustain and improve cognitive function through engaging people in conversation. This was particularly highlighted in relation to beneficiaries with dementia or other health conditions that make conversation more challenging. The focus on the birds and nature was felt to be key to this as it provided people with a focus for conversation that was not reliant on recall.

"He has a condition which means his speech is deteriorating but he always becomes more chatty when X is around." Carer of beneficiary

"Her dementia can make conversation difficult, but her love and knowledge of gardening always shines through." Volunteer

20% of the beneficiaries surveyed felt they had visited the GP less as a result of the project. This highlights the contribution that these types of intervention make in terms of reducing the need for people to access NHS services and reinforces the healthcare cost savings highlighted in section 5.1.

In some cases, the project was directly cited as being key to enabling the beneficiaries to stay in their own homes and helping the beneficiary to retain a sense of independence, both of which were seen to have a positive impact on overall health and wellbeing. For some this was about the project being a 'soft entry into opening up their home to outsiders' and that this had made people more receptive to more formal care services being brought in. Other people referenced that volunteers had been able to signpost people to other sources of help or support that they were not aware of previously.

"As a result of this project X now has a care package in place, that wouldn't have happened before because they didn't want anyone coming into the house." Stakeholder

"We have managed to reach people that other organisations may not have had access to and have unlocked their access to other services." Volunteer

Much of the above was also corroborated by the volunteer survey and focus group. The 17 volunteers who responded to the survey said that their beneficiaries had benefited in the following ways: reduced sense of isolation (9), increased connection with the outside world (7), increased well-being (4), increased sense of purpose (3), increased mental and/or physical health (2). The importance of the communication was also highlighted through survey responses:

“You can only do so much in an hour but it seems normally that it is the most meaningful contact he has in a week” Volunteer

The focus group also demonstrated how the project impacted beneficiaries over time. This was often hugely dependent on the building of relationships which was even more important to those prepared to accept a ‘feed the birds’ volunteer but reluctant to accept other forms of support which may be focused on themselves. The focus of the birds or nature more widely detracted from the need for the beneficiary to accept support.

**“The visits are going extremely well! The project is amazing, Mum so appreciates the support and the fact that the focus is on the birds not her own mental health.”
Family member of beneficiary**

“Every other person that comes to see him is bringing food, giving medical advice or taking blood but he says to me you don’t do any of that” Volunteer

“When I started visiting my beneficiary, he had just lost his wife and was about to have his 89th birthday and was talking about not wanting to see his 90th birthday. He would talk about his wife but then would clam up. Whereas now after 8/9 months of visiting him he will start to talk about his wife and then with some encouragement will talk about the good times they had together. He now talks about the future.” Volunteer

Collectively Feed the Birds volunteers have developed considerable skills in building relationships with lonely and isolated people who may be experiencing other health conditions. Some volunteers are at different points of the journey but learn tips from others about what has worked and identifying the subtle feedback that may be received of volunteer’s appreciation is helpful. For example, one volunteer learned from others not to phone her beneficiary, who is a very private person, to arrange a time to call as she would often make an excuse for the visit not to go ahead. Since the volunteer has been calling in unannounced the relationship with the beneficiary has improved greatly and although their conversation is usually had with the TV on in the background a recent remark by the beneficiary to her cat of ‘isn’t this nice’ indicates that she finds the visit and the relationship between herself and the volunteer worthwhile.

5.3. Outcome 3 - Beneficiaries and volunteers will show increased care and concern for nature

Beneficiary perspective

Feed the Birds has undoubtedly had a positive impact on the environment. The provision of bird feeders has enhanced the bird population and biodiversity in people's gardens. It has also enhanced nature connectiveness resulting in an increase in care and concern for nature by both beneficiaries and volunteers.

Many of the project beneficiaries had a pre-existing interest in wildlife. For them the project has enabled them to continue to attract birds into their gardens through the provision of the bird feeder and the volunteer refilling it as part of their visit which has enabled them to continue watching and enjoying the birds.

"I was unable to walk to the feeder on my own so having someone to come and fill them up has been really beneficial" Beneficiary

"If I had to choose between losing my TV or my bird feeder - I would choose to lose the TV! It was brilliant to see a Sparrowhawk on the feeder! But I was so glad he didn't actually get one of my sparrows for his dinner!" Beneficiary

For those that did not previously have an interest in birds it has given them a new interest and a focal point during, and in-between, the volunteer visits. 80% of beneficiaries stated their involvement in the project had made them feel more connected to the natural world and had increased their interest in nature and wildlife. Significantly the survey findings show that this enhanced connection with nature coincided with people feeling less connected to friends and family due to COVID. This illustrates the important void that nature filled during the pandemic when there was a lack of human contact for many beneficiaries.



Significantly it also provided both the beneficiary and volunteer with a common interest. Particularly in the early phases of the relationship the focus on the birds gave both parties a common topic of conversation which helped to break down barriers. It was also an interest that was sustained between visits and wasn't reliant on the volunteer or anyone else being present.

“The birds will always keep coming and going they are a constant source of joy.” Stakeholder

“Although he said he doesn't always see lots of birds at any one time he said “what I see I treasure”. Beneficiary

In some cases, the project encouraged beneficiaries to expand their interest in wildlife beyond birds and explore how they could attract more wildlife into their gardens. There is also evidence to show how the project acted as a catalyst for spreading interest in wildlife amongst family members of all ages, most commonly through family members putting bird feeders in their own gardens.

“Volunteer A came with her children one day when our grandchildren were with us and they went in the garden and made a bug hotel.” Beneficiary's wife



Case Study -From household to hedgehog adventures



When Sarah started to visit Anne through the Feed the Birds project, little did she know she would spark off a neighbourhood hedgehog project! But that's what happened when two wildlife lovers were introduced by Diane Monether of Shropshire Wildlife Trust.

Anne is nearly 90 and is a retired pharmacist who lives alone following the death of her husband. She has a daughter who lives locally but suffers from ill health so is unable to visit her mum very often. Anne started to feel isolated when she wasn't able to get out and take part in her usual activities. She also had to give up driving and found parting with her beloved car difficult to adjust to.

When Sarah first started to visit Anne, in the home she used to share with her husband, Anne was very much housebound. But as trust between them grew, Anne started to feel more confident and eventually was able to venture outside in her garden knowing that Sarah was on hand should she need her. Soon, as well as helping to fill her newly installed birdfeeders, Anne progressed onto completing more small tasks like a bit of weeding or harvesting her tomato plants. "Eventually Anne progressed right to the end of the garden where we found we had a mutual love of hedgehogs," said Sarah. "Diane linked me up with Kathryn who also came to visit and we set up a hedgehog run and camera in Anne's garden. Anne was delighted when we managed to capture some hedgehog photos and footprints." Anne went on to share all this with her neighbours and they jointly set up a Hedgehog Neighbourhood Watch and installed 'Slow down hedgehogs!' signs in their gardens.

Some visits are a little quieter. Anne has travelled extensively during her life and has many interesting stories to share with Sarah about all the places she has visited. Sometimes they just share family photos, chat about the latest news and discuss birds and plants. Whether they are out exploring garden wildlife or having a quiet chat, it's clear Sarah's visits are providing both physical and mental stimulation for Anne that she didn't have before. Not only that, there's been a benefit to local wildlife and brought some of the neighbours together through a common love of hedgehogs.

"Now we have exchanged phone numbers and we often text during the week to keep in touch. It's more a friendship than a volunteer going in to support someone. We have a surprising amount in common, despite the age gap and I appreciate all the stories she's got to tell," said Sarah about the relationship.



Volunteer Perspective

Volunteers were also asked via the online survey the extent to which volunteering with the project had increased their care and concern for nature and wildlife. Four out of seventeen said it had to some extent. Given most of the volunteers already had an interest in nature and wildlife the responses to this question are unsurprising (see section below on volunteer motivation and commitment).

“In addition to bird feeders I have established some bird and other wildlife friendly areas in my garden - butterfly and bee friendly flowers, places for water and a bug area. I’ve also made a hole in my fence for hedgehogs.” Volunteer

“I’m a bit more clued-up about what to feed. e.g. we were advised not to feed peanuts.” Volunteer

“I have always been very interested in nature, so this is another extension.” Volunteer

The volunteer focus group also demonstrated that for many volunteers their concern for nature hadn't increased because of the project but this was largely due to the fact that they already had a very high level of concern previously. However, for a minority who were not bringing this level of concern into the project it acted as a catalyst:

“Because I was doing the project, I wanted to know more about birds and wildlife. I set up a bird feeder in the garden and this week I set up a hedgehog haven...it looks brilliant!” Volunteer

Although the project didn't lead to an increase in concern for already committed volunteers the opportunity the project afforded to share their concern for nature with others was hugely motivating and rewarding,

“Although my interest in nature hasn't increased – sharing my interest has been really important.” Volunteer

Some volunteers also reported how the relationship that they had with their beneficiary had resulted in a mutual increase in knowledge about nature and wildlife. For example, sharing recommendations for wildlife television programmes or articles to read.

5.4. Outcome 4 - The physical health of those participating in the pilot in care settings & hospitals, will be improved.

The original intention was to pilot the roll out of the project into health and care settings, working with Royal Shrewsbury Hospital (RSH) and local care homes. Whilst some progress was made in relation to this aspect of the project with bird feeders sited at the hospital and at Field House and Lymehurst Care Homes, the potential of these pilots was severely impacted by the pandemic. Restrictions imposed as a result of Covid-19 meant that the volunteers visiting these settings were able to fill the bird-feeders but were unable to interact with the residents / patients or staff. This meant that plans to run training with care home staff on maintaining the bird feeder, bird identification etc... and provide window-based bird feeders for residents that did not leave their rooms were not possible. Despite the limited contact the volunteer had with the resident's feedback from the key contact at Lymehurst was very positive and highlighted the wider impact of the project on staff in addition to residents.

“The residents have very much enjoyed watching the birds from the dining room and the lounge, which they have loved. Having more bird visitors in our garden has been welcome and enjoyed by our staff and residents. It has had a positive impact on their wellbeing.”

Care Home staff member

Although this element of the project did not meet its full potential there is certainly scope to roll the project out into care settings and to develop specific resources and training for care home staff⁶ to encourage greater participation in the project. This would, however, require the Project Coordinator to have sufficient capacity to develop this strand of the project and for there to be sufficient buy-in from the care homes themselves. **A more strategic approach to this through working at a group level rather than with individual homes, may prove to be a more efficient approach and this strand may require additional resources.**



⁶ This is one of the strategic objectives in SWT's Health and Wellbeing strategy.

5.5. Outcome 5 - **Volunteers will have an increased sense of wellbeing as a result of their role as a Feed the Birds volunteer.**

Responses from the volunteer survey show that a significant majority (16 out of 17) of volunteers felt that their engagement in the project had increased their overall sense of well-being either to some or a large extent.

“Made me realise how important it is to live life to its fullest.” Volunteer

“I have enjoyed sharing experiences of wildlife with the beneficiaries I have met and also felt that my engagement has been useful. Being able to share my beneficiary’s life experiences and interests has been great and I look forward to our sessions.” Volunteer

“I’m glad to be in touch with someone of a much older generation and whose own experience is deeply embedded in the care of animals, birds and the land.” Volunteer

This was also supported by feedback at the focus group where there was a strong consensus that the project had resulted in positive benefits to volunteers. Volunteers reported that the project made them feel as though they were contributing something worthwhile; both in terms of the impact on nature and wildlife but also knowing that their visits had a positive impact on beneficiaries too. For some this was unexpected:

“When I started I didn’t think about the impact on myself but it’s a two-way process” Volunteer

Some volunteers have formed real friendships with the beneficiaries and felt that they got as much out of the visits as the beneficiary. The opportunity for social contact and purposefulness provided by the project was equally as important for volunteers, particularly during periods of lockdown.

“I’ve always enjoyed the interactions I’ve had. I look forward to meeting with my beneficiary. We talk and talk...about birds for 10 minutes and then everything else. I know he looks forward to it but I also do...it’s great.” Volunteer

“I enjoy volunteering with Feed the Birds because it’s such a gentle, yet purposeful, way of building rapport. I’m a real people-person and have found lockdown isolation very hard, so going to see my beneficiaries has probably been as good for me as it has for them.” Volunteer

“I have always loved the natural world but the pandemic has really highlighted the positive impact it can have on our health and wellbeing. Being part of the excellent FTB project has offered a route by which we can provide valuable support to wild birds whilst helping others to benefit from the healing properties nature can bring, providing companionship that is not only beneficial to the beneficiaries but also volunteers.” **Volunteer**

All volunteers at the focus group felt that the project had increased their own sense of wellbeing for a variety of reasons;

- they felt as though they were contributing something useful to the lives of the beneficiaries and also their local communities,
- they were making a useful contribution to helping nature and wildlife,
- often, they are also a support to the carers of their beneficiaries,
- it was an opportunity to broaden their perspective and do something outside of their own family responsibilities.

“As a stay at home mum, volunteering with Feed the Birds gave me an excellent excuse to get out of the house and give back to the local community. I get time out to connect with nature as well as hearing some fantastic stories from my beneficiary. Its flexible and even my children have benefited from the FtB experience.” **Volunteer**

“I feel very privileged to have been able to take part in the project, I’ve gained lots from it”
Volunteer



Case Study - Benefits of Volunteering



Elizabeth returned to the UK in March 2020, the week of the first national lockdown, after living abroad for 23 years. Returning after being away for so long required a significant adjustment which was made more difficult as a result of the Pandemic and lockdown. Initially Elizabeth felt quite isolated due to not being part of a social network locally. However, she heard about Shropshire Wildlife Trust's Feed the Birds project incidentally and followed this up with a call to the Project Co-ordinator. As a result, she was recruited and quite quickly matched to a beneficiary.

The beneficiary that Elizabeth was matched to lives in a remote rural area and has a life limiting illness which means that his wife is also his carer. Elizabeth was able to make visits and support the couple throughout the second national lockdown and she felt that this was hugely important to them as it gave them a focus for the week and also not only benefited the beneficiary but also his wife and members of the wider family too.

At the start, Elizabeth did not realise how beneficial the project was going to be both to her beneficiary and to herself. It wasn't clear how beneficial a visit for just one hour a week could be. However, the hour became as important for Elizabeth as it was for the beneficiary and his family as it helped to provide focus and structure at a time when this was missing as a result of the extreme changes that were occurring as a result of the Pandemic. Elizabeth also appreciated not only contact with the beneficiary during this time but also contact with the other volunteers.

Elizabeth feels that the project contributed to her adjustment to living back in the UK by helping her to get to know more people locally and feel part of the community and as though she was doing something useful.

"It's good to feel as though you are helping somebody. You can get wrapped up in your own world when you are not working."

5.6 Unexpected Outcomes

A significant unexpected outcome for the project was the positive impact that it has had on family members of the beneficiary, particularly those with a direct caring role. Many highlighted how much they valued the volunteer visits as they provided an opportunity for some respite and alleviated a sense of responsibility for their 'loved one' for a short period of time. The volunteers also provided an impartial 'ear', someone for the carer to talk to and share concerns of worries with that wasn't a family member or friend which enabled them to take a more objective view.

"X company was a godsend we sat in the summerhouse, or he stood at the door and chatted. He was able to look at things from an outsider's perspective." **Spouse of beneficiary**

"The beneficiaries wife appreciates the time I spend with X as she is able to have a bit of time to herself." **Volunteer**

Case Study - Making friends through bird-feeding



Peter and Gillian led active lives despite Peter being diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease in his 40s. They loved visiting friends around the country and abroad and Peter particularly enjoyed sailing when he wasn't busy pursuing his professional career. Unfortunately, Peter's condition deteriorated dramatically in early 2020. He is now unable to dress or feed himself, move around independently or communicate clearly. While Gillian has support from professional carers, the change in Peter's mobility and ability to talk – coupled with national lockdown left her feeling isolated and anxious.

During a routine visit, Peter and Gillian's GP noticed that the couple were struggling and contacted Feed the Birds. Diane said, "Quite often, people who are isolated feel uncomfortable asking for help. This programme starts off being primarily about the birds but over time our volunteers cultivate friendships and provide beneficiaries with a much-needed source of social contact."

Diane paired Peter and Gillian with a local volunteer Susan. After installing a bird feeder in the garden, Susan started visiting Peter and Gillian every week. Susan said, "For the first few weeks the conversations were mainly about birds and local wildlife. Gradually, as we got to know each other better, we found other common interests like art and reading. Gillian also started to share more of her frustrations and worries and I realized my visits provided her with an opportunity to let off steam. Sometimes when I arrived she was quite wound up but by the time I left she was visibly more relaxed."

Diane also provided Susan with a beautifully illustrated guide to local birds. This gave Susan the opportunity to interact with Peter more and was rewarded with her first smiles from him. Susan also used the guide to have fun in the garden with the couple's grandchildren who were often at Gillian's for homeschooling. Spotting different birds in the garden and helping Susan refill the birdfeeders provided a much-needed break from lessons – for the kids and Gillian! The grandchildren later persuaded their mum to install a birdfeeder in their own garden so the programme has brought benefits to multiple generations.

"When I first started the programme, I wasn't sure I could make an impact as it felt like a weekly visit wouldn't achieve much," said Susan. "However now I can see that Peter and Gillian do value my visits a lot. Because I'm visiting primarily to feed the birds it doesn't feel I'm intruding or expecting anything from Peter and Gillian. That has helped our friendship develop more naturally."

For family members that were caring for relatives from a distance the regularity of the volunteer visits provides them with a sense of reassurance and comfort. Liaison between the Project Coordinator / volunteer and family members was also welcomed as it offered an impartial view and/or update on the wellbeing of the beneficiary and was an opportunity to raise any causes for concern in relation to the beneficiary.

"It saves me worrying I know that she has company and that it breaks up her day."

Family member

Volunteers also reported the importance of the project to the carers of their beneficiaries and highlighted the value of the impartial nature of this relationship. Volunteers experienced carers being able to 'vent' their frustrations or anxieties in a way that they wouldn't be able to with other family members or close friends either because they are trying to protect people from the reality of their situation or because the conversation may become too emotional. The lack of emotional connection to the family situation and dynamic appears to be quite critical.

“Sometimes it is like they are experimenting with venting their thoughts...it helps them to have expressed it.” **Volunteer**

“She (the carer of the beneficiary) can download to me...there are occasions when I have turned up and she has been really, really stressed out but just being able to talk to me and get things off her chest...by the end of the session she is a lot more relaxed, a lot more happy. She refers to me as her little breath of fresh air.” **Volunteer**

Whilst these anecdotes further demonstrate the value and impact of the project they also highlight the lack of support for carers and how their needs can often be overlooked. It suggests that **there would be benefit in the future to widening the remit of the project to include carers as beneficiaries.**

Interestingly the project also had a more practical impact on wider family members. For example, one volunteer reported that her beneficiary’s grandchildren had become interested in birds as a result of the project and she has encouraged them to use feeders in their own garden.



6 Strengths

6.1 The delivery model

“One of the greatest strengths of the project is its simplicity and that it is a very light touch intervention but how significant and valuable it is to all those that engage with it.” Stakeholder

Overall feedback on the project delivery model was exceptionally positive and people felt that the simplicity of the model worked well and had significant benefits to volunteers, beneficiaries and wider family members. A number of stakeholders queried whether the focus on birds could be broadened out into other areas of wildlife or hobby / interests e.g. family history as a way of broaden out its appeal.

Many people referenced the ‘light touch’ or ‘gentle’ nature of the intervention and how using bird feeding as the focus of the project provided access to befriending support ‘through the back door’. As a result, Feed the Birds has engaged people who may not have identified as being ‘lonely’ or acknowledged that they would benefit from regular company providing some of the most vulnerable people in the community who may fall outside of other types of formal social care with regular human contact. The project has also accessed people who would normally not been on the radar of services until they potentially reached crisis point E.g., admission to ICU in hospital or a care home.

“The visits enable us to undertake monitoring of people who may otherwise be “under the radar” of social care for longer periods.” Volunteer

“X is very independent she wouldn’t like to think anyone was ‘caring’ for her so this feels like an equal relationship, it’s a friend not a carer.” Daughter of beneficiary

Another strength of the delivery model is that the time commitment required by volunteers is small and is flexible enough to be fitted around existing commitments. Conversely the time that is invested has a significant impact on the beneficiary.

“People start to see that their one hour visit can make a massive difference to someone else’s life.” Volunteer

The equality of the relationship between the volunteer and beneficiary which centres around companionship as opposed to one party caring for the other is also key to the success of the project. This enables beneficiaries to retain a sense of dignity and pride and to feel that the volunteer is coming to visit them for no other reason than to spend time with them. This has enabled genuine friendships to develop.

“We (volunteers) are someone going to see them, we’re not carers – we don’t have other connotations.” Volunteer

Another key strength of the project was the commitment and dedication of the Project Coordinator. Evaluation feedback consistently highlighted that the project had been well managed and coordinated and that the Project Co-ordinator went ‘above and beyond’ to ensure not only that the project was run smoothly but that safeguarding the wellbeing of both volunteers and beneficiaries was paramount.

“Diane has been amazing...so supportive. She has made it feel easy.” Volunteer

“She (Diane) is very efficient and kind at the same time.” Volunteer

6.2 Partnership working

The delivery model is reliant on strong working relationships with local organisations that can refer into the project and help promote and support the volunteer opportunity. As many of these relationships were not already in place the Project Coordinator has had to invest significant time to building this network around the project, and has done so successfully. Good examples of this include the relationship it has built with Severn Hospice’s Compassionate Communities project who delivered volunteer training, local GP surgeries and organisations such as the Alzheimer’s Society and Huntingdon’s Disease Society.



6.3 Volunteers

With volunteers playing such a key role in the delivery of the project the success of Feed the Birds was heavily reliant on a number of key factors:

- Volunteer training and support
- Effective 'matching' between beneficiary and volunteer
- Volunteer commitment.

Training and Support for Volunteers

Training and support offered to the volunteers throughout the project was significant and from the volunteers perspective extremely useful. Initial training was delivered through the Compassionate Communities project and consisted of a 4 hour session covering an overview of the role; the boundaries between beneficiary and volunteer, Adult Safeguarding awareness and lone working practice and communication. Additional training on specific health conditions e.g. Dementia or Huntingdon's Disease was also offered to volunteers to provide them with valuable insight into their beneficiaries condition.

“Training forms a critical part of the success of the project it ensures volunteers are comfortable and clear about the role.” Stakeholder

Volunteer recruitment was undertaken in a systematic and strategic way with the Project Coordinator targeting specific geographical areas of the county and using local community networks to promote the volunteering role.

Due to the vulnerability of many of the project's beneficiaries, the focus on befriending and that visits take place in the beneficiary's home, there is the potential for volunteers to be exposed to challenging or emotionally charged situations. As such clarity on the volunteer role and training on issues such as safeguarding are essential components in terms of volunteer recruitment and induction. In addition, on-going support for volunteers is essential to ensure that volunteers are able to address issues of concern or share their experiences with other volunteers. The Project Coordinator holds monthly volunteer supervision meetings which are well attended and undertakes regular check-ins with volunteers. Feedback from volunteers gathered through the on-line survey shows that volunteers feel well supported in their roles which demonstrates that the support mechanisms that are in place are effective and valued. This view was also corroborated in the focus group discussion with volunteers expressing that they felt well supported.

Effective matching between volunteer and beneficiary

As previously referenced the matching process between volunteer and beneficiary forms a key part of the success of the project. Investing time and energy into getting the right match is an important aspect of the programme and undoubtedly results in high levels of volunteer retention, however it also takes time.

Volunteer Commitment

The volunteer survey asked people what their motivation was for volunteering for Feed the Birds. For most people their engagement with the project was borne out of both their interest in birds / nature and also a personal driver such as; the desire to 'give something back', enhancing their sense of purpose or improving their own wellbeing. This highlights the uniqueness of the volunteering role offered through the project.

Feedback from the volunteers focus group suggests that the opportunity to volunteer with the project was often picked up through other interest groups or volunteering roles that people were involved with. For example through other wildlife groups they were involved with or volunteering work in relation to Alzheimers awareness.

Some stakeholders felt that a more formalised connection between volunteers and other support workers working with the same beneficiary would be beneficial in terms of providing a more holistic approach to support around the individual. However, it was also recognised that this would place additional pressure on the volunteer's time and that this may over complicating the volunteer role.



7. Challenges

7.1. Capacity and nature of the Project Coordinator role

Staffing capacity proved to be one of the biggest challenges facing the project. The requirements of the Project Coordinator's role which included; volunteer recruitment, training and support, partnership development, overseeing the beneficiary referral and matching processes, beneficiary liaison alongside the administration of the project were too ambitious given the part time nature of the post. This resulted in the postholder being over-stretched. This was compounded by the fact that many of the relationships that facilitated beneficiary referrals and volunteer recruitment had to be newly established. The project did recruit a part time Administrator between September 2020 - December 2020 but this was specifically to support the distribution of the additional bird feeders out into the wider community. **Future consideration needs to be given as to how the project can be properly resourced going forward to ensure the Project Coordinator has sufficient administrative support.**

The elderly profile of the beneficiaries supported through Feed the Birds meant that during the course of the project many had, or developed, serious health conditions and a number of beneficiaries sadly passed away. In addition, many of the beneficiaries were significantly impacted by the pandemic, resulting in increased anxiety and isolation. This meant that often volunteers were dealing with highly emotional situations and supporting beneficiaries with complex needs. This led to the Project Coordinator providing significant emotional support to both volunteers and family members of beneficiaries. Whilst this support has been highly valued and welcomed by those that have received it this has, at times, left the Project Coordinator feeling emotionally overwhelmed. To address this an independent external counsellor was contracted to provide monthly supervision support to the Project Coordinator. **This additional support was felt to be essential and provision for this needs to be considered going forward.**

7.2. Beneficiary matching

One of the key aspects of the project that makes it successful is matching the right beneficiary with the right volunteer which has proved to be a challenge for the project at times. This has been a particular issue in terms of recruiting and matching volunteers and beneficiaries within the same geographical area in order to avoid volunteers having to travel an unacceptable distance to undertake their visits. This has resulted in the Project Coordinator needing to invest time to undertake more targeted recruitment. Despite this, some 5 volunteers and 10 beneficiaries remain unmatched. **Going forward consideration needs to be given as to how this can be resolved without compromising the quality of the matching process or placing too much pressure on volunteers.** Potential solutions may be to:

- Enable volunteers who are able and willing to take on more than one beneficiary
- Make more effective use of local voluntary and community sector organisations to help recruit volunteers and/or identify potential beneficiaries
- Where practicable explore the use of on-line⁷, using Facetime or Zoom, as an alternative to face-to-face visits with the bird-feeder being filled up by the individual themselves or a family member.

7.3. Sustainability

Given the vulnerable nature of the beneficiaries and how important the volunteer visits are to them continuity of support is essential and careful thought needs to be given as to how the project can be put on a firmer footing going forward. Funding has been secured from Shropshire Council until the end of March 22 with the opportunity to bid for part of the project costs next financial year but this does leave a shortfall and additional resources are required in order to cover the costs associated with delivery.

The success and simplicity of the delivery model makes it an obvious project for potential roll out across other geographical areas and our understanding is that conversations with The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts in respect of this are already underway. SWT should consider how it may be able to 'franchise' the project and draw on its experience of delivery in both Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin to provide consultancy support to those looking to establish Feed the Birds in other local areas.

Further exploration into how the project might become more self-sustaining longer term should also be undertaken and **this next phase of the project could be an opportunity to revisit the development of Feed the Birds satellite projects in market towns.** These satellites would be coordinated by a local volunteer who would act as the point of contact for the volunteers in the local area and act as an ambassador for Feed the Birds locally. Identifying a market town where there is a cluster of volunteers and beneficiaries would enable this satellite model to be piloted. **Alternatively, it may be worth exploring the opportunity to work in collaboration with other partners, such as Age UK , to pilot this approach.** It is important to note that whilst the satellite model may be more self-sustaining the project will always require a level of resourcing in order to cover the costs associated with project coordination, volunteer support and management, volunteer travel expenses and the cost of the bird feeders.

⁷ The additional resource and access implications of this would need to be considered given the elderly profile of the beneficiary base.

8 Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this evaluation and are based on the understanding that Shropshire Wildlife Trust is committed to delivering the Feed the Birds project as one of its key health and wellbeing projects.

- 1 To record beneficiary numbers as direct and indirect beneficiaries in order to reflect the wider value of project support to those caring for the individual.
- 2 The remit of the project should be widened to include carers as beneficiaries.
- 3 To provide adequate administrative support for the project.
- 4 To continue to provide the Project Coordinator with external coaching support.
- 5 To review the matching process and explore opportunities that may expediate the process or address the issue of parties remaining unmatched.
- 6 To use the findings of this research to demonstrate how Feed the Birds can contribute to Shropshire Council's Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2022-27.
- 7 To explore how the project may be rolled out across the national network of Wildlife Trusts.
- 8 To seek additional funding to enable the continuation of the project and to develop its work with care settings.
- 9 To pilot a satellite Feed the Birds project and explore the opportunity to work collaboratively with other agencies, such as Age UK, on this.



9 Conclusion

“We’ve lost the community cohesion that we once had so I hope this project will encourage more people to think more about helping people in their communities”.

Shropshire Wildlife Trust

Feed the Birds is a simple yet highly effective project that has made a significant difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable and isolated people in society. The project has been hugely successful in reducing loneliness and increasing the wellbeing of the people it has supported and has also brought with it wider benefits for those caring for the beneficiary and the volunteers.

The focus on ‘feeding the birds’ has connected people with the natural world and has made a positive contribution to the local environment whilst providing a shared interest for the beneficiaries and volunteers.

The pandemic shone a spotlight on loneliness, social isolation and the impact it has on wellbeing which has brought the issue into even sharper focus for policy makers locally and nationally. Alongside this the focus on social prescribing means there are growing opportunities for projects like Feed the Birds to contribute to the health and wellbeing agenda.

Whilst SWT has undertaken small scale ad hoc health and wellbeing projects over the past 20 years and has always recognised the value of connecting people to nature it has during the past 5 years demonstrated a much stronger commitment to this type of work. With a new focus on Green Social Prescribing and the development of a health and wellbeing strategy in the last 12 months, including a priority on activity that targets older people and reduces isolation, Feed the Birds is at the heart of this and provides an excellent showcase through which to demonstrate the benefits of these types of interventions. SWT needs to use the findings of this research, alongside the powerful beneficiary stories, to position itself to take up Local Authority commissioning opportunities to deliver services targeted at improving people’s wellbeing and reducing loneliness and social isolation.





The evaluation was conducted by Impact Consultancy & Research