

## Age UK Blog- Tea Talks

By Beth Sedgwick, Participation and Community Officer at Oxford Playhouse

Oxford Playhouse's pilot project, 'Tea Talks' ran in two parts in association with Age UK Oxon in the Summer and Autumn of 2020.

At the Playhouse we believe in the importance of creativity for everyone, which has never been truer than in the strange and isolating times we find ourselves living in right now. I also believe everyone has the capacity, if presented with a platform, to be a storyteller in some shape or form. I see my job as enabling people to express themselves.

I started developing the first part of this project with the support of the OP creative team in April 2020, after recognising the difficulties presented to later in-life people in finding human connections that were not centred online.

Firstly, I set about organising a call out with Age UK and made an appearance on BBC Radio Oxford to publicise the project. I received referrals from Oxford Association for Blind, and Social Prescribers from a local surgery and began weekly phone calls over the course of a month in June 2020. Fifteen people that were aged 60+ initially took part.

At first, I set themes for our 30-minute chats over the phone, thinking people may need prompting as this was all very new and I did not know or could not see most of my participants. This proved to be unnecessary as I got to know each person.

Their likes, interests and hobbies were all very varied and I learnt a lot of new things about science, VE day and music! After a few weeks we felt like old friends- chatting about family, pets, travel & adventure. I see these relationships as an on-going extension to our Playhouse family, even at a time when our doors are currently closed.

Although not without its minor challenges, the feedback we received from participants has been overwhelmingly positive. As the mean age of the project was 82 and a third of our wonderful participants are in their nineties, the impact of the project can be both quantitatively and qualitatively measured.

A few feedback quotes from Tea Talks participants include:

*“Brilliant*

*Happy Times*

*Fabulous!*

*Buzzing with memories*

*Interesting”*

The health and wellbeing elements of the project are also part of an ongoing evaluation, and we plan to contact our original participants during Summer 2021 to see if we can gauge the longer-term benefits of the project on their health and wellbeing.

The second phase of the project is currently underway and involves creating a radio project from the stories and talents that the participants shared over the course of their chats with us.

I was able to facilitate over the phone chats about what they would like to record for it and offer direction over zoom and the phone. Ten of our participants from the summer have taken part. I was delighted that as well as their life stories, piano carols, short stories, and amazing facts are also a part of it. This is work that is *of* them, rather than simply being *with* them. The distinction, I think, is important.

We plan to launch the radio piece on **Dec 17<sup>th</sup> 2020** as a Christmas special on the OP website and through Age UK.

The support Age UK has given us for this project has been fantastic- it helped us reach people who might not otherwise have taken part and who might live independently and more rurally than Oxford city. The diversity of reach for this project is important to us and is something we will continue to expand as we look to re-do both parts of the project again in 2021.

Our collaboration with Age UK has been vital to the project's success- people trusted us. They trusted that we would bring something positive to the lives of themselves or their loved ones, clients, and service users.

Although this year has presented unknown challenges to creatives, audiences, and charities, this experience has been a positive one in demonstrating Oxford Playhouse's commitment to providing a creative service to the elderly of the county and beyond.

A special thank-you to Helen Fountain, who was always on the other end of the line for advice or feedback, and to personally refer people she thought would benefit. And lastly, a big thank-you to our participants for helping us realise this initiative – long may it continue!

If you, or someone you know would like to enquire about taking part in Tea Talks phone calls in spring 2021, please email [community@oxfordplayhouse.com](mailto:community@oxfordplayhouse.com)