



Evaluation of Hear for Norfolk's Cuppa Care Project

Mrs Anna Sweeting, Charlie Handy and Dr Sarah Hanson

Faculty of Medicine and Health

University of East Anglia

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Introduction

Background

Hear for Norfolk (the operating name of Norfolk Deaf Association (NDA)), is a registered charity, set up in March 1898 and first registered with the Charity Commission in September 1962. It is dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing, aiding communication, and enhancing the overall quality of life of people of all ages with hearing loss and hearing related conditions, their families and carers.

The delivery model for all their services is based on achieving wide reaching and accessible support across the county of Norfolk, reducing inequality and ensuring that the services are available in the right place, at the right time, delivering the right care by the right person. One of their services is the 'Cuppa Care' project (listening, wellbeing and practical support, information and advice). This was developed and piloted during the pandemic to address the feelings of loneliness and social isolation experienced by members of Norfolk communities to help proactively tackle the issue.

The 'Cuppa Care' Project is a mobile outreach service offering emotional, wellbeing and practical support, information and advice to people of all ages who might experience loneliness or isolation. The specific outcomes Hear for Norfolk are aiming to achieve with this project are: Improved companionship/someone to talk to; Improved community connections; Reduced feeling of loneliness; Reduced feeling of isolation and Improved access to support, information and advice.

Overview of the evaluation

Hear for Norfolk sought an evaluation of 'Cuppa Care' when the service was established but at an early enough stage of the lifecycle of the funding, so that any learnings could be used to adjust and further develop the model going forward. The UEA (Dr Sarah Hanson and Ms Anna Sweeting) were commissioned to do this.

Using qualitative methods, the evaluation sought to provide independent insight into how far 'Cuppa Care' objectives have been achieved, any barriers to the service achieving its full potential and observations of features that have the potential to be optimised.

To do this the research team conducted:

- Nine interviews with staff, volunteers and partner organisations either on Teams or while on site visits with the 'Cuppa Care' bus.
- Interviews with 28 people who are using the service. These were undertaken while visiting eight sites with the 'Cuppa Care' bus across four days in summer 2025.

The research team sought to visit a range of sites to capture the different models and assets used. The sites were: Holt Community Centre, Bure Valley Support Living in Aylsham, The Forum in Norwich, Thetford Market Square, Swaffham Market Square, Northrepps Community Centre, Aylsham Market Square and Stalham Staithe Surgery Car Park. Creative methods were used during the interviews to increase inclusivity and provide engaging visuals for the report. This involved asking people to describe 'Cuppa Care' in three words written on a luggage label.

This report outlines the key findings.

Establishing the 'Cuppa Care' Project

During the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated lock down periods Hear for Norfolk remained open as a charity. During this time, Hear for Norfolk received multiple phone calls from service users whose needs went beyond solely practical support with their hearing aids or the need to book an appointment for the aural care procedure. For many, they were lonely and looking for conversation. The charity identified a clear need for social interaction amongst their service users and the older population in general. These concerns were shared with the Rotary Club of Norwich, (the Hear for Norfolk CEO was a member), who were also concerned about the rising levels of loneliness and isolation experienced in local communities. It was decided then that as part of their 100-year anniversary celebrations, the Rotary Club would help raise funds towards the 'Cuppa Care' bus which could widen the reach of support for people needing to access a range of services. After establishing the idea, Hear for Norfolk raised the majority of required capital and revenue funds, developed and led the project. The project was partly built on the model used in Suffolk (Suffolk Rural Caravan) where a partnership of organisations would take the bus to different locations across Norfolk providing a cup of tea (hence 'cuppa' name) and seek to build social connection and community while providing wrap around support. This model built on Hear for Norfolk's substantial experience of providing mobile outreach clinical and support services. In designing the service, the aim was to provide support in the heart of the community, taking an asset-based approach. This involves utilising existing assets (such as community hubs and networks) so as to build upon what was already offered. The intention and design are explained in the following quotes:

"It was very much about providing companionship, a listening ear to people and then identifying what needs they have and helping them with those needs. It's very much about reducing that loneliness and isolation but also reducing any additional needs people have." (Stakeholder)

"When we set up the 'Cuppa Care', of course we were trying very hard to make sure that we are in the heart of the community and utilising the existing assets. To add on rather than start competing." (Stakeholder)

Hear for Norfolk gathered interest from partner organisations with the idea that a range of support offerings could be provided from the 'Cuppa Care' bus alongside the social interaction.

"I got in touch with the chief execs of Vision Norfolk, Age UK Norfolk, Age UK Norwich, Norfolk & Waveney Mind, Norfolk CAB and Norfolk LGBT+ project and they all agreed that it was a good idea." (Stakeholder)

"We have Breckland Council, the community connectors and development workers. They come to Swaffham Sessions. We had the Macmillan charity as they needed to reach people in North Norfolk." (Stakeholder)

"We supported Hear for Norfolk when they came up with the concept through the Rotary Club as a fundraiser, and it was trying to maximise an asset which already existed and about us trying to reach individuals who were in the communities who don't often have the ability to access mainstream services or might not feel comfortable going straight into our Citizens Advice or an Age UK because, they don't really know what they need. It ticked a lot of boxes for us and equally got us into a few places where we probably weren't engaging in Norwich and also it went wider into the county." (Stakeholder)

For Hear for Norfolk it was important that 'Cuppa Care' was utilised and made available as a wider service provision regardless of whether people had a hearing need, thus the desire to work with other organisations, making possible a wide spectrum of support services reaching members of the community who otherwise will not be accessing their services.

After initial roll out, the 'hands on' technical assistance with the maintenance of hearing aids was added to the offering in a number of the locations visited as service users were asking for such provision. This resulted in members of the community not only receiving advice and information about hearing loss, ear related conditions, communication tactics, advice on how to access hearing related clinical services, but also, when appropriate, being provided with batteries and replacement parts for hearing aids, or hands-on technical assistance with the maintenance and repairs of aids, if required. This was all delivered as part of one point of contact but also enabling a much wider reach of people. Without the 'Cuppa Care' this additional support would not have been possible in a number of areas due to financial and resource constraints.

"It made sense to add the technical help with the maintenance of hearing aids where we could...it was very much because people are saying, well, it's nice to come and see you and you know have a word, but it would be nice to do my hearing aids at the same time, get some batteries or something."

Three years on, starting with six venues, 'Cuppa Care' now visits 38 locations across Norfolk, visiting rural, urban and coastal areas and taking the project to a range of community assets such as community centres, supermarket car parks, markets and supported housing projects.

What has the 'Cuppa Care' Project achieved?

Hearing related specialist information

At the core of Hear for Norfolk's 'Cuppa Care' is the provision of hearing related information, advice and specialist support provided by staff and volunteers to people in Norfolk communities, with the view of reducing the feeling of loneliness and social isolation that often stems from hearing loss. There is clearly a huge need for such support, particularly hearing aid maintenance especially in poorly connected villages and market towns for the older population, particularly those less mobile.

"It's important as we all get older. We all get old. And I never thought I'd get old and have to have a hearing aid, but you know, it comes to some of us as we get older and it's important that we have things local because not everybody wants to get on the bus. People don't want to drive as they get older; they lose their confidence." (Service user)

"We have a 1/2 mile walk to get a bus it's so difficult, these things they're an absolute godsend." (Service user)

"Well, when you're not too mobile, it's more convenient than having to get to Norwich or Cromer. We've found it very, very helpful and have always been satisfied with the service." (Service user)

Support was clearly needed in central Norwich too, where people felt comfortable traveling in or whereby people easily accessed the support while doing other errands. For those who were working, they were able to access support in lunch breaks from work. When asked what they had used the 'Cuppa Care' bus for that day, many responded with comments such as:

"I use the bus to get the replacement parts for the hearing aids." and "For batteries, for my hearing aids." and "Well they've put new tubes in" (Service users)

Hear for Norfolk are only able to provide this support in Norwich as part of 'Cuppa Care', otherwise the service users would have to attend one of their clinics on the outskirts of the city to pick up hearing aid parts, for example. Transport issues are well known in Norfolk, it has even in the UK Transport Select committee as a transport desert:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn31mvd5z17o>

It is clear that the 'Cuppa Care' mobile service is vital in making support more accessible and enabling the use of hearing aids. By also providing the opportunity for interaction with other service users, staff and volunteers it also creates a supportive environment and social interaction. It is a very nice example of an asset-based approach, meeting people where their needs are and with the additional benefit of supporting the reduction of social isolation and loneliness.



Case study of support with hearing issues in rural areas – Amy has a busy life caring for both her elderly parents, as well as her daughter who has disabilities. She spends a lot of time traveling from where she lives to appointments in the city for those she cares for, which is difficult and time consuming as she lives in North Norfolk. The researcher ends up talking to Amy who sits in the car along with her mother and daughter, and it is clear just how helpful the more rural provision of the ‘Cuppa Care’ bus support has been in terms of hearing support. She is quickly able to explain to the team that her father cannot read or write and is having problems with his hearing aids. Amy explains, “Dad is disabled, so I have to do all the driving so it’s quite handy that it’s local. To be able to take him and it’s never regular when he needs his hearing aids checked. It could be like, today, and then in a month’s time he might need them done again, it might then go three months. So, yeah, so, he’s really, really hard of hearing, so when I can Google when you are close, it’s handy for me to be able to bring him.” (Carer of service user)

As well as the hyperlocal element of ‘Cuppa Care’ practical support, it was clear that there was great strength in the accessible timely support ‘Cuppa Care’ provided, as illustrated by the following quotes, all by users of the service.

“Well, yesterday my hearing aid fell apart and so I can look up on the screen where this travelling bus is, or one of the travelling buses is, every day for the next three months or whatever, and I just pick out the next nearest one that’s within ten miles of my home and try and go there to be first customer when it opens.”

“[another provider] improved a bit lately but they used to be pretty haphazard, you wouldn’t always be guaranteed an appointment for 2 – 3 weeks. Well, you can’t really sit for 2 – 3 weeks with no hearing aid. So, this is delightful because it’s almost available next day or in a couple of days.”

“I’ve got two hearing aids, but I manage with one. But it’s just not as convenient with only one. I have difficulty hearing things with both on. One’s not so good. So, it would make a big difference if I couldn’t have it repaired straight away, within a day or two. That’s the big advantage, the speed of getting it fixed.”

“I haven’t got to worry about waiting for a lengthy appointment.”

“The hospital number here, I mean 9 times out of 10, there’s nobody there and you have to leave a message.”

There were examples that demonstrate the additional support and advice ‘Cuppa Care’ provides to people regarding their hearing, important to meeting Hear for Norfolk’s aims. Support went much further than merely ‘signposting’, which often does not meet people’s needs in a holistic or supportive way, especially for those with additional needs, or who struggle with a digital world from which many are excluded. Examples of this ‘hand holding’ and person-centred care included making direct phone calls to clinics, looking to ensure that connections and appointments had been made. Also, staff and volunteers booking hearing assessments or calling audiology departments when people were distressed and had been waiting a long time for referrals to the hospital and were unsure about progress. Staff and volunteers are highly

attuned to the potential needs of people who use the 'Cuppa Care' bus. This level of practical and emotional support to people struggling to navigate complex health systems is a strength of the service. Examples are below.

"I'm not too happy with the hospital...I had to go to the doctors to get a referral for a hearing test, which she put through and I don't know I got a letter that said that'll take 28 weeks...the fella in there [cuppa care bus] said he'll follow that up once he gets back...It's a bit embarrassing when people talk to you, who don't really know you...I'm the fool. I've got a mobile. I don't have a landline now, too expensive. I usually text people who I know because they know I can't hear what they're saying but when people phone you, who don't know...well that's embarrassing." (Service user)

"Just batteries for my hearing aid, and help and advice, like the chappie today is gonna' hopefully get me sorted at the hospital." (Service user)

"Another example is a lady who came last week, who, she broke down, frankly. It was, we'd had a rush in the morning, and it was quite a bit quieter in the second part of the session. She explained her husband had died, 55 years they'd been married, and she was struggling and relatively recently moved to Sheringham. She was lonely and myself and one of the other members of staff, we were able to sit with her, she had a cup of tea, and she again went away saying, 'I'll come back. I'll come back next time.' Now, she didn't come with a hearing problem but throughout the conversation, it became apparent she did have hearing problems, and when we were talking to her about that she said, 'Well, you know, I have noticed that I've got to turn the television up,' and 'I have noticed my grandchildren shouting at me,' and so on. So, we were able then to point her towards getting an audiologist to have a look in her ears with a view to see if there was wax, the follow on from that being we could have her booked up to have a hearing test." (Stakeholder)

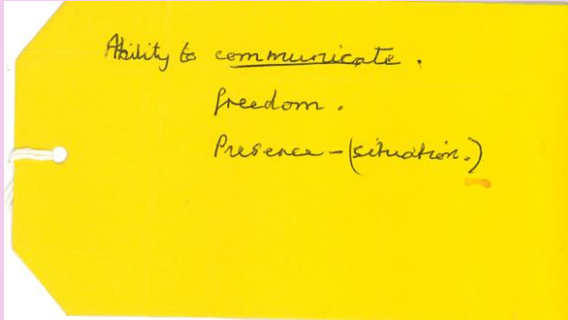
It is important to note that such conversations require a private space away from other service users and time for staff and volunteers to give sufficient attention. This space and time was not always evident. There is high demand for the service and regularly people were waiting to be seen.

Another of Hear for Norfolk's service provision is their Hearing Support service. This is only able to support service users with repairs, replacement of parts, maintenance of hearing aids. Due to demand, there is no time, in the Hearing Support technical service for advice, information and help with connecting to other professionals. The Hearing Support service is also not as widely provided across Norfolk due to challenges with raising the funds for such a service. Our understanding is that the landscape of tariffs and block contracts has meant that patients are not getting the follow-up technical assistance that they need from their original providers. This is evidenced by us seeing several people coming forward for such support after trying, with no success, to gain this from their initial provider. Therefore, 'Cuppa Care' are picking up this work, because without it in many locations across Norfolk people would not be able to get the help with their hearing aids.



Case study of the impact of support – Bridgit regularly uses the ‘Cuppa Care’ bus. She arrives on her scooter and shares that she finds using the public bus service very difficult to travel to different locations. “I think you saw me on my buggy. Well, when you’re disabled, just to get on a bus is really, really difficult or you have to ask somebody to help

you to go to the hospital, so it’s an absolute godsend to me.” Bridgit has two hearing aids and speaks of how difficult it is socially to join in when one of these is not working. She explains



that if the ‘Cuppa Care’ bus was not here, she would need to wait for weeks for an appointment which would mean she could not join in conversations. When asked by the researcher what it would mean to her if the ‘Cuppa Care’ service was not in place, she responded, “Isolation first of all and the difficult of getting anywhere else”. When describing the bus in three words, she spoke

of the ability to communicate, freedom this service provided and the importance of its presence’



Case study of the impact of support – Graham was becoming worried about his mother who was in a care home and struggling to engage, thus becoming increasingly isolated. This was causing tensions for all the family. Graham visited the ‘Cuppa Care’ bus, and the team were able to organise support his mother needed around hearing. This unlocked so much for his

mother, who Graham now says is thriving in the care home. She has started to eat and join the dining area again and is mixing with the other residents. ‘Cuppa Care’ explained, “The gentleman drove past and saw the bus and thought, what’s that about? He came in to find out what it was all about. His mother had hearing aids, that’s not the principal reason he came. That she was withdrawn. She wasn’t eating. She’d lost all interest. To cut a long story short, through that intervention by him actually coming we provided her with a hearing assessment and have continued to maintain those hearing aids. And he said it’s like having his 80-year-old mother back, not a 102-year-old lady. She’s interacting with people in the care home. She’s eating. She’s having lunch and he said it’s just magnificent to see.”

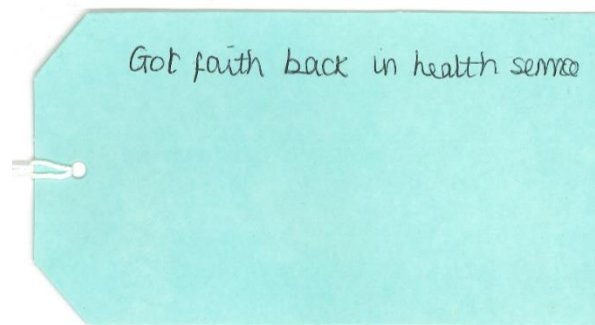
Importantly we also found some evidence that 'Cuppa Care' is reducing the burden on hospital audiology hospital appointments. People were accessing the bus rather than making appointments with the audiology department at the hospitals in the region.

"I mean if I can, I mean I know everybody at hospital is so busy and stretched, so if I can use this bus and save the time there as well, it also saves petrol and driving to Cromer. So yeh it's just practical really."

"I would say that this service is good as you don't have to go all the way to hospital and then maybe take less time so then the nurses can do other things." (Service user)

"Well, I haven't got to go and park in the town somewhere. Haven't got to make appointments at the hospital." (Service users)

The following case study illustrates that 'Cuppa Care' is reaching individuals that are not coming forward through conventional healthcare provider routes. Instead, through being based within people's communities they are building trust enabling people to come forward.



Case study of reaching those not accessing healthcare – Carol has not been to the doctor for 17 years, since her husband died, she explains, "because they did a wrong diagnosis and everything. I just have no faith in the NHS." She lives with her son and has recently had two falls but neither time sought medical support. Carol saw the 'Cuppa Care' bus in her market town and stopped to see what they provided as she has been experiencing hearing loss since the falls. She has limited digital access and speaks of the NHS being more based on Apps and technology. "The NHS is going to bring out a new App to go to the doctors, I don't go in for fancy stuff. I have a mobile phone. That's just a phone. So, another one, tick, can't use that." Carol is pleasantly surprised by the 'Cuppa Care' bus and feels this is more what is needed, "if you knew that it was going to be here on a Friday, Tuesday there and that what, you know, something like that. Yeah. It's all you need." Carol was able to be seen in the bus and provided the support that she was looking for. Importantly, it also helped restore her trust in healthcare support and the 'Cuppa Care' team were able to make phone calls for further support.

Building connections and reducing loneliness

Loneliness is defined as the distress that accompanies a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships. The discrepancy usually arises from having relationships that are of poorer quality than wanted. Loneliness is not synonymous with objective isolation (which is living alone or having few social interactions); thus, people interacting with others can be lonely and, conversely, be alone yet not lonely. (Hawkey, 2022)

The connection between social connection, loneliness and poor health are widely recognised, for example Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010) and Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015). We also know that hearing impairment has important implications for social connection and the psychosocial health of older adults (Shukla et al., 2020). A recent qualitative study in England with people experiencing hearing loss found that, ‘the burden is very much on yourself’ and that the experience of hearing loss takes significant effort, involving hidden practical, psychosocial and relational work that is devolved to the individual (Smith et al., 2024).

In terms of the particular social isolation that hearing loss brings, people in this evaluation described the maintenance and support the service provided for hearing aids as having a profound impact on reducing their loneliness and isolation. There were many examples where people spoke of broken hearing aids meaning they were unable to speak to family members, join in with conversations and missed out on social opportunities. This led to frustrations and loneliness so the ability to quickly access support to fix these problems through ‘Cuppa Care’ enabled them to socialise and improved their quality of life.

“It's bad enough that I've got a problem with tinnitus and the hearing aids aren't 100% effective for me. However, without them, I can't hear anything and then you're totally socially isolated.” (Service user)

“Deafness is so isolating. If you can't hear, you're left out of so many things.” (Service user)

These quotes describe the exclusion that many people with hearing loss encounter and so the important service that the ‘Cuppa Care’ project provides.

“Because if I haven't got my hearing aids, I wouldn't be able to hear and I know that people leave people out of the conversation. I went to a party the other day with a friend of mine, she had encephalitis when she was younger, and she is profoundly deaf. At the party we were all sitting together, people don't mean to do it, but she was just being totally disregarded in the conversation because she couldn't take part - and people don't think about that. And you can't blame them, they're chatting, they want to chat with their friends and everybody, so it really is an isolating disability.” (Service user)

“You can't hear. Frustrated because a conversation flows. If you stop it and start it, it doesn't work. It is really frustrating. It's like saying ‘no’ isn't it. That ends the conversation.” (Service user)

“I can't hear. It's horrible. You stick your fingers in your ear and you tell me what you feel like.” (Service user)

“[Researcher – what would you do if it wasn’t here?] Probably not bother [Researcher – explores the consequence of this] ...you can’t hear properly... it’s so limited you can’t hear the television, you can’t join in the conversation.” (Service user)

We have given the following lengthy quote to illustrate the opportunity afforded by ‘Cuppa Care’ to support increasing social connection and potentially reduce feelings of loneliness. The quote also illustrates the complexity of people’s needs and the skills needed by people staffing the bus to recognise these.

“The lady was standing outside the venue, she was looking inquisitively to see, you know, what might be going on, and I approached her actually, so she came over with her dog and just started to have a chat, asking what the service was about, she attends the venue [where the bus parks] once a week, generally on a Monday, to come for coffee and she doesn’t really get to speak to many people. And as it turns out it’s because she has a bit of hearing loss, so she probably can’t hear, so she’s probably not interacting very well. So, she is particularly lonely, she lives in a silent household, she doesn’t really watch TV. She doesn’t listen to the radio, which may be helped by hearing assessment and hearing aids, even though she said that she had some hearing aids from, who knows how many years ago, that she purchased from Boots. I think they were more amplifiers. And she’s lonely and she actually said, you know, ‘I’m very lonely.’ So, she sat for ten minutes just having a general chat and everything from the weather, to ‘why are the planes flying so low today, is there something going on?’” (Stakeholder)

It is clear that in addition to vital technical assistance with hearing aids maintenance, ‘Cuppa Care’ is facilitating connections and conversations for people. This might take the form of casual social interactions between people while they are waiting to be seen on the bus or more focused when they are engaging with the staff and volunteers. There are greater opportunities for this, dependant on the location. For example, a private space is needed for quiet conversations, especially if people are distressed or personal information is needed to support referrals. For more meaningful social interaction, ideally hot drink making facilities are needed that do not rely on the bus facilities (staff and volunteers are busy on the bus and other people are present, waiting to be seen) and an indoor space for comfort (especially for those who are more infirm) and available in all weathers. We appreciate, however, the challenges around this in terms of venues and extra staffing, especially in remote rural areas, when the priority needs to be on providing services. It is also likely that this will require additional funds, which is difficult in the current climate.

The following gives some insight into the variety of opportunities currently afforded by providing ‘Cuppa Care’ and also what members of the public who use the service value. People looked forward to the bus coming, with one service user saying, “It’s like a day out for us.” In another location people had the opportunity to come out of their nearby supported housing to meet up and have a conversation, thereby widening their social network. The researcher also saw people in the market towns pop by the bus to ask a question and seek help about very specific challenges they are experiencing. In another place, the following quote epitomises the opportunity that ‘Cuppa Care’ offers for more spontaneous support.

“This morning we’ve had a lady from Vision Norfolk here while I’ve been doing hearing aids. She’s actually been talking to all the folks outside and lining them up for us. So actually, although they’ve come along to have the hearing aids fixed, primarily they’ve actually had a social conversation without this and everyone’s happier.” (Stakeholder)

“Some people just walk out and have a chat.” (Stakeholder)

“Well, it's a friendly chat. Yes, the welcome. You know, the friendly chat, it might be raining here. You've got your thing out [The gazebo].” (Service user)

In terms of more organised building of community and connections, as ‘Cuppa Care’ had originally sought to do, Northrepps is a particularly good example, as explained in detail below. The bus is parked outside a community centre but uses the facilities within the centre. This includes a vibrant coffee morning led by a Hear for Norfolk volunteer. In addition to this being a warm and welcoming occasion it also provides opportunities for different services to be represented, in addition to Hear for Norfolk offering technical assistance with the maintenance of hearing aids in a dedicated room. The energy, connection and community spirit created through this was clear to see as illustrated through these quotes and the case study.

“I think that it's the company, that everybody is here. They all chat and yes, I just go and talk about things.” (Service user)

“We have had Vision Norfolk. He comes in regularly. We have the Council Community Coordinator, I think she was called. She has access to those things in the Council. Also finance as well through the Council... various people on and off, you know, come and have been welcomed and most people come and speak to them, so that's good.” (Stakeholder)

“Company, family, laughter.” (Service user)

“To me, it's a lifeline. People say, ‘hello [name],’ if I didn't come here no one would say that.”

“This is more sociable. You go to hospital; you're just a number.” (Service user)

“We have a good laugh.” (Service user)

“The companionship, the friendliness. Every month they come and it's not always that they're here about hearing aids, actually they don't do that. They come because they sit and have a chat. They enjoy it. We all know each other now because it's that bit where friendships form.” (Stakeholder)

“The best thing about it is people have smiles on their faces when they go out of the door, and the other thing coupled up with that, they're very happy with the work they receive on their hearing aids and the improvements.” (Stakeholder)

“The tea and the coffee. They love it, they love it.” (Stakeholder)

Service users and volunteers who had been to more than one location for the ‘Cuppa Care’ bus noted the difference in the qualities of this particular site.

“Here it is just to sort of ask what you want that takeaway whereas you go to [Northrepps] and have coffee, tea, bit of cake, chat, get to know people.” (Service user)

“This [Northrepps] is a very vibrant one compared to the other ones [other ‘Cuppa Care locations’]. It takes a while, but I think sometimes it's because we're volunteers that chat to them, that they're drawn in and then they'll come back again. Because I think if

they've got a friendly atmosphere to go to, you get them back again. And the important part of it is because they have someone to talk to.” (Stakeholder)

Such connections are clearly having an impact on social isolation and loneliness. Visiting the ‘Cuppa Care’ bus while it was operating gave the opportunity to witness the interactions with people using the service.

The project was named ‘Cuppa care’ with the intention of supporting people’s needs in an informal way with a hot drink and a conversation. The example from the set up at Northrepps, detailed above, demonstrates this. Elsewhere it is operating differently. There are a range of challenges that help to explain why the ‘cuppa’ and more informal conversation support is not operating at other sites, whilst recognising the importance of a flexible model that reflects the circumstances and assets unique to each location.

Firstly, for most people, they are accessing ‘Cuppa Care’ for support with their hearing issues. There is clearly great demand for this, and queues were seen in most sites that were visited, with one service user telling us, “There’s often a queue here.”

“But by far and way, the number of people who come are people I think are people who know that ‘Cuppa Care’ is here and they call along, or they've enquired, and they come along and say can I have my tubes and my batteries done.” (Stakeholder)

As detailed above, our observation is that that people’s needs are being very well met around the care and support of hearing devices and hearing loss in general. To do this well however puts time pressure on staff and volunteers to ensure that these more functional needs are met. Whilst they work hard in asking follow-up questions to explore any wider issues the user might want to discuss; this is limited by the time pressure at busier sites.

As mentioned above, Hear for Norfolk are dependent on local assets, partnership arrangements, and opportunities to co-locate with coffee mornings that are already provided. For example, ‘Cuppa Care’ have some venues (e.g. Erpingham) where coffee mornings are run by the village hall committee and Hear for Norfolk attend with ‘Cuppa Care’ to offer assistance with hearing issues and support with any other issues if any of the other partner organisations are present. This is an example of Hear for Norfolk purposefully linking the two activities, which is synergistic and effective as this reaches approximately 70 people, thereby accessing a lot of people in an enjoyable space where service users have coffees and socialise while waiting to be seen. It is also a very good example of building long term relationships and trust and promoting the service in such a positive way. Rather disappointingly, in other places, ‘Cuppa Care’ have not been allowed to visit on a day of a coffee morning run as the bus was perceived as ‘competition’. This synergy was therefore lost with the bus visiting on different days to make sure that the service still reached people in remote areas. Also, for town centre locations, there are no village halls or communal spaces that the bus could utilise. Going forward, we support and encourage the ongoing work Hear for Norfolk does in trying to build these synergies, for example, where possible to partner with warm spaces and other partner organisations as there is so much potential in such synergies.

Wider community service

Your own reporting has data on who is using the service. Our evaluation enabled us to ask people their views about the service and to observe the service in operation.

It appears that due to financial pressures and lack of funds there is a lack of presence from other organisations. Some also only visit intermittently, depending on their other priorities. For example, Age UK Norfolk, had been joining regularly but then they lost the volunteers who were assigned to Cuppa Care. They now have new resources in the team and are hopefully re-starting their visits with staff members.

Our observation is that users may not be aware that 'Cuppa Care' may be able to support people beyond their hearing needs. These three service users illustrate this.

[Researcher -Are you aware that it's not just hearing and that you can ask about other support?] I didn't know" (Service user)

[Researcher – Did you know that Age Uk Norwich and different charities can also provide support on the bus?] No"

[Researcher-Did you know that this bus provides more than just hearing support?] not really... Well, I wondered why it was called a Cuppa Care."

Emotional support

We saw 'Cuppa Care' staff and volunteers providing people with emotional support. This may be in the context of hearing loss such as:

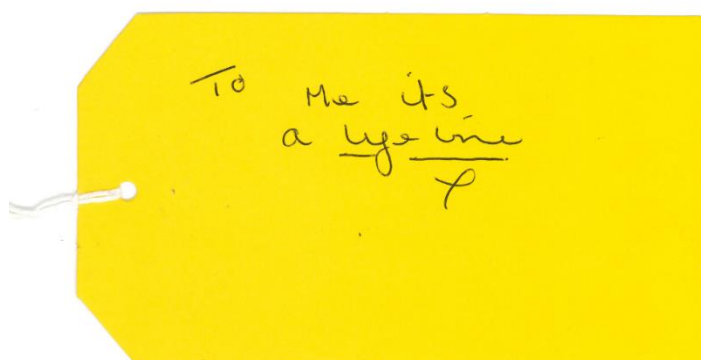
"I think if you understand what's happening, yeah, it can help and be less distressing. Yet when you get frustrated or upset and angry, I used to be a very upset, angry young person or I'd have...explosions. Yeah, out of sheer rage and frustration. And right now I understand what's happening, how the brain works, how the hearing process works. Yeah. So I'm much more patient and I try to explain that to people so people get less upset." (Stakeholder)

Also, being a place that people feel they can come and share how they are feeling more widely.

"I came over here one of the weeks and I was so low, and I admit I cried, but they were so supportive of me." (Service user)

For many, they described that the service gave them peace of mind, with others describing it as a 'lifeline'.

"It gives some peace of mind...knowing that when you need something you can, you know five minutes, 10 minutes, even 20 minutes...no questions asked you haven't got to justify yourself. Such a godsend." (Service user)



'Cuppa Care' staff and volunteers work hard to create a trusted safe place where people feel accepted as they are:

"I think we're creating a space that people feel is trustworthy... And when they sort of see the same person several times running, they open up a lot more. So I think if I've been somewhere three or four times running, they will talk to me more because it is about trust rather than seeing different people." (Stakeholder)

"It's about relationship building and sort of feeling confident to come to the vehicle. We are safe." (Stakeholder)

"They felt it was safe to come out, have a chat" (Stakeholder)

The team work hard too, to provide people with time and to listen, however this can be challenging when large queues are forming for the service outside the bus.

"Listening, having the time to hear them. And the problem with commercial sector or even in the NHS at the audiology unit is that they have so many people to get through. I'm a volunteer and I will give them time, they know that they will be given time." (Stakeholder)

"The important bit is time and being able to listen to actually work out what the issues are. Sometimes it's emotional and therefore it is a way of working through that and explaining. Sometimes it is physical and taking the time to be patient with them. This morning one of them needed help with how to put the battery in the hearing aid. It took time and giving her time to practise in front of me so that when she left she knew she could do it." (Stakeholder)

"It's not a rushed appointment. That makes a difference. It's not having a rushed appointment where you go in a doctor's, or you go to an optician that you see somebody clinical and you're out of the door." (Stakeholder)

Financial support, including accessing welfare benefits

One of the agency partners invited to attend the 'Cuppa Care' bus is Age UK Norwich who can provide financial advice and guidance. When Age UK Norwich were present, this was valued.

"I think the time before when I came, there was someone here from the benefits people. Helping people know if they're qualified for allowances." (Service User)

"For example, an individual that came was widowed, had no idea about the additional benefits they could claim, had been living on really very little money, not had the heating on for three years, was wrapped up in blankets, duvets and additional layers, not taking care of their personal hygiene because they were frightened to put the hot water on. Things like that, and we were able to point them in the right direction. The increase they got was more than double what they had been receiving. They gained so much from that, because it spurred them on to not only look at other things that they may be just entitled to but other things that they could do for themselves. So I think, making people feel confident enough to actually seek out further support where it's needed." (Stakeholder)

Practical support

It was clear that 'Cuppa Care' had a very person-centred approach responding to a wide range of needs, important to the person. Ostensibly, these needs could be considered small, but they clearly had a large impact on the person. There were multiple examples, such as showing someone how to use a key safe, mending broken wheels on walkers, recommending small changes in the home to reduce falls, accessing services such as prescriptions or mobility support.

"It was funny. It just reminded me when I was here last, which is months ago a gentleman came to see someone, as he had no idea that prescriptions and medications could be delivered. And he just said I can't keep doing this for whoever he was doing it for. And he just thought that was the best thing ever, but he was unaware of it. Yeah, I mean, it's just a tiny little thing, but it made his life better, and it made the resident's life better. I think we take it for granted that things that are available to people, but people are not aware of the services that are available to them." (Stakeholder)

"They've helped me a lot with getting in touch about equipment and stuff like that." (Service user)



Case study of receiving practical support - Theresa circled the 'Cuppa Care' bus many times before coming in one day. The team discovered that a wheel on her walking frame was broken and that she had been eating cheese and ham sandwiches for many years. 'Cuppa Care' were able to fix the wheel and support Theresa to access the welfare benefits that she was entitled to.

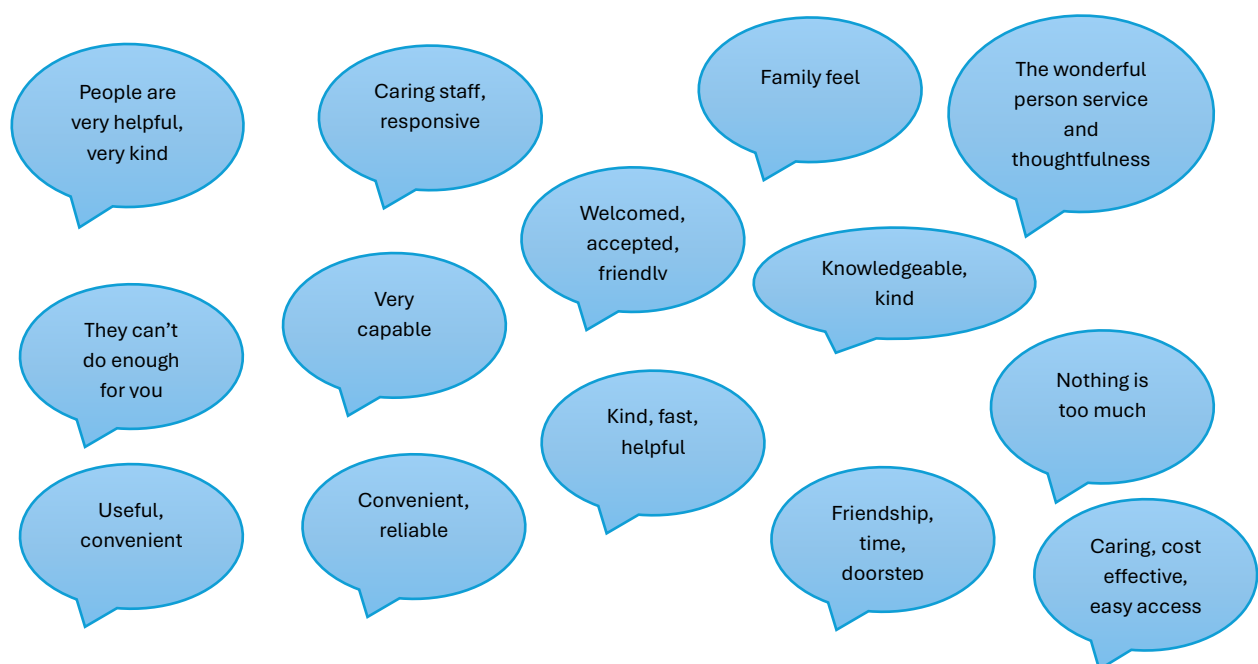
What people who use 'Cuppa Care' told us

As outlined in the introduction, the research team asked participants to describe what 'Cuppa Care' meant to them in three words. From these a word cloud was generated, below, with the largest words being the most common.



Overwhelmingly, Friendly, Local and Convenient stands out. The cost-of-living crisis and reduced disposable income for many people at retirement, and the inconvenience, worry and planning to go to a town or city for support makes the Hear for Norfolk bus a real asset for Norfolk. This is how it is viewed by a stakeholder: "There's a lot of places to go and one of the biggest reasons for that is because, it's a vast county, it's a beautiful county, but public transport isn't perhaps what it could be. A lot of people that are isolated, they don't have the means to travel, whether that's physical means or financial means or whatever it is, and you can't get to appointments for whether it's hearing or other services, that's why we do it. That's why we're going to different places."

These words give lovely feedback on the service and what it means to people:



Conclusions and suggestions

Our findings show the value of the Hear for Norfolk 'Cuppa Care' provision. They chime with a recent qualitative study about people with hearing loss entitled, 'the burden is very much on yourself', that the workload of hearing loss appears largely devolved to the patient who often feels very disconnected (Smith et al., 2024). The service meets many of the recommendations of this study which found that people needed to draw on multiple resources to learn about their hearing loss, communicate with and educate others, manage devices and cope with the residual uncertainty and feelings of disconnection inherent in the experience (Smith et al., 2024).

Undertaking the evaluation at this interim stage of the funding cycle for Hear for Norfolk's 'Cuppa Care' bus has not only illustrated the need for such a service for the people of Norfolk and insight into its impact, but allows time for the operational model to be optimised.

It is clear that the 'Cuppa Care' bus is greatly valued by those who use it and that it reaches many people who would be otherwise hidden, might not come forward or be able to travel to central Norwich. Staff are warm, kind, welcoming and provide a safe trusted space. This, along with the support received around hearing is clearly having an impact on social isolation and loneliness.

To optimise this impact further, we suggest considering the following operational adaptations. We are, of course, mindful of additional costs and resources which have to sit with your other strategic priorities and challenges to the wider VCSE sector.

Suggestion 1: Increase the frequency of sessions in particularly busy areas. This would help reduce the number of people attending each session and therefore reduce queuing and waiting times. This is difficult for staff and volunteers as well as for service users.

Suggestion 2: Consider the timing of each of the sessions. Staff and volunteers work very hard and feel a real sense of responsibility to see all the people that arrive at each session. This can mean that they have less time to attend to people in the way that they want to, and sessions can overrun. Rushing to pack up and skipping a time for a break and a 'recharge' has slipped into practice. Not only does this have a knock-on effect for the start time of the next location, it has an impact on staff and volunteers.

Suggestion 3: Review the resourcing of each session. Due to demand, and linked to the impact on staff comment above, an additional member responsible for welcoming and making the refreshments, especially at busy locations would enable other staff to better attend to the hearing support service.

Suggestion 4: Re-assess the model for winter months and consider the potential for connecting with warm spaces. Many of the services users are older, more vulnerable and less physically able. The model of 'Cuppa Care' is clearly popular but needs adapting for winter months. Making linkages with 'Warm spaces' would be a logical synergy.

Suggestion 5: Consider building links with Norfolk Community Advice Network (NCAN). NCAN are a partnership of advice and community experts in Norfolk and have a referral system that facilitates professional, accurate and timely referrals between agencies across Norfolk. Due to resource pressure on partner organisations such as Age UK Norwich and Age UK Norfolk to commit designated staff or volunteer to be available for each 'Cuppa Care' session, staff and

volunteers on the 'Cuppa Care' bus could, with appropriate training, refer their service users to NCAN for a whole range of services and partner organisations across Norfolk.

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