

Essex Reminiscence Network

In the summer of 2003 a partnership was initiated by the Essex Heritage Education Unit, working with Older People's Services and museums, archives and libraries across Essex, to look at ways of developing a county-wide reminiscence network. Following extensive consultation, the Network that emerged took the form of specially developed loan boxes available from ten museums in the county. The boxes, containing objects that act as multisensory memory triggers, have themed contents e.g. Going Out and Childhood. Care workers (formal and informal) are able to borrow these boxes for an agreed time scale, and free of charge, to use in care homes, day centres or at home.

The Network delivers a training programme for carers in the use of the boxes. This programme has enabled carers to feel confident in the use of museum objects and archive documents as memory triggers, and has greatly increased the potential capacity of the Network, especially where museums have a small or voluntary staff.

The Essex Reminiscence Network Project has resulted in closer links between museums, archives, libraries and carers in the county, producing a model for working together in the community which could be used in other areas. Recent work piloting Generic Social Outcomes has demonstrated there are also clear positive benefits for the carer; while museums, archives and libraries benefit at many levels from increased access to collections and greater community involvement.

Since 2003 over 500 care workers have been trained in the use of the boxes. Funding has been gained from a number of sources and has been used to deliver training, purchase high quality boxes and create promotional literature. There are now over 40 boxes available for loan from twelve museums. The demand for the boxes remains high and they are in constant use. To increase access to the boxes some are also now available through local libraries, who have been involved in the project since the outset, providing some of the resources. Mini-boxes have also been introduced – these are small reminiscence boxes designed for home carers to use one-to-one.

To sustain and develop the Network a steering group has been set up with members from all interested parties. This has led to the development of several joint working projects and encouraged visits by carers and older people to museum sites. Projects to come out of the group have included a sensory garden, reminiscence picnics and art workshops. The potential of working with Arts and Sports has been identified and a number of art workshops, tea dances and other physical activities have taken place. Partnerships developed through the Network have also led to the development of major intergenerational projects, such as 'Butlin's: It's Another World'.

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