

The Attic Project



# The Attic Project Evaluation

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The Attic project provided support to older people who needed to make space in their homes by de-cluttering, sorting, and clearing possessions. Over the three years from September 2017 to October 2020, 257 older people received support to make their homes safer, and allow repairs or adaptations to be carried out.

An independent research company completed a thorough evaluation of the Attic Project and this report provides a summary of the report's key findings.

# The Attic Project

Following its launch in September 2017, the Project assisted older people with organising their possessions to make space to complete necessary repairs, adaptations and improvements. The support offered by a specialist caseworker, project staff and trained volunteers helped create a safer, comfortable home environment for older vulnerable individuals.

Alongside the decluttering help, the Project also provided the opportunity for people to reminisce with project volunteers by documenting or talking about memories, experiences and stories in a way that helped them feel more comfortable in letting go of treasured possessions. Through this reminiscence, the Project has aimed to reduce feelings of loneliness, social isolation and to improve wellbeing.

The Project has supported people to donate their unwanted items to charity or community groups where they could be reused. This reduces landfill waste and impact on the environment.

## The Attic Project aim

To support vulnerable people over the age of 50 to reorganise and declutter their homes to help them to live as safely and independently as possible.

To make the process of reorganising homes easier, both physically and emotionally, by helping people to sort through possessions ready for removal and by providing the opportunity to share or keep the memories behind those belongings most special to people.

## The Attic Project objectives

- Support older people to live independently by assisting them to sort through the accumulated items that prevent adaptations, repairs or downsizing from taking place.
- Enabling people to share and record their memories through reminiscence, in order to reduce feelings of social isolation often experienced by older people.
- Reducing our impact on the environment by creating more opportunities to recycle and re-use possessions.
- Provide opportunities for volunteers to build skills, experience and confidence by taking part in the Project.



## 3 year achievements



257 older people received support from the Attic Project



80 older vulnerable people received support to sort through their belongings at home



2155 volunteer hours dedicated to helping older people



94 volunteers were recruited



Approximately 2026 bags of possession removed to make space at home



57% were recycled  
48% went to local Energy Recovery Facilities  
32% were donated to good causes



80% of clients said the service made it easier to get around and manage at home



86% of clients said the service helped them feel less stressed



98% of clients said the service improved their quality of life

# Making a difference through decluttering

Throughout the Attic project, feedback on the value and impact of the project was gathered by Arad Research from the clients supported, from volunteers, and from the staff at the Attic Project and referral organisations. That feedback has demonstrated the difference the Attic Project made.

## Preventing falls

Around 1 in 3 adults over 65 who live in their own home have at least one fall a year and although most falls do not result in serious injury, they can result in hospital admissions and leave people with a loss of confidence and/or independence. Furthermore, falls are estimated to cost the NHS over £2.3 billion per year .

### How the Project has helped

Many clients the Project has supported live with mobility issues and struggle to move around their homes. Possessions had become trip hazards, limiting clients access to cleaning / kitchen facilities or their bedroom. By helping remove items and clearing space, the Project has helped improve these clients' quality of life and reduce risk of falls.

## Reduce delays in hospital discharge and returning home

If a hospital patient's home environment is deemed unsuitable, they will not be discharged from hospital. However, delays in discharge can cause increased hospital costs; increased risk of hospital-acquired infections; and reduced patients morale and/or mobility.

### How the Project has helped

Clutter can be a contributing factor to hospital patients' homes being deemed unsuitable for them to return home. Clutter may need to be cleared to make space for better accessibility or home adaptations. Clutter may also be making the house unsafe or unhygienic. The Project helped to prevent these cases and therefore reduced delays in hospital discharges.

## Enable necessary home adaptations

Home adaptations may be required to enable older people with arising health issues to live a safe and independent life. These home improvements may be required to address mobility issues, such as installing a downstairs shower, converting a downstairs room into a bedroom or installing a stairlift. Home improvements may also include heating repairs.

### How the Project has helped

Clutter can prevent access required to make necessary home improvements. The Project has provided decluttering support to make space for agencies to carry out home improvements, enabling the clients to live more safely and independently.

“I couldn't get to the bed before...there was stuff all over the floor around the bed...“I don't have much room here, so it's made a difference that I can now get to the bed easier, especially with my knee problem.”

- Client

“The hospital wasn't going to allow the client home, as the care agency said there were rats in the house. He might never have gone home again if it had not been for the Project. By explaining to staff at the hospital that they had been referred to the Attic Project, they could go home.”

- Referral agency



## Help to downsize

The number of older people across the UK looking to downsize to smaller accommodation is growing, with one in four over the age of 65 wanting to downsize. However, packing up belongings to downsize can be an overwhelming prospect, particularly for older people who have accumulated many possessions. This can invoke feelings of stress and anxiety.

### How the Project has helped

Although the Project has not worked with many individuals seeking to downsize, it has supported individuals who had already downsized and no longer had space for all their possessions. The Project has provided support to sort through possessions at a manageable pace, which has alleviated feelings of stress and anxiety for these older people after downsizing.

## Reduce loneliness and social isolation

Many older people experience loneliness and social isolation, often on a daily basis. In 2018, Age Cymru noted that 75,000 older people in Wales have reported 'always or often' feeling lonely.

### How the Project has helped

Individuals supported by the Project have felt embarrassed to allow other people into their homes because their possessions made it untidy and uncomfortable. By supporting these individuals to sort through their belongings, the Project has helped them regain a sense of pride in their home, increasing their willingness to invite people in.

The Project has also provided older people with the opportunity to share memories, either one-to-one or in a group reminiscence session within the community.

This has offered an important vehicle to reduce loneliness and social isolation.



“What happens with a lot of people is the chaos builds up and it becomes unsurmountable in their minds. Just having someone say ‘look, I will be here and help you go through it bit by bit.’ Then it’s not so overwhelming.”

- Referral agency

“We tried not to invite people to the house as we were ashamed, we didn’t want to see people as the house was in such a state. There was so much stuff that needed to be cleared – I didn’t know where to start.”

- Client

<sup>1</sup>National Institute for Health and Care Excellence website, (2013) [Falls in older people: assessing risk and revention.](#)

<sup>2</sup>Homes for Later Living, (2020) [ChainReaction: The positive impact of specialist retirement housing on the generational divide and first-time buyers.](#) p.5

<sup>3</sup>Age UK, (2017) [No one should have no one - tackling loneliness and isolation in Wales.](#)

# Making a difference through sharing memories

**The Attic Project included a reminiscence aspect, providing clients with the opportunity to tell personal stories and memories around items as part of the decluttering process. If clients so wished, the Project would also offer them the opportunity to digitally record these stories or memories, for example, through oral recordings or photographs.**

In practice, reminiscence activities consisted of three different elements including:

- Organic reminiscence: when clients have shared memories evoked by the process of sorting through their possessions with a volunteer or decluttering officer.
- Planned reminiscence: when clients have been offered the opportunity to record their memories.
- Reminiscence workshops: where members of the community, clients and others, could go along and share experiences, stories and memories in a group environment.

The reminiscence and decluttering aspects of the service are closely linked and are both valuable aspects of the service. Individuals consulted expressed the importance of reminiscence in supporting individuals to 'let go' of items, helping them to declutter. One member of staff explained that **'reminiscence is spontaneous, and it does trigger memories when you go through the items.'**

Volunteers and clients have both had the opportunity to take part in reminiscence activities. Clients were given the opportunity to reminisce organically with volunteers, or if they wished, they could plan how they wanted to record their memories through a variety of media, such as DVDs, memory boxes and assistance with writing a book.

Clients tended to undertake organic reminiscence through naturally talking about memories attached to their possessions whilst going through their belongings with volunteers and decluttering. The impacts of this organic reminiscence are discussed in sections 6 and 7. Fewer clients were keen to record their memories in a more planned approach. One example shared of a planned reminiscence is set out in case study 2, where the client was helped by the reminiscence coordinator to record herself speaking about her wedding photo album.

Digital photographs of each image in the photo album were taken to coincide with the recordings. Memories of the clients wedding and honeymoon were recorded, then merged with the images onto a DVD.

## Reminiscence workshops

The Project has delivered reminiscence workshops for people who've used the decluttering service, as well as in community libraries, care homes or other accommodation for the elderly. An overview of one of these workshops is presented overleaf.

These workshops have provided a good opportunity for attendees to get to know each other and share experiences. In some cases, these workshops have helped reduce attendees' loneliness and isolation. For volunteers, these workshops have provided them with the opportunity to meet other volunteers and clients, and given them a chance to practice and develop their skills using a recorder and asking questions to a client to prompt them to share their stories.

“For some people, they just want to get rid of the clutter. But for a lot of people, they're not able to get to that point without having that opportunity to talk through some of those things that are important to them and why they've kept them...So the opportunity to chat it through and maybe keep a record of it could be the key for some people in being able to move forward a little bit. So, I would say it's a very valid part of the project.”

- Referral agency



## Reminiscing Client and Volunteer Workshop

There were two clients and two volunteers in attendance at this reminiscing workshop, which took place over a 2-hour time period. The main aim of the workshop was to provide the attendees with the opportunity to reminisce through talking about their lives and sharing stories and experiences with the group.

The workshop commenced with an ice-breaker activity, which involved attendees picking a year out of a pot and taking it in turns to talk about a memory triggered by their selected year.

Before the workshop, attendees were invited to bring along an item of significance to them to talk about during the workshop. One out of the four attendees brought an item and presented it to the group. This developed into a discussion, which prompted other members of the group to share their stories.

Then an array of other objects, which evoked memories for individual attendees (e.g. old photos, old toys, magazines) were presented to the group and discussed.

The workshop concluded with the opportunity for the clients to pair up with a volunteer and to share their stories and memories whilst the volunteer recorded this reminiscing session. The purpose of this final activity was to provide volunteers with the opportunity to practice their recording skills and to give clients another chance to reminisce through sharing their stories.

### Impact

Through sharing their stories and memories with the group, attendees became more connected throughout the workshop. This was particularly evident with the two clients, who realised that they had grown up in the same area and therefore had many memories about the area to share.

Members of the group grew in confidence as the workshop progressed. They found it to be a sociable experience, with one client commenting: "it's been entertaining".

One volunteer explained how they found it "fulfilling" to encourage their client to reminisce during the final activity of the workshop. They noted how the session gave them a chance to practice and develop their skills using the recorder and asking the client questions to prompt them to share their stories.



I'm so pleased with it and would recommend it to anyone. It's made such a difference... and it's lovely to have the DVD there to look at photos "when I want to on my television."

- Client



"I'm coming out of my shell a bit now."

- Client

"The workshop has inspired me to go through some of my old photos."

- Client

# Attic Project's impact on clients

## Client safety, physical and mental health

The Project has had a positive impact on client's safety in the home and their mental health. Many clients reported that before receiving support from the Project they sometimes struggled to freely move around their home due to the clutter that had accumulated. For a number of clients, this issue was exacerbated by the fact that they had limited mobility, and therefore attempting to get rid of belongings was 'too daunting'. For example, one client, explained that due to her mobility, she wouldn't have been able to clear the belongings herself. She mentioned that she didn't believe she 'would've been able to do it in a year.'

As well as causing safety problems, clutter in the home had led to the deterioration of some clients' mental health. Some clients interviewed stated that the clutter had been causing them distress and anxiety for some time, but they had not been able to remove these items on their own or with help from other family members. One client, pointing out that she knew the house had got into a state, explained that 'when you get older it's not like you aren't aware, you do know, and you can see it – you just don't know how to cope with it.' This is also portrayed in Case Study 5.

In some cases, clients had displayed evidence of isolating behaviours, with their homes causing them embarrassment, not wanting to allow friends, family and other health professionals into their homes. One client stated that they 'tried not to invite people to the house as we were ashamed, we didn't want to see people as the house was in such a state. There was so much stuff that needed to be cleared – I didn't know where to start.'

As described in case study 3, one client had only been allowed home from the hospital because of the support and help of the Project: due to the client's physical condition, they would not be able to be able to use the stairs, and the downstairs rooms were too cluttered for them to live there safely. With support from volunteers, a room downstairs was cleared in order to install a bed, and the client was able to return to the family home and access the living room and other communal areas. The Project, in this instance, had not only improved the client's quality of life, but also the whole family's quality of life.

Many clients felt that the Project has enabled them to address clutter that would have otherwise been left or would have escalated to other rooms in the house. They believed that the situation would not have been resolved had it not been for the Project. In some cases, clients explained that this was because they felt their physical health problems were impeding their ability to order and organise their homes.

Feedback collected from clients showed that over three-quarters of them found that the Project had made it easier to move around the home. One client for example (case study 2) had received help from a volunteer after downsizing to a smaller house. She had been finding it difficult to move around the house as a result of too many belongings and had previously fallen over and harmed herself. With support from the Project, the volunteer helped her rearrange her belongings into labelled plastic boxes, throw items away and donate items to charity. The client explained during a house visit that she could now move around the house more freely, access the bed and find items in her house, which has improved her quality of life.



Clients reflected on how the clutter and disorganisation in their home had made them feel unhappy, exasperated and depressed. As illustrated in case study 1, one client had been feeling unhappy, due to not being able to physically move large items out of the house. This had resulted in more clutter accumulating and feeling less able to clear unwanted items. Another client mentioned that her depression was a fundamental reason why she could not cope with the clutter in the house. The clutter was causing anxiety, which resulted in her not allowing other health professionals into the house.

A volunteer reflected on the difference in one of the clients they had supported, from their first home visit to their last visit, which they described as 'immeasurable'. When starting the Project, the client was not interested in the objects that were being thrown away, but after a few weeks she would show more of an interest, share memories and help sort through items.

Clients expressed how volunteers and staff had gone 'above and beyond' their expectation of the Project. One client explained that the support provided by Project staff members had resulted in her 'feeling there was a point in carrying on'. She explained that there was a gap in other services available to her, and that the Project had provided her and her family with 'genuine mental and physical support throughout'.

Of the clients that completed the client feedback, over three-quarters of clients said that the service helped them feel less stressed. A few clients explained that bills and day-to-day paperwork had 'got on top of them' as piles of grew. Volunteers helped many clients start a filing system of all recent bills and paperwork, going through all paperwork in an orderly manner, throwing away any bills that were out of date.

Volunteers would help clients by organising files and filing cabinets for paperwork, helping them create a system that was easy to use, and clients could continue to use once their case had been closed. By giving clients the tools to manage their own bills, the Project has given them more independence, by not having to ask family members for help.



# Client Case Study 1

## Edna

### Reducing loneliness and isolation

The Project has had a positive impact on reducing clients' loneliness and isolation through clients befriending volunteers. The Project has created opportunities for older people to meet volunteers and Project staff through the decluttering service, and other clients, volunteers and staff through the reminiscence workshops.

One client (case study 1) attended reminiscence workshops to meet other clients and volunteers and explained that she could not have done so without the help from her volunteer, who offered to pick her up in a taxi and take her to the workshop. She also mentioned that she would not have felt confident and comfortable to meet other people without the help from the volunteer.

Clients have developed friendships with staff and volunteers, which has reduced clients' loneliness and isolation. Some clients mentioned that they rarely leave the house, and do not get the opportunity to speak to other people on a weekly basis. For example, one client explained that since losing his wife and suffering from a stroke, he wasn't able to leave the house very often and had been feeling lonely. Therefore, for him, the befriending aspect of the Project was most valuable.

Clients expressed their appreciation of the help they received from the Project, specifically noting that they enjoyed spending time with their volunteer, who was 'patient', 'kind' and 'helpful'. This was particularly the case for one client, who described themselves as 'a bit of a hermit' and explained, 'I know I'm not the easiest person to get along with'. However, she explained that every week the volunteer would help them clear some of the bedroom, and if any memories were connected to objects, she felt able to speak about them with the volunteer.

Clients were given the option to share memories either in a planned way, through recording or taking photos of objects, or organically, with volunteers when clearing objects. One client explained that he had enjoyed sharing memories and stories with the volunteer about his wife and their lives before she passed away. Another client, who had been struggling with low confidence due to anxiety and depression, started opening up about her life after a few visits from their volunteer, sharing memories of the War and using the ration books. For some older people, they didn't have family and friends to share this with, or at times, some clients found it easier to speak about a loved one with a volunteer that was one step removed from the family:

The Project has had a substantially positive impact on clients' feelings of loneliness and isolation. Most clients reported enjoying the social aspect of the Project, and would be 'sad to see the volunteers go' after the support had come to an end. Clients have enjoyed visiting reminiscence workshops, and would likely have not ventured out to meet new people in a group setting had it not been for volunteers building a relationship with clients first. Most clients have explained that they enjoyed sharing stories with volunteers and spending time with Project staff. A few volunteers and staff members have kept in touch with clients, resulting in long-term befriending, that clients have valued, especially throughout the lockdown period.

### Background

Edna is an 85-year-old widow who lives on her own. She has had various health problems in the last 6 years and has been suffering from anxiety and depression. She has not felt as agile in recent years due to falling over and breaking several bones. She has also had an operation on her eyes which has meant that she is now registered blind. Edna had struggled to go into her bedroom for years after her husband passed away. A carer comes to the house from Age Connect, but she does not have time to help with clearing the house.

### Support received

Edna waited for 18 months before fully committing to the Project, as she wasn't sure if

she was ready. The volunteer manager visited the house and agreed on a day for the volunteer to visit. The volunteer helped her clear the spare room and the garage space. She was awarded a grant to re-insulate the loft and needed to clear the loft in order to install the insulation. Everything was removed from the loft and left in the spare room. The volunteer has visited three times to date and has been sending old toys to charity shops.

Edna has also been attending client workshops, meeting other clients and volunteers as a result of the Project.

### Impact

Edna has found the Project helpful as she didn't feel confident or able to clear and move objects in the house. She enjoys spending time with the volunteer and finds her kind and helpful. She wouldn't have felt confident in attending these workshops without first meeting the volunteer and then accompanying her to the workshop. Since getting support from the Attic Project, she can move around her house more freely, and find day-to-day objects in the house.



**"It's been so helpful having someone else there when sorting through the stuff. It's caused me so much stress, I couldn't cope and have been feeling miserable. Since having the problems with my eyes, I was finding it hard to look and find things. I just shut it away and knew it was there in the back of my mind."**

**"I can't fault the Project, no one could do more. The volunteer and staff are doing all they can for me. They've even offered a taxi for me to get to the workshops to meet other people."**



## Recycling unwanted items to charity

The training provided to volunteers prior to making house visits was useful when removing clutter and items from clients' homes. Volunteers helped clients talk through and understand what should be kept and what should be thrown away in such a way that they could become less attached to items. Clients found it useful to have help in making decisions on what to keep and what to throw away was useful. By explaining and allowing clients to clear their own belongings and to understand why they didn't need to keep things, clients would then be able to apply these tactics when tackling other rooms and additional clutter when the support came to an end.

The evaluation identified some examples where clients were able to declutter on their own once support from a volunteer had provided them with the tools to make decisions on what to keep and what not to keep. One client who was assisted to reduce her belongings by two-thirds, working methodically from the floor upwards, had since been clearing other rooms in the house in her own time, stating 'I've now been able to get my pride back in my home.' There have also been other examples of clients decluttering during their own time, with volunteers setting targets when they leave the house for a drawer or an area to be cleared by the client before the volunteer's next visit.

Clients have found that recycling items from their homes was an easier and less emotional process than simply throwing objects away. 'It's good that the stuff has gone to good use. You feel good that you've helped out as well.' One client expressed how happy it made her feel to know the items she decided to give away were donated to a good cause and that she was able to choose which charity to donate the items, as this felt more personal to her.



**“They (volunteers) were absolutely brilliant; they had a lot of knowledge of what things were worth – they helped me get a valuation on some antiques and jewellery. They would involve me in everything and ask if I wanted to get rid of something, after explaining the story behind it and the memories I had. There were things that I was happy to get rid of, and some that I chose to keep.”**

- Client

# Client Case Study 2 Betty

## Background

Betty is a widow and lives on her own. She has mobility issues and learning difficulties. She was referred to the Project by her tenancy officer. She was struggling with getting rid of items since downsizing and couldn't access some rooms due to the amount of clutter in the house. She was struggling to sit down and couldn't get to the bed due to the mess in the house.

## Support received

The volunteer manager visited the house, whereby photos were taken, and the bedroom was prioritised. A volunteer had been helping her clear through her belongings, some items were thrown away, recycled and stored into clear boxes with labels attached. The volunteer visited for two hours per week for 2-3 months.

Once the bedroom had been cleared, Betty was visited by the reminiscence coordinator who helped her record and take photos of her memories. These included photos from her wedding and honeymoon.

## Impact

Betty has found the Project helpful in organising her belongings and making the house safer and more accessible. She enjoyed spending time with the volunteer, sharing her memories and reminiscing about her past holidays with her husband. She has also been attending client workshops through the Project, meeting other clients and volunteers. She has since re-applied for the Project, as the kitchen and living room also needs attention.

**“I really got on with the volunteer. She was friendly and helpful...”**

**It's made a big difference.**

**I couldn't get to the bed before, and there was stuff all over the floor and around the bed.”**



# Client Case Study 3

## Iris

### Background

Iris and her husband lived in their family home when referred to the Attic Project. Her husband had suffered from a stroke and other health complications which had resulted in her husband not being able to walk. When discharged from hospital, health professionals were worried about his quality of life. They needed help with clearing the dining room, in order to set up a bed in there – as her husband was having trouble with the stairs. Her husband has since passed away.

### Support received

Volunteers came to the house to help clear the dining, living room and kitchen in order to make ground floor rooms accessible for Iris' husband when returning from hospital. The volunteer visited for two hours per week for 2-3 months. Volunteers have since also helped clear other spaces in the house. Iris explained that 'the volunteers were so empathetic, they didn't make me feel bad...Other social workers and professionals have looked down on us, but the Project has always been kind and tried to help us.'

Iris has also received informal wellbeing support from Attic staff. She had been struggling with dealing with her husband's condition, and since his passing, her mental health had deteriorated. Project staff have been supporting her during lockdown, checking in and making sure she is okay.

### Impact

Iris and her family were very happy with the services provided by the Project. Being able to have her husband home for the last two years of his life has been 'priceless, it's been life changing for the whole family.' She explained that they needed the mental and physical help as a family and are grateful for all the support provided.



**'I was depressed and needed the mental and physical help. Without their support I don't think I could've stayed the course; they gave me back the point of living and never lost faith in me...They've been there for me when I've been feeling down – and the Samaritans are no good for you unless you're actually going to commit suicide.'**

**These guys have been a genuine, useful help for me and my family. I'm not ashamed of the help that I've received from them, the Project has restored my faith in humanity.'**

**“they might start talking about their late husband or wife. People might find it harder to speak with family about their loved ones, especially if it was particularly sensitive for family members. Having us there sometimes can mean it's a safe space for them to chat.”**

**- Volunteer**

**“It's been so nice having a chat with the volunteer and staff as I had been feeling isolated and lonely...It's a very good project, especially for people like me that are practically house-bound.”**

**- Client**

# Attic Project's impact on volunteers

## A fulfilling and rewarding experience

Volunteers found supporting clients to be a fulfilling and rewarding experience. Most volunteers felt a sense of satisfaction in the work they had completed and the support they had provided. In many cases, volunteers reported that providing support to clients through decluttering, befriending, or meeting them during workshops has made a significant difference to clients' lives. This has given volunteers a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment in their roles and the time they have dedicated to helping clients.

Volunteers explained that the Project was beneficial for both client and volunteer, with both parties sharing stories and building trust and a relationship with one another: 'We've learnt a lot. You almost get more out of it than the person you are supporting.' Volunteers felt 'enriched' and felt a sense of purpose in supporting their clients. One volunteer explained that the Project has changed the way they look at other people, 'it's a reminder to me that you don't know what's going on behind closed doors, you can't judge people.'

Volunteers have found the Project rewarding, gaining the opportunity to help other individuals that may not be able to help themselves, due to physical or mental health difficulties. They valued being able to help clients, that might not have been able to carry out the decluttering themselves, helping them make their home a safer, more inviting place to live. For some clients, volunteers had noticed that the clutter in their houses had resulted in their mental health and wellbeing declining over time. It was therefore rewarding for volunteers to see clients come out of their shell, and feel happier in themselves whilst carrying out the decluttering work through the Project:

A common reason given for volunteering was a desire to 'give something back.' All volunteers consulted explained that taking part has met their expectations, with some stating that the Project had exceeded their expectations.

Although clients were referred to the Project requiring assistance with decluttering and moving objects in the home, many volunteers appreciated that the befriending aspect of the Project was just as important for some clients. Volunteers enjoyed helping others by spending time with clients, reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness.

It was mentioned by a few volunteers that some individuals would not get any other human contact for the rest of the week, and that they could be that person's only human contact – therefore, 'it's such a rewarding feeling that you're making a difference to someone's day.'



## Development of skills and experience

Volunteers described how they have developed various skills through volunteering with the Project. Two key skills developed were interpersonal and active listening skills. Volunteers revealed how they had learnt to communicate sensitively with a variety of clients. This has often involved adopting a flexible approach to offering support, which volunteers have developed through their initial training and then meeting and getting to know the clients they have supported.

Volunteers learnt that it was important that conversations were led by the client. Once clients had decided that they had had enough, or the conversation naturally came to an end, they would continue with the actual decluttering. Volunteers also gained an insight into hoarding behaviours from volunteering with the Project. Often, some clients that had received support through the Project had displayed hoarding behaviours, as well as having issues with clutter in their homes. One volunteer, as a result of the Project had thought about 'the clutter in my own house, and re-consider what I need to keep. Understanding hoarding behaviours has helped me organise my own life.'



**“You adapt your methodology depending on the client and what support that they need. I found it useful to sit down and have a talk about the job and what work they needed done, and what they hoped to achieve through the project. You have to build that trust with them from the beginning, as you're going into their home and moving their stuff around. You need trust in order to achieve anything.”**

**- Volunteer**

### Opportunity to meet other people and socialise through the Project

The Attic Project has given volunteers the opportunity to meet new people, this includes Project staff, clients and other volunteers through house visits, reminiscence workshops, volunteer meetings and training days. Volunteers have enjoyed the opportunity of meeting a range of different clients with different needs, with volunteers finding it 'enlightening' and commenting on building trust and a relationship with clients through the befriending element of the Project. For one unemployed volunteer, this was important in improving their self-esteem and reducing isolation.

Several volunteers have gained experience and made long-lasting friendships whilst working with other volunteers when decluttering homes. These volunteers have found working with others enjoyable and that sharing the work of clearing and reminiscing has meant that they could complete work quicker.

Another impact of volunteering cited by the volunteers was a greater awareness of the situations of other people and the wider community.



# Volunteer Case Study 1 Edith

### Background and training

Edith initially engaged with the project with an interest in the reminiscing aspect. She has taken part in training days, and refresher days for volunteers. She visited the energy centre in Cardiff as part of her training, with the aims of understanding the cycle of landfill and recycling. 'It was really interesting seeing what it was all leading to, and how our roles fitted into that.'



### Volunteering

Edith has worked with around ten clients since starting volunteering. From her experience, some clients have taken between a few weeks and 12 weeks to complete the work. One client needed help in decluttering her lounge, as the central heating needed to be replaced, and therefore the floorboards raised. By the end of the project, the client wanted to get rid of everything, as she could now see and understand what she needed to throw away.

Since Covid-19, Edith has been keeping in touch with some volunteers on an ad-hoc basis. She has continued to provide support, explaining that one client in particular is a 'bit of a recluse, it's a very different mental challenge to deal with a lockdown on your own.'

'Clients have told me that it's been 'life-changing how the project has helped them.' They get a new lease of life and can see the end result coming once most of the clearing is done. I think all clients have benefitted mentally, physically, and emotionally from taking part in the project.'

'You can see a mental change in people, it's quite astounding when they realise, they can see the floor again.... We're helping but a drop in the ocean of people that need that support. This project could be rolled out country wide, as there are so many people in the same position.'

### Impact

Edith finds the psychological side of the Project the most interesting. She has found volunteering rewarding in many ways, including meeting new people, building a relationship with clients and other volunteers, and seeing how the trust developed between her and the has helped them progress over time.

**Fulfilling**  
**Reduced isolation**  
**Improve self esteem**  
**Enlightening**   **Teamwork**  
**Meet new people**  
**Impacts on volunteers**  
**Confidence**  
**Socialise**   **Insight**  
**Communication**  
**Problem solving**  
**Giving something back**  
**Interpersonal skills**

*Flexibility*  
*Adaptability*  
**Increased confidence**



# Volunteer Case Study 2

## Jessica

### Background and training

Janet had been searching for a voluntary position through a volunteering website and came across the Project. She contacted the volunteer coordinator, who explained the project in detail to her.

She completed two half days of training: one day covered appropriate language to use with clients, the second focused on reminiscing.

### Volunteering

Janet has been volunteering since January 2019 and has worked with two clients. Both clients were in different circumstances, the first had a learning difficulty and needed help deciding what to keep. The second client couldn't physically move objects. Both clients' hoarding seemed to be linked to grief, Janet wasn't aware that there were links between hoarding and grief prior to volunteering with the Project. She would spend 2-3 hours per week helping clients clear their house, throwing and recycling items as necessary.

### Impact

Janet has learnt how to expand conversations with clients in order to reminisce about objects. Janet has improved her active listening skills; she is also now more aware of what clutter looks like and has been able to look more objectively at her own belongings. She has enjoyed getting to know the clients and building up a relationship with them.



**'I spoke to a client about horse riding, as we were recycling some magazines. Her face changed; you could tell it meant everything to her. It validates their lives; you can tell that sharing their memories are therapeutic.'**

**'You can feel quite embarrassed and helpless, so it takes a lot for clients to work with us. It can seem to others that it's a small achievement, but it's a privilege and it makes such a huge difference to their day to day lives.'**



**"It's nice to know that just going in and spending a bit of time moving these things that people don't need any more, the fact that she was talking about cooking again. It was lovely to see that and to know that you are spending a bit of time helping somebody on that level."**

**- Volunteer**

**"It's fulfilling volunteering and very interesting experience. When I've been volunteering before, it's been working behind the scenes, but with this project you're 'at the coalface'. The clients have been so grateful. Going into someone's house, it can be difficult for the clients, as it's such an emotive subject."**

**- Volunteer**

# Continued Need for Attic Support

Referral organisations say the Project provides unique practical and emotional support to help older people sort through their belongings. They recognised a significant amount of people require this type of support, but they do not know another service that offers it.



“The project worked with [client] in tandem with what I was doing with her. She had an awful lot of stuff and it was unmanageable for me because I was helping her with lots of other things such as benefits. So, the Project was brilliant because it worked in tandem with what I was doing.”

- Referral agency.

“I really hope they get going again, we don't know what we'll do without their support... they are so unique in what they do.” Referral agency

“It would be such a shame if the Project did come to an end, as so many people could gain from it.”

- Client

“It's part of our job to keep up to date with new projects. We do tend to do quite a bit of research to find out what's currently running and what's coming next...I'm not aware of any other project like the Attic Project...We were really glad when it started and thought 'well at least that's somewhere where people could go to if they've got overwhelmed by their possessions”

- Referral agency

“When we heard about it, our whole team thought 'what a great idea' because we had some older people that we knew it would be really helpful for...It was a new service and different to anything I had heard of before. I think there is a definite need for it.”

- Referral agency

“I really hope the project can continue in some shape or form. You see the impact on the clients – and you see that those are the things that really matter. Older people are so easy to be overlooked, as they are hidden away in their own homes. So many vulnerable and isolated people, they really need that help. It would be a terrible shame if the project stopped. There are no other services like this project to help these people. Their issues never get addressed; they just get evicted from their homes.”

- Project staff member

“It would be very sad to see the project go. I can imagine it started as a difficult process to find the older people that needed help, as the impetus picked up – it's touched so many lives...It will be very sad if we lose what's desperately needed for these people. Even if we could get some form of the project, through Safer Wales whereby older people could still get support if needed to gain a better living condition.”

- Volunteer

“People like us, we need the help from the volunteers because of our mobility. The Project has been brilliant, I can't speak highly enough of it. I hope and pray that it continues – it was the best days work when they put us in touch with the Project. The volunteer was marvellous company, and the way that they work, they don't make you feel ashamed or guilty of the mess.”

- Client

“Lots of people would benefit from the project, and if it came to an end – they wouldn't get that support. It's so nice having someone at the end of the phone. They're just ordinary people, helping others in need. They give you hope to carry on.”

- Client

# Conclusions

**The Project has left a lasting impact and legacy on many people including those who have received advice and support from the Project and those who were recruited to provide this support. Over the 3 years, 257 older people have received support from the Project. Additionally, 94 volunteers were recruited, who between them dedicated 2155 hours to helping older people. This support has enabled people to feel more independent, safer and more relaxed in their own homes, thus improving their mental health and quality of life. Having their belongings more organised has given individuals a sense of pride in their home and enabled them to feel happier to invite visitors into their house, reducing loneliness and social isolation.**

The Project has concentrated its efforts on ensuring that the process of helping people to declutter their homes does not have a negative impact on the environment. Therefore, where possible, the Project has aimed to recycle unwanted items either by donating them to charity shops, encouraging people to pass possessions on to family members or taking them to local energy recovery facilities. By donating items to good causes, the Project has not only reduced the impact on the environment, but it has also helped to support other charities and enabled items to gain a new lease of life as they are used by someone else.

The reminiscence aspect of the Project has consisted of three elements which are:

- Organic reminiscence;
- Planned reminiscence; and
- Community reminiscence workshops.

Clients have found all three elements of reminiscence useful, depending on their needs, and what they personally require from the Project. The reminiscence has enabled clients to feel less attached to items. It has helped people to record their memories in various formats, such as DVDs of photographs or memory boxes. Older people can now hold on to these recorded memories as keepsakes and can share them with their family and friends. The reminiscence workshops have also been useful in providing clients with further links to members of their community, and has worked well as an 'aftercare' element of the Project.

The evaluation concludes by noting that remains a demand for the service from referral organisations, volunteers and clients, and as such consideration should be made to fund its continued delivery.

these workshops have helped reduce attendees' loneliness and isolation. For volunteers, these workshops have provided them with the opportunity to meet other volunteers and clients, and given them a chance to practice and develop their skills using a recorder and asking questions to a client to prompt them to share their stories.

# The Attic Project

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