

HOMEMADE

CIRCUS

BY UPSWING



YEAR 2 REPORT BY MARINE BEGAULT

HOME
MADE
CIRCUS

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INTRODUCTION



Homemade Circus is a project designed and delivered by Upswing to bring the benefits of participating in circus into care and nursing homes, by training care home staff to work with circus equipment and lead circus activities with their residents. An important aspect of this work was the development of a digital toolkit to give care home staff access to step-by-step videos and detailed workshop plans. The digital toolkit has been designed for care staff who have participated in Homemade Circus, and for those who are completely new to the project. Circus as an artform can often be perceived as highly skilled and inaccessible. Homemade Circus, however, demonstrates that circus, and the benefits of participating in circus is for everyone.

The 2-year project was funded by City Bridge Trust and The Rayne Foundation and worked with a team of 8 workshop facilitators to run sessions in care homes with residents and care home staff to explore the countless possibilities and opportunities for connection, play, movement and laughter that circus equipment provides. Care home staff were trained in using 10 different pieces of circus equipment, with multiple adaptations to suit the needs of different residents.

All activities with the equipment were designed to improve hand-eye coordination, dexterity, and mobility, reduce anxiety and above all to have fun and bring people together. Care staff and residents alike experienced the joy of exploring the multi-sensory dimensions of the circus equipment. They experimented with balance and teamwork. They also experienced the playfulness and freedom in dropping things, getting it wrong, failing, and trying again. By supporting the sessions with residents and receiving training themselves, the staff were able to experience the power of circus.

This report will concentrate on the work that took place in the second year of delivery, which was concentrated between October 2023 to March 2024. Please refer to the [first report](#) for reflections on the first year. This report will give an overview of what happened, including the different delivery models that the project experimented with. It will then focus on the adaptations and recommendations taken forward from the first year and reflect on their outcomes. The case study includes a selection of vignettes from notes and observations made during workshops in one care home with a particular focus on the quality of the interactions that this kind of work creates. The impact of the project on the facilitators and the care homes will be discussed in relation to the objectives of the project, which primarily focused on legacy. Many of these were already discussed in the first year's report and will thus not be repeated. Finally, the report will discuss suggestions and learning for future iterations of this project.

As in the first year, the same mixed methodology was used to evaluate the project which included session observations, informal conversations with stakeholders, questionnaires, sessional debrief forms and reflection activities. The care staff baseline surveys were dropped and were replaced with a group discussion around perceptions of circus, which suited the tone of the sessions better. The names of residents and care workers were changed to maintain anonymity.

The impact of the project has been overwhelmingly positive. One important aspect of Homemade Circus that was more significant than originally anticipated, was around the positive impact of the workshops on the wellbeing of the care staff. These sessions were valuable not only in terms of skill development and legacy of the project but also in the ways that they provided the staff with a space to bond and spend time together differently. The more joy, laughter, and playfulness the staff experienced in the sessions, the more the residents participated and demonstrated joy, laughter and playfulness. There is joy in watching others experience joy. The reciprocity of the experience is key and is something that was observed throughout this project.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

October 2023 - March 2024



16

Staff training sessions

12

Videos and session plans were developed for the digital toolkit

10

Different pieces of equipment were introduced into the homes

2

Regional training days with 13 & 15 care home staff from across London and Milton Keynes regions

369

Resident Interactions (some residents attended multiple sessions)

12

Residents participated in the workshops (on average) with a few sessions including more than 20 residents

8

Staff attended the training sessions (on average) with a couple of sessions including more than 15 staff

242

Staff interactions (some staff attended multiple sessions)

25

Resident workshops

OVERVIEW OF DELIVERY



WORKSHOP FACILITATOR TRAINING:

4 training days for workshop facilitators:

All facilitators (except one who was working abroad) chose to continue working on the project. The group received an additional 4 days of training, which included training by Zoe Gilmour, a specialist in participatory work in care homes, and Laura Dajao, an inclusive Dance Artist around movement and dance with wheelchair users. Additional training was provided around working 1-1 in bedrooms and with bedbound residents. These 1-1 sessions are an important extension in the delivery and were introduced because of the feedback and interest from the facilitators and care home staff in the first year. There will be a more detailed evaluation of these 1-1 sessions in the “recommendations from year 1” section of the report. The facilitators also worked together to further develop activities working with existing and new circus equipment.

CARE HOME REFRESHERS:

4 “refresher” visits to 4 care homes

Four of the care homes from the previous year (Hunters Down, Sherrell House, Norton House and Silk Court) received an extra “refresher visit” from the workshop facilitators. As well as checking in with the homes on their use of circus equipment and integration of various skills, it was also an opportunity to share elements of the digital toolkit and get some feedback to feed into its development.

One of the big challenges in the legacy of this work is around the high levels of employee turnover in care homes. In some cases, the staff present in these revisits were all different. The homes had used the circus equipment, with one home bursting their beach balls as a result of over-usage. Leaving a “circus bag” in the participating homes was key as stretched budgets mean that care home staff are often not able to resource projects like this themselves.

“It was great to hear that the care home has been doing the activities. There was lots of laughter hearing about what Jess has been doing with the residents and the equipment. She talked about leading a session around once a week. She said that she focuses on one piece of equipment per session and that this works really well for her.” (Silk Court, Sessional Feedback form)

*“We had small school children come and we did the parachute with the customers and the children, and they all loved it.”
(Norton House, Informal conversation with care staff)*

EXCELCARE IN DEPTH DELIVERY

4 weekly staff training and resident workshops and a circus party in 2 London Excelcare homes

The original delivery plan had to be amended as the two London based Anchor care homes changed ownership and the main contact and advocate for the project was made redundant. Upswing lost the connection with these homes as a result. Having the connection with a provider held by one person does make this relationship more vulnerable and is something to be wary of in the future.

Nonetheless, the delivery was redirected to Excelcare who jumped at the opportunity to work with Upswing in a more in-depth way with two of their homes. In the first year the focus of delivery with this partner were Regional Training days (full day training with care home staff/ lifestyle coordinators from across the region). In addition to what was previously arranged with the regional training days, two London Excelcare homes, Windmill and Limetree, received 4 weekly sessions which included staff training, resident workshops, and 1-1 sessions as well as a final “circus party.”

The benefit of these more in-depth interactions with care homes is clearly visible with the levels of staff engagement and confidence but also in the circus facilitators being able to get to know the homes and adapt content accordingly. Facilitators reflected that it takes a few weeks for staff to really understand what the project is about and their role within it. They found these homes most supportive and involved in the work.

In practice, the “circus party” was more of a “handing over” session which responded to the need of the homes better. The focus of this session was around supporting the staff to take ownership and lead large chunks of the workshop with residents.

RESIDENT WORKSHOPS WITH BUPA NURSING HOME

4 weekly resident workshops in Manley Court, London

An additional partnership was developed with Bupa in year 2. Four resident workshops were delivered with one of Bupa’s care homes: Manley Court. Bupa were unable to resource the staff training element of the project so with this partner, Homemade Circus explored a different delivery model, which only included the resident workshops with a small number of staff supporting the sessions.

Whilst these workshops were evidently greatly appreciated by the residents and staff, this model of engagement is less effective. Providing some time for the care home staff to learn from the workshop facilitators and experiment with the equipment directly is important in them being able to adequately support the residents during the workshops. Workshop facilitators found these sessions more challenging to lead without the support of staff.



REGIONAL TRAINING DAYS

2 staff training and resident workshops in 2 homes and 2 regional training days (Excelcare London and Milton Keynes)

Two Excelcare homes, Park Avenue in London and Dovecote Manor in Milton Keynes were selected to receive 2 days of resident workshops and staff training. These homes also participated in a “Regional Training Day” where lifestyle coordinators from across their region were trained in using 10 different pieces of circus equipment so they could work with residents of varying abilities.

As well as being quite physical, these sessions were fun and creative, involving team building and supporting staff to find their own creative expressions with the props or activities. Care staff found it very beneficial having an entire day together to connect (often for the first time) and discuss the challenges in their respective homes.

HOME MADE CIRCUS DIGITAL TOOLKIT

The Digital Toolkit was an important part of creating a legacy for the project. The website was designed to be accessible for care home staff who had been involved in Homemade Circus as well as for care staff who were completely new to the concept of circus activities in care settings. Upswing filmed a series of short videos to introduce each piece of circus equipment and to describe how the equipment can be used effectively in group and 1-1 sessions. The videos also explain how to simplify the activity or make it more challenging.

The toolkit includes downloadable information sheets and activity plans, links to Spotify playlists and circus equipment suppliers, as well as briefing notes on health and safety considerations, how to set up the room and recommendations for before, during and after the workshop.



RECOMMENDATIONS & DEVELOPMENTS FROM YEAR 1

The report from the first year of the project identified some recommendations which were taken forward into the second year.

1 A CIRCUS CHAMPION IN EACH HOME

A Circus Champion was identified by Excelcare management in each of the homes and attended a Zoom planning meeting with Upswing's General Manager and the Lead Artist for Homemade Circus at the beginning of the project.

The Circus Champions identified were all either the manager or deputy manager of their home and were involved in the early stages of planning and scheduling of sessions. This relationship was key in progressing the project with queries around staff rotas and attendance for example.

Whilst this did support better communication with each home, information did not necessarily make it to the right people (like the care assistants or some of the lifestyle coordinators who are the ones organising and participating in the sessions.)

In the future, we would recommend having all the lifestyle coordinators also present at this meeting and having more input in selection of the Circus Champion as this was not always the most appropriate person.

An ideal scenario would include a face-to-face meeting prior to the project starting with managers, lifestyle coordinators and the staff member who prepares the rotas. In some homes it took a few weeks for the scheduling of staff and rotas to adjust so that the staff attending the training session were also available in the afternoon to support the resident workshop. Having a relationship and buy-in from management as well as people working on the ground is key to the smooth delivery of the project.

2 A TOUR DAY PRIOR TO SESSIONS STARTING

A tour day was organised in the homes which the facilitators found very useful; particularly in understanding the dynamics of each home, such as who to talk to regarding specific questions or issues. They felt more confident going into the homes as they knew where to keep their belongings or have their lunch and had the chance to familiarise themselves with the workshop space. At the final evaluation session, workshop facilitators suggested it would be helpful to have an all-staff meeting as well as a tour, to ensure that key information is communicated at all levels.

Workshop facilitators found that care home staff still have preconceptions around who this kind of work is for and tended to include more able residents in the workshops. A staff meeting with clear guidelines around accessibility (re-iterated throughout the project) may help to bring everyone on the same page at the beginning of the project.

Workshop facilitators also recommended receiving a list of staff and their roles as this would support them in navigating the home, such as who to speak to about rotas for example.



3 1-1 SESSIONS: TRAINING AND DELIVERY

The facilitators received extra training and support in delivering 1-1 sessions and this became a key aspect of their time in the homes. Each care home visit included three to four 1-1 sessions with members of the care home community who are either bedbound and/or prefer 1-1 interactions. The facilitators found these sessions extremely valuable for several reasons.

- They inform group work by providing experience in different ways of working with residents who have different needs
- They provide an easily accessible framework that care staff can apply/ run themselves without too much effort (group sessions require moving a lot of people into the space and take longer)
- They are potentially more beneficial in creating these 'pin-dropping moments' for the staff supporting. One workshop facilitator described: "the 1-1 sessions are the epitome of the potential for this kind of work." (workshop facilitator feedback session)

"One of my bedroom sessions was with a woman in bed, with very limited mobility. Her husband was visiting, and I quickly realised I could get him involved. He took my place and they managed to catch the ball together a few times. They made half a cup each with joined hands to catch the ball together. We made a sequence where they would catch the ball from me together, then he would throw the ball to me and I would start juggling, followed by me throwing the ball back to them." (Excelcare Park Avenue, Sessional Review Form)

Workshop facilitators recommended that it was important to allow enough time after the group session to get into "the bedroom headspace." The 1-1 sessions are a very different pace and energy and require a different set of skills.

In wanting to understand a little bit more about what it takes to deliver these sessions, the facilitators were asked about the skills they felt were important. Below are some of their responses:

- Risk taking – in wanting to make a connection you need to take a risk and put yourself out there
- You're not trying to be funny. It's about opening yourself up to the possibility
- It's similar to clowning and exposing your vulnerability
- Assess the room, the energy. Is the person up for it or not? This will dictate how you begin
- Very careful in matching the energy at the beginning and slowly raising the energy
- Intuitive
- Responsive / in the moment
- Better to have two artists running session as they can feed off each other's energy but also care for each other in the space
- Assertive as well as gentle
- Resilience

4 BESPOKE DELIVERY IN THE HOMES (CHANGING STRUCTURE OF DELIVERY)

As scheduling in the first year was sometimes challenging (with residents being too tired in the afternoon, or staff finishing their lunches/rotas during the session), the structure of delivery was loosened slightly, and the homes were able to decide what model suited them best. For example, one home opted to have 2 shorter group sessions, followed by bedroom visits, and finishing with staff training in the afternoon. Different structures have pros and cons. For example, resident workshops in the morning mean the residents are more awake but there is always a bit of a delayed start as people are finishing breakfast. Having the staff training after the resident workshop means that staff are being trained in equipment that they will be using the following week (rather than for that afternoon) which brings challenges in recollection or memory and staffing.

Whatever model the home opted for, it was important to keep the same structure throughout as by the third week there was a clear shift, where homes anticipated the visit and were prepared for the day.

Consecutive delivery (a day of delivery every week) was another innovation from Year 1, where delivery took place fortnightly. It was felt that weekly delivery might make the homes more focused on the project and more aware it was happening compared to the first year where staff sometimes forgot that the workshop facilitators were coming in fortnightly because of the gap in delivery. In practice most of the workshop facilitators thought that the fortnightly delivery had more of an impact as the presence of the project in the home was felt over a longer period of time.

Workshop facilitators did advocate for longer delivery in each of the homes as they found the staff needed more opportunities for application. They suggested that 8 – 12 weeks would be a good amount of time to really see a shift in the culture and have time to engage with staff across the home (including senior management).



CASE STUDY:



As in the first year, I was able to attend and observe sessions in the care homes, which was extremely helpful for me from an evaluation perspective. Each home has their own internal dynamics and being able to experience these first hand has been significant in understanding the impact of this project on the various stakeholders. I visited Windmill Excelcare home on a weekly basis which also gave me the opportunity to see how the project developed from week to week.

Below are some vignettes selected from my weekly observations which say something about the quality of interactions and moments created. They are organised thematically, rather than chronologically.

ACTIVITIES AND THE MULTI-SENSORY DIMENSIONS OF THE EQUIPMENT ENCOURAGE PARTICIPANTS TO BE PRESENT:

The bunting was passed from person to person with limited words or intervention from the workshop facilitators.

- “How did that make you feel?”
- “We are here now. We are present.”
- “It’s about being present – not bothering about giving medication or paying bills.”

The workshop facilitator re-iterates that with this activity, “if you think you are going slow – go slower.” The workshop facilitators are encouraging staff (who are often rushing around, with mental to do lists and tasks) to take time and stay with an activity. (Windmill, ST observation)

One resident spent a considerable amount of time carefully observing the colour of her hand through the juggling scarf. (Windmill, RW observation)

SOMETIMES IT’S ABOUT SHIFTING THE ENERGY AND SOMETIMES IT’S ABOUT MATCHING THE ENERGY

- The juggling balls are introduced. As a piece of equipment, they are dense and heavier than previous equipment introduced. The workshop facilitator emphasises: “sometimes you need a change in dynamic. You don’t always need to be slow and gentle. Sometimes you just want a firm handshake, really feel the density of the ball.” (Windmill, ST observation)
- A resident stands up to throw and catch a juggling ball with one hand. She’s very keen and wants to be challenged. The throwing and catching become further and further apart. She is concentrating hard. There is joy in this challenge and shift of pace. (Windmill, RW observation)
- Thomas is punching beach ball back and forth. His energy is met by the workshop practitioners “we’re here from the circus!” He pretends to faint when hit by the beach ball. After a few tries, he is able to catch the ball and shouts “hello!” He pushes himself up to sit more upright in order to better catch the ball.
- “Enough is enough.”
- “I’ll do the work then.” And Callum begins to juggle.

THE ACTIVITIES AND EQUIPMENT ENCOURAGE COLLABORATION AND EQUALITY IN THE CONNECTIONS CREATED:

- The workshop facilitator encourages the group to think about how you can collaborate with your resident. The key term here is, to collaborate. The language used by the workshop facilitator to describe these interactions signifies equality in the relationship. To collaborate you need buy in and participation from both parties and this opens the possibility of being creative together. (Windmill, ST observation)
- There was a beautiful moment between a workshop facilitator and a resident where the resident tucked their juggling scarf into the facilitator's clenched fist and wrapped her hands around the facilitator's fists. "Anyone know a magic word?" the facilitator asks. "Bunny" someone replies. "Everyone together, Bunnyyy" and with the prompt of the resident, the facilitator uncurls her hand slowly to reveal the beautiful "flower". Both the resident and the facilitator are drawn into the "reveal" moment created by the unfurling scarf but also by the moment of intimacy together. (Windmill, RW observation)
- Claire who did not want to join at the beginning but is quickly participating in all the activities and giggling. She moves to sit next to a lady across the circle and initiates a hat swap with her. The two of them are quickly laughing together stealing each other's hats. (Windmill, RW observation)

THERE IS SO MUCH JOY IN WATCHING OTHERS EXPERIENCE JOY AND THIS CREATES EQUALITY IN THE EXPERIENCE.

- I observed one resident gently tickling the face of the staff member using the peacock feather whilst the staff member was kneeling in front of her giggling. The resident was checking in with the staff and asking "do you like this? Is this ok?" It was a total role reversal. The care is reciprocal. (Windmill, RW observation)
- The nurse present in the bedroom visit is invited to participate. Staff and facilitators are dancing to Calypso by the resident's bed, with scarves being waved around, all laughing. At the end, the resident joyfully exclaims: "I've never seen him (the nurse) so happy." (Windmill, 1-1 observation)

THERE IS CARE IN THE WAY THAT THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE IS CONSTRUCTED, NOT JUST THE "DOING" OF THE ACTIVITIES.

- The workshop facilitator highlighted the way that the hats were handed out. Everyone got their moment. Handing out the equipment is part of the experience. (Windmill, ST observation)
- The workshop facilitator is in the space blowing up the beach balls theatrically with clown like gestures whilst the residents are finishing their breakfast. Blowing up the beach balls, preparing the space, becomes part of the spectacle. As performers, the practitioners know about stage presence, and the joy that can be found in something simple (like blowing up a balloon) if done with intention. It creates anticipation for what is to come. It gently starts to shift the energy in the space. (Windmill, RW observation)
- I observed one of the care staff taking the time to organise all the juggling scarves in his hand so that each colour was clearly visible in order for the resident to clearly see and choose their favourite colour. (Windmill, RW observation)
- In the 1-1 session, the facilitator makes a display of the juggling balls on the ledge at the bottom of the resident's bed so that he could see them throughout the session. (Windmill 1-1 observation)



THE IMPACT



IMPACT ON THE WORKSHOP FACILITATORS

THEY ARE MORE SKILLED

Most of the workshop facilitators had never worked in a care home setting, with older participants, people living with dementia and cognitive impairments or with people with limited mobility. At the end of this project, each of them can confidently engage with and lead work in these settings with staff and residents alike. Their development over the two years is huge.

As in the first year, weekly Zoom check ins were organised with the lead artist as a space for facilitators to reflect on their experiences and support each other in various challenges. The lead artist noticed a significant shift in the second year, whereby facilitators needed less “handholding” and whilst still valuing this space to connect and share their experiences, found solutions to their challenges together.

The looser structure of this year’s delivery meant that facilitators needed to remain flexible and responsive. They often needed to be able to read the room, respond to the energy levels and spontaneously adapt content. They worked very well together, supporting and bouncing off each other. This was particularly noticeable in the 1-1 sessions, where they gently but confidently supported each other in very intimate settings.

“I think about the structure and break down of a skill more... I am more aware and receptive to the different needs of people. Rather than being reactive I want to try and approach situations more like that, by being sensitive and perceptive to the whole environment (for example in a school setting – the reception, the teachers etc).” (Facilitator reflection interview)

“I knew the potential of circus but had no experience of making it accessible – putting it into practice.” (Workshop facilitator debrief session)

THEY ARE ADVOCATES FOR THIS WORK:

As practitioners they have become big advocates for this work, with one practitioner aiming to run a similar project in Sussex and another starting an MA in movement therapy. They can immediately see and feel the impact that it is having on the care home community and are motivated and moved by this. All of them have said they would continue this work and that the project had shifted something for them, through their changed perceptions of care homes, circus and for some of them their own practice.

IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING DAYS:

All workshop practitioners spoke about the “luxury” of having such intense training days together and how important it was for them in terms of skill and confidence building but also in building the group. As workshop facilitators, they are expected to co-deliver sessions and sometimes deal with quite challenging situations. One facilitator said he had never felt so prepared for any project before.

*“Staff are caring, and I found it beautiful.”
(workshop facilitator debrief session)*

“I see it (dementia) more. I think about it more.” (workshop facilitator debrief session)

THEY HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF CARE HOME DYNAMICS AND ITS CHALLENGES:

They became more confident in navigating the complex dynamics of care homes, like addressing issues around staff rotas early on and being clear about expectations. Additionally, their understanding of the care assistants’ roles as well as the challenges they are faced with, was significant in getting staff on board (and returning) to the sessions. The workshop facilitators were caring with the staff, and this was central to setting the tone of the project.

The workshop facilitators held a conversation around music.

“Music dictates the pace but also the spirit of the game or activity. It’s important for you to also feel inspired. You can choose music that drives you. Don’t forget about what you like.” (London Regional training, workshop observation)

“... Us, the healthcare assistants, you treated us very well. The way you teach us, the communication level, the way you interacted with the residents and the team members. The sounds, the facial expressions, your gestures... It was really amazing. Thank you for taking care of us and our residents. (Staff interview, Windmill Care home)

“I learned a lot about myself. It really made me rethink it all. I look at projects in such a different way. I’ll take that into my other work.” (workshop facilitator debrief session)

“The realisation that this work is so important and not so common. So I want to carry on.” (workshop facilitator debrief session)



THE IMPACT



IMPACT ON THE CARE HOMES

THE CARE HOME STAFF EXPERIENCED THE POSITIVE IMPACT ON RESIDENTS FIRST-HAND

Staff were able to experience first-hand the impact on their residents and value the potential of this work. The repeated visits made an important difference as care home staff were able to see how residents' physical and cognitive wellbeing developed every week.

"Peter wasn't like that before. He was very quiet and silent. But last week, we all noticed that Peter was very active, and he was laughing and smiling throughout the activity. And even, this week, he spoke to the members and the circus team...he waved his hands, and he gave me a handshake. And he called me by my name." (Windmill, Care assistant interview)

The 1-1 visits provided intense micro-moments of high levels of interaction with people that usually do not participate in any activities. This was extremely beneficial for the staff to witness.

"Scarves are brought out. The resident chooses the colour and with the support of the facilitator has it run through her fingers gently. The scarf is dropped into the resident's lap. After a few repetitions, the resident reaches out to catch the scarf. The lifestyle coordinator cannot believe what she has seen and exclaims, clapping hands that she is so impressed. The resident repeats this action twice. The member of staff is genuinely amazed and surprised by this level of engagement and tells other members of staff she passes in the corridor". (Limetree, 1-1 observation)



UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF PLAY

Through the workshops care home staff experienced the simplicity and beauty of play. Many of the activities are about exploring an object and experimenting with different ways to hold or balance it. Rather than objective or goal orientated it is playful and explorative. This is a significant shift in the way activities are perceived and delivered in the home.

“Changing my approach to activities and equipment...It's just taught me minimalistic items can become a whole activity... not everything needs to be so extravagant. Sometimes it can be person centred and simple and still be the most effective.” (Limetree, carehome staff interview)

“What we're asked to do are simple, beautiful things, creative things that can keep the resident engaged for a long time... Everybody can play...and I think everybody wants to play. But sometimes you think they're beyond playing now. Then you bring it back to them and they're like, no, you can play. You can play!” (Windmill, lifestyle coordinator interview)

I didn't realise how much you can communicate effectively through play!” (Milton Keynes, Regional training day)

“Some people, rather than karate chopping the yoga blocks preferred hiding behind them or holding them up to their ears like a telephone. Although a bit unsure at first about not following “the instructions”, the staff supported these different interpretations of the activity. Shortly after, this is echoed by the workshop facilitator who celebrates “I am the best at getting things wrong! It's quite a skill isn't it!” (Windmill, resident workshop observation)

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE JOY AND CARE BEING RECIPROCAL

One important impact in the care home was around the ways in which the training sessions positively impacted the wellbeing of care home staff. This was clearly communicated in the first year of delivery and re-iterated strongly in this year's care homes. The care home staff made the link between their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their residents. There is joy in observing others experience and feeling joy and this is an important aspect of Homemade Circus.

“It was fun and I was happy to see the staff actually enjoying themselves doing this, because they're working so hard. To see them let their hair down like that, like they're having a party, and having fun and learning something. And then the residents are having a party!” (Windmill, Lifestyle coordinator interview)

“Even when I was watching it, I was still very happy because I was watching the residents and the staff enjoy themselves. I'm just reading everybody and the residents who don't normally do things they are doing it. Those who didn't want to join in, like one or two here in the café, they were watching it, totally engaged with this beautiful expression on their faces. It brought me joy”. (Windmill, Lifestyle coordinator interview)

“In these 12-hour shifts, at least, we are expecting some relief. I'm acting on the dementia floor, it's not easy. So, when I am in the training room with you guys, that one hour, I didn't think about anything. Even my family problems and personal problems. Nothing was in my mind. And I enjoyed it. I was planning things to do with my residents. How do I do it with Benjamin? How do I convey this to Burrell? You know, I was imagining that.” (Windmill, care assistant, interview)

BUILDING CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY ACROSS THE HOME

The project encouraged connections and community across the home, between staff members, between residents and between staff and residents.

For example, in the regional training days, the participants reflected on the importance of feeling supported in the delivery of activities with residents. Some participants explained that it was sometimes challenging to involve other staff members who did not perceive “activities” as part of their role. There was a recognition that this kind of training is important in building relationships and bringing staff teams together so that they can adequately support each other.

“This was good bonding experience. We need to know each other, who we are working with. So we can work as a team.” (London Regional Training Day evaluation)

One care worker in the Milton Keynes regional training spoke about the fact that their home included people from different ethnic backgrounds and that this kind of activity breaks down language and communication barriers.

“The activity speaks, breaks down barriers, removes fear and makes you feel free to communicate.”

Non-verbal connections are being made throughout the workshops. There is a clear shift in awareness of space and each other that occurs through using the equipment and doing the activities. This expanded awareness has a physical impact on the residents’ bodies and interactions with one another.

“At the beginning residents are in their own bubbles, slower to engage and connect. Once warmed up with the beach balls they start to look up and across the circle, they sit up in their chairs, anticipating the ball and connecting with other residents through eye contact and facial expressions.” (Windmill, Resident Workshop observations)

“Beatrice was able to help another participant when she didn't know what to do. Beatrice was actually physically supporting her similarly to how we do - it was very brief but quite magical”. (Windmill, Sessional Debrief Form)



SUGGESTIONS

FOR DEVELOPMENTS

1 TRAINING FOR SENIOR MANAGEMENT

The facilitators found that in the homes where a senior person/ management participated in training and/or a resident session, future sessions were more successful in terms of staff participation and attendance. By participating and experiencing the workshops they become advocates in the home. Future iterations of this project could include a care home-wide workshop with staff from all levels including management. This would ensure that buy-in occurs at all levels whilst simultaneously providing a space for staff to spend time together differently. As demonstrated by this project, circus is a great equaliser and builds relationships.

2 A HOMEMADE CIRCUS 1-1 SESSION TOOLKIT

The workshop facilitators suggested developing a flow chart or handbook for 1-1 sessions based on their experiences of what worked well with residents with different abilities and energies. They found that what they developed in these sessions was very intuitive but agreed that some people may want additional support or ideas in assessing the energy and the resident in that space and how to manage and respond to different situations.



3 MORE EQUIPMENT

The workshop facilitators have already suggested other types of equipment that would also work very well in this setting. More equipment in each of the homes would also ensure there is “a circus bag” on each floor readily available for care home staff to use whenever necessary as most homes have multiple floors that do not regularly work together. Workshop facilitators also advocated for care staff being able to take equipment home to practice or play in their own settings.

4 MORE FAMILY AND VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT

It was evident when family members were present in the workshops or 1-1 sessions that there is huge potential to involve them in this work. Family members are often looking for different ways to connect with their loved ones and also need opportunities to laugh and play together. Homemade Circus could include training family members and community volunteers. Including them in the training would support the home’s capacity to continue delivering this, irrespective of staff changes and/or their lack of time to do this work.

5 LONGER DELIVERY, MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO COLLABORATE WITH STAFF

Workshop facilitators have advocated for 8-12 weeks of delivery as a minimum to ensure that the project is embedded across the home (including management) and that there is enough time for the staff to put into practice what they are learning. Some members of staff struggled with the idea of free exploration and that “there is no right way” to do a particular activity. They sometimes “corrected” residents or got frustrated when the equipment was not used in the “proper” way. This approach to activities and the arts more generally is engrained in many of us and something that is hard to dismantle. More time with care staff to explore and play with the equipment and collaborate in the design of activities or sessions would be beneficial.



THE LIFE

WORTH LIVING



All the care workers and workshop facilitators who participated in Homemade Circus were asked to think about the life worth living. They were asked: What is essential to a good quality of life? Their answers are displayed in the Word Cloud below. Care workers are confronted with end of life on a daily basis. They are acutely aware of the need for wellbeing, love, laughter, creativity, connection, freedom, learning etc. in the life worth living.

Homemade Circus provided care home staff with the space and training to explore a different set of tools and techniques so that they can support their residents to continue a life that is worth living; even at the end of their life.



CONCLUSION

Over the two years of the Homemade Circus project Upswing worked with care and nursing homes across London, Essex, Cambridge and Milton Keynes. Upswing partnered with three different providers, Anchor Hanover, Excelcare and Bupa. The 2-year project resulted in 450 staff interactions and 621 resident or family interactions, with, of course, some staff and residents having repeated interactions with the Homemade Circus team.

The digital toolkit was launched in summer 2024. It is freely accessible to all care homes that have participated in the project, and has been shared with other care settings as well as circus artists who are interested in developing their own practice in this area. Upswing hopes the toolkit will prove to be a comprehensive resource for anyone looking to deliver participatory workshops and 1-1 sessions with circus equipment in care settings.

Homemade Circus has had a significant impact on all its stakeholders. The workshop facilitators are more skilled and confident in working in these settings and importantly, are now big advocates for this work. The care home staff have been able to experience first-hand the positive impact that this work has on their residents' physical and mental wellbeing. They have gained skills in creatively using and exploring circus equipment in an accessible way with their residents.

In addition to this, the wellbeing of care staff has also been positively impacted. As well as improving dexterity, mobility, balance and verbal communication, Homemade Circus focuses on play and exploration, fostering a sense of freedom and presence. This focus on exploration and being in the moment has been particularly beneficial for staff as well as spending time as a group in this way.

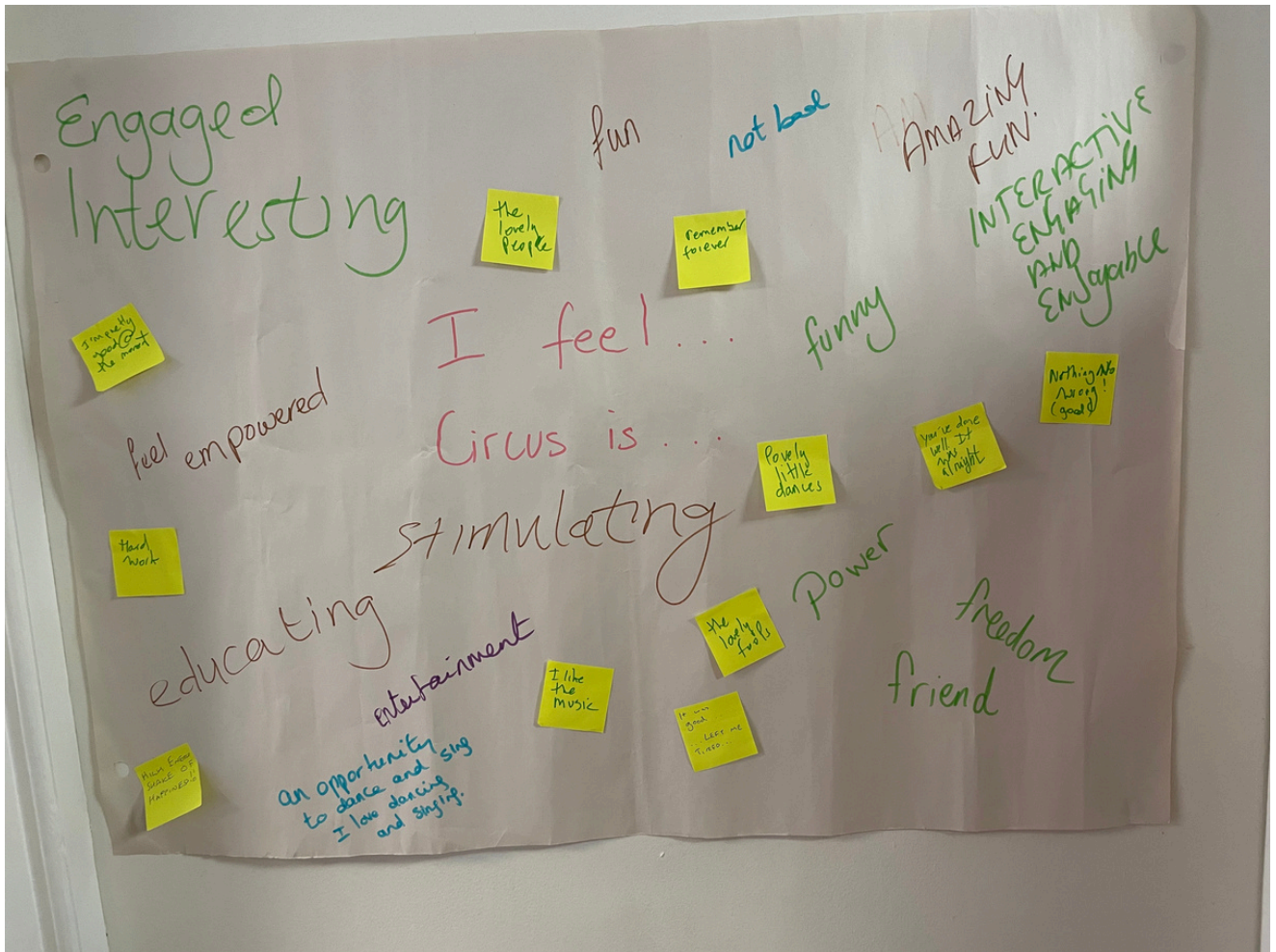
The care workers who participated in the project have also become advocates for this work and recognise the link between their own wellbeing and the residents' wellbeing. Further work in this field would focus on engaging senior management in a similar process, whereby the impact of this work is experienced across all levels of the home.

By focusing on the training of care home staff in Homemade Circus, Upswing hopes that the benefits and joy of participating in circus will remain an integral part of the care homes. Importantly, a project like this demonstrates the ways in which care workers' wellbeing needs to be part of the conversation when assessing and addressing care home residents' wellbeing.



APPENDIX

LIMETREE CARE HOME FINAL SESSION



YEAR 1

TRAINING



16
staff training sessions

29
activity coordinators attended one of the Regional Training sessions



18
resident workshops

5
staff, on average, participating in a fortnightly training session

LOCATIONS



Westminster

Bethnal Green

Peckham

4 homes
in London

2 homes
outside of London –
Chigwell and Huntingdon

PARTICIPATION



208
staff interactions

252
resident or family interactions



4
circus parties



11 residents
on average participating in a fortnightly workshop

TRAINING



16
staff training sessions

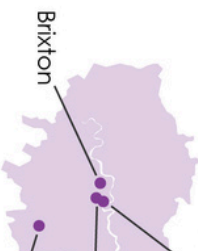
28
activity coordinators attended one of the Regional Training sessions



25
resident workshops

8
staff, on average, participating in a weekly training session

LOCATIONS



New Cross

Herne Hill

Bromley

Brixton

4 homes
in London

1 home
outside of London –
Bletchley

PARTICIPATION



242
staff interactions

369
resident or family interactions



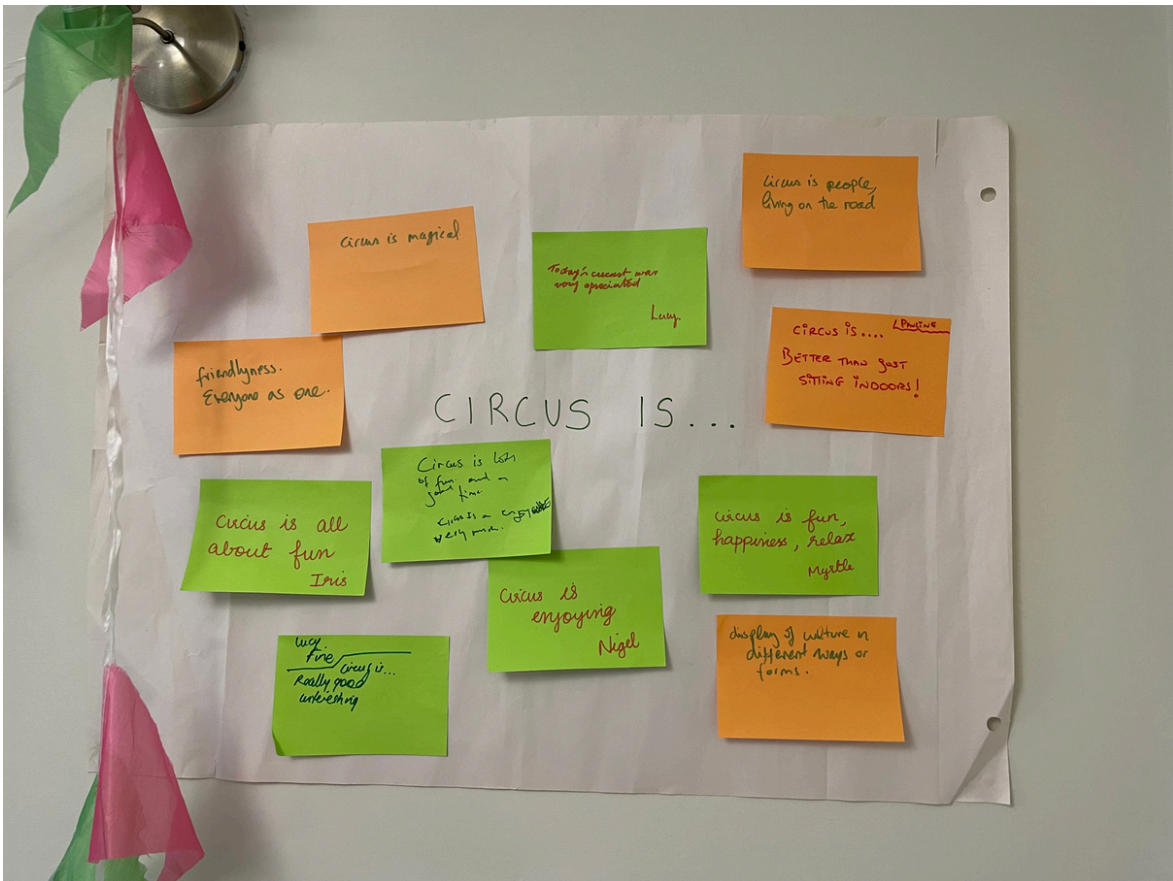
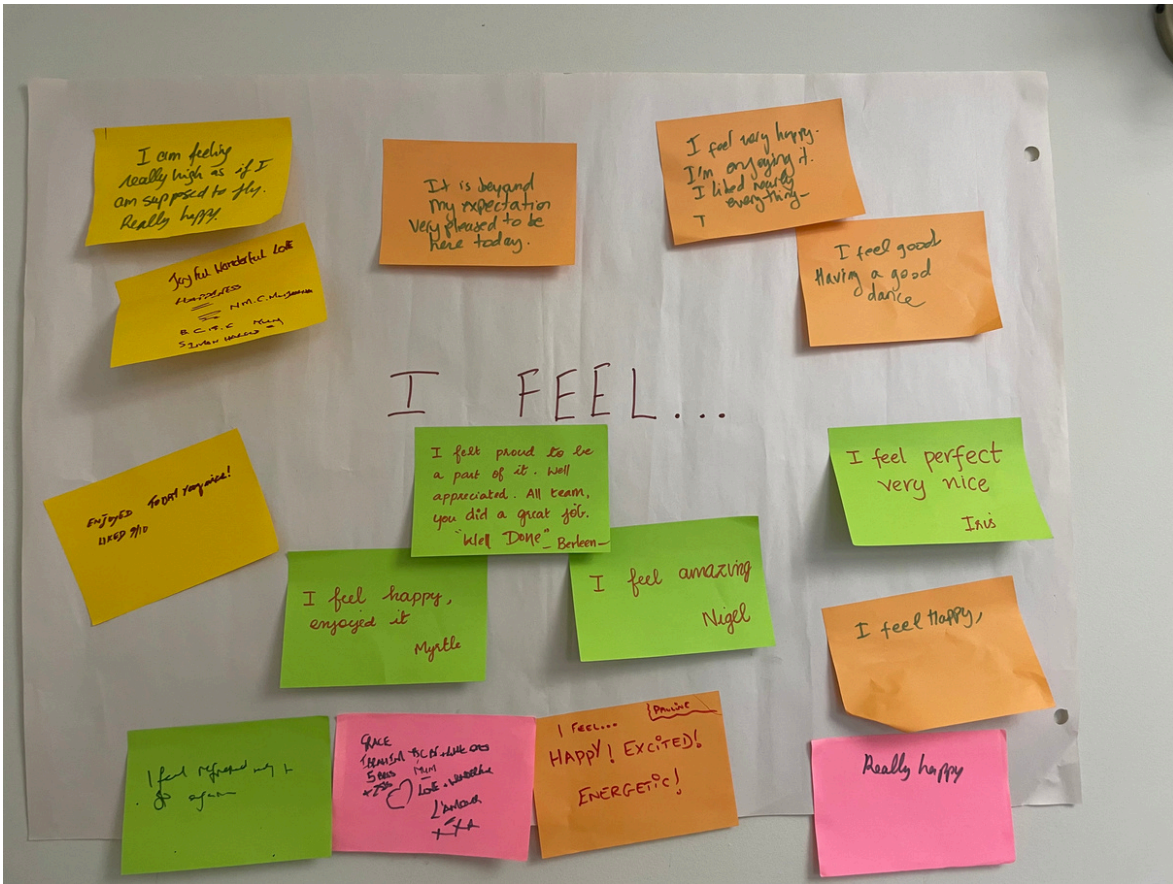
2
circus parties



12 residents
on average participating in a weekly workshop

YEAR 2

WINDMILL CARE HOME FINAL SESSION



REGIONAL TRAINING DAY EVALUATION

feeling at peace
love
laughter
cake 😊 food.
cash.
none of substance
family relationships
friendship
The good life
healthy
- mentally
- physically
- emotionally
- spiritually.
Balanced
active stimulation
having goals
no judgement
personal space
choice
holidays
reciprocal respect
respected in your boundaries
privacy
quiet time

bunting
- more blocks for longer dominoes
What I wished we'd spent more time on
more juggling
- hand/eye coordination -
flower sticks

Connect / drop tools
 → all staff engage in activity.
 → pick up equipment.

Using other equipment / like lemons to do activity

teach other staff new skills

bricks / blocks
 goal for board
 dominos w. blocks

fabricating diff. methods of using equipment

What will I do as a result of today?

scarves - bed board
 feathers - bed board.

could do more hubs.

I like Sent - it's reusable, - sensory - you just whip it out (dropping)

rolling + passing w. flower sticks.

to be more engaged with residents and staff

giving them more independence through the activities

Use with friends & family members

More fun! Enjoyments

Try to implement the activities with the residents, staff team

What will I do as a result of today?

Encourage more physical activity and Creativity

Staff more interaction with residents

Innovate new skills

more enhancing of concentration & mobility

Residents
mood swings

Lack of team
work

mental comparaty

No trust/confidentiality
when confiding with
management

Whistle blowing
process

Time - Not enough

What challenges am
I faced with in
my role

Short staffed

Lack of communication
management & team
members

Lack of money / wages
(better pay)

~~Self~~

More juggling - to feel more
confident.

More group
fun competition
activities

prizes

What do I wish
we had spent
more time on?

More activities
with the flower
sticks

Explore
more ways
to balance
blocks

Differentiate
between
group & (:) tasks

awareness of
diff. skills

Confidence

Something new
to be done
here

gain more
knowledge
about diff. types
activities

Hopes

transferable skills

interacting styles

mental wellbeing
(for us too)

possibilities

increased
mobility

laughter

Concentration

come together

adventures

juggling

interact

music

read

new skills

Satisfaction

performative

CIRCUS IS ^{team}work

Confidence

excitement

Fun

group

creation

wazy

colourful

fun

laughter

accessible

skilled

clowns

jokes

entertainment

building
friendship

skilful