

The following edited interview with Shamilla Kumari (Newham Council) and Emma Cahill (Daily Life Ltd), outlines the contemporary context for Daily Life Ltd's work and how it seeks to connect with and extend existing practices around arts and mental health within its local community.

The interview took place on July 20th 2014.

SK: I'm Community Hub's lead worker and I cover Stratford and West Ham. I sit within Adult Social Care in the council, and my role has two elements to it. There's the community engagement, community building capacity side of it, looking at the needs of the community: working with third sector organisations, building relationships, developing projects and activities, and bringing services together to enhance what they're already doing for the local community. And then the other focus is around tackling social isolation, it is a national crisis in the country and very prevalent amongst older people in the community: so working with older and vulnerable people, getting them out of their homes and more engaged in activities in their local area. We do a lot of home visits, we get referrals from GPs, mental health professionals who refer people on that fit that criteria and we then work with them in putting a support plan together. So, for example, I've had quite a number of patients that have come through that have a mental health background. One man in particular had chronic depression and since his wife died he's just spiralled down and he can't do things for himself. He wants to get out and do stuff, but just doesn't know where to start. People can be isolated in their own homes. This particular man was a champion in chess and draughts and he plays the guitar so, working really closely with his social worker or his support worker, we try and tailor stuff that meets his needs, try to get him back to the library as they do a chess club there or singing classes at Stratford Circus: we look at what's nearby to see what he can start connecting with and take baby steps that way.

And a lot of people need befriending, so we work really closely with our volunteering scheme, Active Newham, and they provide skilled people that really want to give up some time to befriend and connect with people and build relationships. And even if it's just going to the shop with them and coming back, that makes such a big difference to their lives. So little things like that. Not everyone has a family nearby and they're on their own in their eighties, in their nineties. You can meet some amazing people, they're on their own, they're happy but they need transport. With the Dial-a-Ride they're cutting

back on rides and with Taxicard, that's becoming really difficult, so they're facing a lot of challenges within themselves and trying to get out and stay connected. But, in overview, we try and get them into bigger activities, into our events. Let them have a voice, let them feed back on what's going on, be part of like the decision making process within the council and within their local area. And that's sort of my role divided into two sections.

Stratford is such a buzzy place; it's just got so much going on. The library's a really good platform for information. But we also run regular adult social care coffee mornings on the second Wednesday of every month and theme them around different things. So one could be around mental health, one could be around diabetes, the Olympic Park, employment - whatever we feel that the community might benefit from. And it's very informal, you can come and talk and have some tea, coffee and just meet new people and learn what's going on in the local area. When we get referrals we say well, why, as a first step, why don't you come and have a coffee, come to the library and register, and then we can talk about what's going on.

EC: Could you tell me a little bit more about the relationship with Daily Life, how you came into each other's worlds?

SK: I was talking with our arts officer, explaining about Active Minds Café, and she told me about a fantastic arts project that's all around mental health. She sent me a link to your website and we got really excited watching one of the films. I didn't know that that existed in Stratford, that you'd come here, had an office here, so I was really impressed and wanted to know more about what the charity does. We were planning to talk about how we could work together but before that you were having your exhibition, the Diary Drawings exhibition here at the town hall, so I thought I would come along to that and see what that's all about. So it was just basically through word of mouth, a connection with somebody that already knew the organisation. And part of my role is scoping out and mapping what exists within Stratford, what have we got, what community groups are there and when I met with Daily Life Ltd, you were new to Stratford, trying to make connections and you had your map and you were dotting out who you had met so I just tried to link them into our networking nights and other mental health providers in the area.

I came along to the exhibition and performance of Mad Gyms and Kitchens. I wasn't expecting that, it was quite shocking but very powerful and interesting. I think people can relate to it, the topics that Bobby was discussing - people could really understand that.

At the end, drawing your top tips for staying healthy and being happy - that was quite interesting, because I brought one of my friends with me and we were looking at our list and it just starts conversation. You start to think, it's interesting what people's priorities are, what makes them stay sane and tick over and just get on with life.

EC: Our first performance in Stratford was the day of the tube strikes - it was supposed to be this big launch and we had so many people coming but then tube strikes cut numbers so we did another show last week - we were expecting about 40 people and we had 55 people which is fantastic. But it was really interesting because since the Active Minds Café and the forum that you set up, we have made connections with kind of key people within the organisations - from local MIND, from national MIND, from Hestia, from Anchor House. They have helped advocate for us within their organisations and promoting the show. If you hadn't introduced us to that network and encouraged us to be part of it we probably wouldn't have had access to those people and definitely not in the same way.

SK: What I've sort of found with a lot of the third sector providers is they do fantastic work, but they often work in silos, on their own. It's not that they don't want to work together; I just think there's not much opportunity or a forum for bringing people together. So that's when I had the idea of the Active Minds Café, so one of the focuses was to bring third sector organisations together so that they can enhance and co-produce, work together and enhance the services that already exist for mental health. The Active Minds Café came about because when I was meeting local people through the coffee mornings and some of the referrals I was getting, it was quite clear that they were getting their medication - they had seen a doctor, been diagnosed and just left - there wasn't really a support mechanism or place where they could go and get more information or meet other people in similar positions and build connections. I wanted to make a project that could bridge that gap, to help and support those people. Then I wanted to open it up to not just those that are diagnosed, but anyone that wanted to find out more about

things, whether it's a carer, or a family member. So the café was there to be very informal- a one stop shop where they can come and get information and advice, but also do an activity, have a cup of tea and just relax, so it's not full on, there's no pressure there, it's in a community place. So it was about bringing providers together and sharing that information in a positive way, but also allowing and giving the individual the power to then take that information and do something about it, self-refer if need be, and learn more about what's happening in other organisations, getting more connected within their community.