

FOREVER YOUNG PROJECT

(Enhancing skills and wellbeing of older people through creative arts)

Funded by the Charity of Sir Richard Whittington,
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EVALUATION REPORT



2019 - 2021

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About IROKO Theatre

IROKO uses African art forms: oral storytelling, drama, music, dance, arts and craft to enhance education, skills, health and wellbeing of people from all backgrounds and abilities, so that they can achieve their full potential, play an active role in their community and have an improved quality of life.

To achieve this, they design programmes with key learning and health and wellbeing outcomes, using a variety of creative approaches including workshops, performances, training, research and exhibitions.

About the Evaluator

Kate Kelsall is a freelance arts and heritage professional with extensive experience and training in assisting small organisations with project monitoring and evaluation, volunteer management and publicity. She has worked with IROKO on other projects, including *Speaking Without Voice* and *Stories of Africans Living in Newham*.

1. Project and Evaluation Overview

Forever Young was a two-year project by IROKO Theatre Company, running from January 2019 - March 2021 (extended due to COVID-19) under Mercers' Older People & Housing Grant Programme. Its goal was to enhance the emotional wellbeing and skills of older, isolated people through a range of creative workshops activities and events. To amplify its impact, the programme also sought to develop strategic partnerships and provide volunteering and training opportunities.

Reach and Target Groups

The project proposed to reach 150 isolated older people from different cultural backgrounds, living in the London Boroughs of Newham, Redbridge and Barking and Dagenham through its activities. Within this group, IROKO hoped to reach a number of individuals living with mild/moderate dementia.

Furthermore, *Forever Young* aimed to recruit 10 older people as project volunteers. Additionally, 5 representatives from partner organisations would be trained in IROKO's creative methodology in working with older people.

Activities and Events

The following activities and events were proposed in order to achieve *Forever Young's* outcomes:

- 3 x 3-hour Oral Storytelling Skills Development workshops
- 18 x 2-hour African group music making and gentle movement workshops
- 12 x 2-hour African bare-hand clay modelling, arts and crafts workshops
- 6 x Festive Sharing Days/Weekenders: picnics, celebratory events, etc
- 6 x Museum of London Docklands' 'Memories of London' workshops

Partnerships

In order to reach the beneficiaries and provide an optimum experience, *Forever Young's* success was contingent on collaborative partnerships with a range of organisations, working with or running programmes for older people. IROKO initially proposed to work with the following partners:

- Museum of London Docklands
- Newham Adult Social Care Services
- North East London NHS Foundation Trust (Older Adult Mental Health Team)
- Redbridge Central Library (Celebratory Projects and Health & Wellbeing)
- Carpenters Café for adults living vulnerably
- Newham Dementia Support Group
- Redbridge Dementia Support Group

The project would also work with Community Link Workers who identify vulnerable and isolated older people, at times through GP referrals.

Proposed Outcomes

Forever Young set out to show that age should not be a barrier. The project aimed to provide opportunities for older people to be more active in their community, enhance the quality of their lives through learning new skills, interacting with other people and making new friendships. The proposed outcomes of this work, were as follows:

- Engendering a feeling of self-worth amongst older people by upskilling their oral storytelling skills and providing them volunteering opportunities, enabling younger generations to learn from them.
- Discouraging inactivity amongst older people and making them healthier, livelier, and happier through participation in regular, fun and inspirational creative activities that will enhance their mental wellbeing, manual dexterity skills, circulation and muscular strength.
- Providing older people, particularly those who might be experiencing anxiety and or symptoms of stress due to isolation and loneliness, opportunities to develop their confidence and form new friendships and cultivate the habit of spending more time outdoors through participation in sociable activities.
- Enabling participants to reconnect with their past in a fun way, through Museum of London Docklands' 'Memories of London' workshops.
- Enhancing the service delivery, and skills of approximately five members of partner organisations, in IROKO's methodology so that they can start to deliver creative activities to enhance the wellbeing of older people.



Music for Wellbeing Workshop

Evaluation

The evaluation makes use of a range of monitoring tools employed by IROKO throughout the duration of the project, including attendance registers and participant feedback (see [Appendix](#) for sample forms), as well as surveys completed by three workshop leaders and five representatives from project partners.

At this stage it should be noted that from March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic made the need for *Forever Young* even more acute, whilst forcing IROKO to change how activities were delivered in order to achieve the outcomes set out above.

The shift to online delivery in the second year of the project presents a challenge to the evaluation as it prevented IROKO from gathering participants' feedback from all attendees. To mitigate this, the survey completed by workshop leaders and project partners covers not only *their* experience of the project, but also that of participants with whom they had extensive first-hand contact.

2. Project Reach

This section of the report provides a top line indicator of *Forever Young's* achievements, simply overviewing the activities which took place and how many people participated in them.

Year One

Activities	Number of Activities	Number of Participants
Newham Workshops and Festive Sharing Day	8	47
Redbridge Workshops and Festive Sharing Day	8	37
Barking and Dagenham Workshops and Festive Sharing Day	8	53
TOTAL	24	137

Table 1: Year One Activities and Participants

In the first year of *Forever Young* alone, activities were attended by 137 participants, putting the project well on track for the proposed aim of reaching 150 older isolated people across two years.

Year Two

As with arts and culture organisations everywhere, all bar one of IROKO's *Forever Young* face-to-face bookings had to be cancelled, due to the COVID-19 pandemic (see [Activities](#)). The kind understanding and flexibility of The Mercers' Company to entirely lift restrictions on the agreed purpose of the grant, as a result of the pandemic, meant that IROKO was able to reallocate budget headings. This enabled the company to programme in more activities than originally proposed.

Note: Where Table 1 categorises activities by the boroughs in which they took place, digital delivery in the second year meant participants could join sessions from diverse locales. Table 2 therefore opts to differentiate the workshops by activities instead. Secondly, figures in the table below represent new participants who joined the project in the second year.

Activities	Number of Activities	Number of new participants
Music For Wellbeing Workshops	21	142
Mindfulness and Wellness Workshops	6	0*
Singing For Fun Workshops	6	23
UCL Doctorate in Clinical Psychology Online Conference	1	130
TOTAL	34	295

Table 2: Year Two Activities and Participants

*The 6 Mindfulness sessions were attended by people who *also* took part in a range of other activities – the zero indicates no new participants, so as to avoid double-counting.

Training

In terms of training and certification, IROKO's proposed targets were exceeded, as the table below shows. The proposal

Training	Proposed	Reached
Older People - volunteers	10	12
Young Volunteers, plus older people receiving NOCN/ ONE Award Certification	0	18
Partners' Representatives (7) and UEL Clinical Psychology Students (3)	5	10
TOTAL:	15	40

Table 3. Training reach

Furthermore, in addition to the 12 older people who volunteered on the project and received training, a further 15 young people from Dagenham Park School also volunteered (see [Training and Volunteering](#))

Overall

The *Forever Young* programme was originally conceived to entail 39 workshops and 6 Festive Sharing Days. At the end of the first year, IROKO were on target, having held 3 Sharing Days and 21 workshops. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, it was not

possible to programme the 3 remaining Sharing Days. Migrating the workshop programme online meant some content had to be altered, as mentioned inter alia (see [Activities](#)). It also meant they were able to hold more workshops than originally proposed, bringing the total to 53 across the project's lifespan: 14 sessions more than originally proposed.

In total, a staggering 302 participants benefited from *Forever Young* events, workshops and activities: predominantly isolated older people but also NELFT NHS Foundation Trust frontline workers. This more than doubled the proposed reach of 150 isolated older people. An additional 130 people were reached at the UCL Clinical Psychology Online Conference and 40 people benefited from training.

Demographic information

In the first year of *Forever Young*, activities were evenly spread across the three London boroughs which the project aimed to reach (Newham, Redbridge and Barking & Dagenham). Delivering the programme digitally in the second year meant participants were able to join sessions from diverse geographic locations. In response to partners needs (NELFT NHS Foundation mainly) and also the needs of service users, IROKO opted to extend services and sessions to frontline workers for whom the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic were causing detrimental effects on wellbeing.

Referrals through Community Neighbourhood Link Workers meant that the project was able to reach isolated and vulnerable individuals not usually able to access services which use the arts to improve wellbeing, as well as a significant proportion of participants living with mild to moderate dementia. Working with Dementia Support Workers from other London Boroughs like Tower Hamlets, Hammersmith and Fulham, enabled the project to reach isolated and vulnerable individuals in wider geographical areas.



'Music for Wellbeing' participants

3. Publicity and Awareness

The reach of *Forever Young* was enhanced by IROKO's consistent and comprehensive publicity campaign. The project also garnered significant attention and admiration, leading to organic word of mouth, which further increased the pool of partners and participants reached. To encourage this process, prior to the pandemic, IROKO used interactive demonstrations and found this to be a highly effective way to win participants over to the project.

IROKO used posters, leaflets, e-newsletters, Library Services, Adult Social Care Services, Health and Wellbeing organisations, Newham Community Forums and social media to spread the word. Project partners also promoted activities via email, leaflets, e-newsletters, direct phone calls to members, as well as events where they invited other organisations, expanding *Forever Young's* network. Additionally, traditional media mentions included features in Newham Recorder, Ilford Recorder, NELFT NHS e-newsletter and Annual Report 2020.

B&D OAMHT & Memory Service Launches 'Forever Young' Collaboration

Barking & Dagenham Older Adult Mental Health Team & Memory Service launched its second collaboration with IROKO Theatre Company and Dagenham Park School with an event at Barking Park on September 11th. The 'Forever Young' project will provide intergenerational encounters for mutual sharing and wellbeing, focused around rhythmic drumming, clay modelling, storytelling and reminiscence, including a guest 'Story of London' workshop by the Museum of London Docklands.



The programme launched with a shared lunch and an energetic African drumming and movement session, attended by AMD Dr Mohan Bhat and Guest of Honour, Councillor Peter Chand, Mayor of Barking & Dagenham. Lindsay Royan, Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Health and Wellbeing Ambassador, said "Clients are excited about welcoming IROKO and Dagenham Park School back for more collaborative workshops.

They got so much from the last series and have been encouraging other clients to join them. We are indebted to the Mercers' Company who have funded the project and were present at its launch.

Posted on 27 Sep 2019 at 11:35 AM

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North East London NHS Foundation e-newsletter, 27 Sep 2019.

NELFT NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Forever Young project
(Enhancing the health and wellbeing of older people through creative activities)

The recent lockdown and continued social distancing regulations are causing older people to suffer different levels of emotional, physical and psychological stress.

IROKO and the Older Adult Mental Health Team & Memory Service at NELFT NHS Foundation Trust are delighted to launch an innovative ONLINE series of health & wellbeing activities, aimed at older people to help alleviate the negative effects of these troubling times. The unforgettable and rejuvenating experiences will be filled with fun and excitement, and promise to leave participants feeling more relaxed.

FREE

Join ONLINE through Zoom

DAYS	DATES	TIME	ACTIVITIES
Wed.	22nd Jul. 2020	2pm - 2.30pm	Mindfulness and Wellness
Wed.	9th Sept. 2020	2pm - 2.30pm	Singing for Fun
Wed.	30th Sept. 2020	2pm - 2.30pm	Music for Wellbeing
Wed.	14th Oct. 2020	2pm - 2.30pm	Mindfulness and Wellness
Wed.	4th Nov. 2020	2pm - 2.30pm	Singing for Fun
Wed.	25th Nov. 2020	2pm - 2.30pm	Music for Wellbeing
Wed.	9th Dec. 2020	2pm - 2.30pm	Mindfulness and Wellness
Wed.	16th Dec. 2020	2pm - 2.30pm	Singing for Fun
Wed.	6th Jan. 2021	2pm - 2.30pm	Mindfulness and Wellness
Wed.	20th Jan. 2021	2pm - 2.30pm	Singing for Fun
Wed.	3rd Feb. 2021	2pm - 2.30pm	Music for Wellbeing

Enquiries, please call:
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www.irokothatre.org.uk

Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn

MEMBER OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF MUSIC THERAPISTS

Forever Young Publicity Poster

Some examples of the effectiveness of the informal and integrated publicity approach include:

- Participants from areas outside the targeted boroughs found out about the project through the recommendation of Newham Dementia Support Workers who had moved on to work with Tower Hamlets and Richmond Alzheimers UK.
- IROKO participated in the UCL Doctorate students in Clinical Psychology 'Intergenerational Psychology: In Neighbourhoods and Online' conference on Friday 26th March after the organisers heard about the project through NELFT.
- The Memory Service Team reported the project as a good example of partnership working, at an Age Alliance conference.
- A partnership with Newham Adult Social Care arose after the Community Neighbourhood Link Worker Team Leader saw and responded to one of IROKO's social media posts.
- IROKO ran a drumming workshop in Plashet Park and staff and patients at the nearby hospital heard the music and came to enquire about the project. As a result of this encounter, stroke victims and their occupational therapists (from East London NHS Foundation Trust, Stroke Recovery Team) joined the programme. According to the occupational therapists, their participation in the activities was useful in enhancing their brain and motor skills.
- Three students from UEL School of Psychology, Department of Programme Clinical and Community Psychology, used *Forever Young* as the focus of their research for their course work on Project Evaluation. Wafaa Ibrahim, one of the students' summary can be viewed [here](#).

4. Partnerships

IROKO built a strong network of partnerships with local and national organisations in order to realise *Forever Young's* ambitions.

- NELFT NHS Foundation Trust: Older Adult Mental Health Team & Memory Service
- NELFT NHS Foundation Trust (Mental Health Team)
- Trustwide Clinical Health and Specialist Psychological Services (Barking and Dagenham)
- Arthritis Self-help Network London (ASNET)
- Museum of London Docklands
- Redbridge Carers Support Service
- Redbridge Central Library
- ELFT (East London NHS Foundation Trust), Stroke Recovery Team
- Manor Park Library
- Manor Park Neighbourhood Team
- Carpenters Café for vulnerable older people
- Newham New Deal Partnership (Newham NDP)
- East London Cares
- Dagenham Park School

Strategic partnerships came to form a mainstay of the project's success in the following ways:

- Skill sharing between IROKO and the organisations they worked with was mutually beneficial for all parties.
- Through collaboration, *Forever Young* developed in fertile, sometimes unexpected ways, and in line with the needs of the community.
- Partnerships increased IROKO's capacity to widen participation in the project and reach new beneficiaries.
- The popularity of *Forever Young* and interest in IROKO's Health and Wellbeing work led to further opportunities to continue the project's legacy and generate income after the end of the project.



Launch event: Lindsay Rohan (Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Health and Wellbeing Ambassador), Alex Oma Pius (IROKO Artistic Director), Councillor Peter Chand (Barking and Dagenham Mayor), Councillor Dorothy Akwaboah (IROKO MC member), Jenny Copsey (Secretary, IROKO MC), David Terrace (Grants Programme Manager, The Mercers' Company)

The relationship forged with ASNET (Arthritis Support Network, Redbridge), who became involved with *Forever Young* through Redbridge Central Library, is a great example of how reciprocal learning was facilitated. Gaining experience of working with older people whose lives are affected by Arthritis, whilst under the tutelage of ASNET's extensive knowledge in this field, led to IROKO designing programmes which better accommodate participants with various needs.

Similarly, IROKO's work with the Older Adult Mental Health Team & Memory Service in Barking, enhanced their understanding of both physical and mental issues affecting older people. In turn, Assistant Psychologist Raizel Fernandes (Older Adult Mental Health Team & Memory Service) who assisted IROKO with both face to face and online mindfulness, clay modelling, drumming and light exercise activities reported feeling confident in trying the same with their clients. Indeed, four out of five partner survey respondents said that they or representatives from their organisation, gained knowledge or developed skills in IROKO's creative methodology.

More formal opportunities to share IROKO's creative arts methodology arose in the form of invites to speak at conferences organised by NELFT NHS Trust, Age Alliance and University College London, Research Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology. It should also be added that the Peer Webinars organised by Mercer Trust offered a further avenue to share expertise, learn from the experience of others and make connections with other organisations which may lead to future collaborations.

In addition to this kind of knowledge exchange, pooling ideas and utilizing the overlapping expertise and experience of IROKO's partners, took *Forever Young* in interesting new directions, beyond its initially proposed scope. For example, in the first year, the working relationship between the Older Adult Mental Health Team & Memory Service and Dagenham Park School and their Age Alliance programme, led to the suggestion that young people may benefit from volunteering on the project. Approximately 15 young people from the school did so, adding an intergenerational element to the programme (see [Training and Volunteers](#)).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic increased both isolation and emotional, physical and psychological stress for older people as well as broad sections of the populace. A new partnership with NELFT Wellbeing Project for Frontline Staff (which came about thanks to an existing working relationship with NELFT Older People's Unit) meant IROKO were able to extend the project's beneficiaries, offering online wellness sessions to NELFT NHS Foundation Trust workers under extreme strain.

In more general terms, IROKO's project partners' feedback consistently highlighted the organisation and quality of the services, as well as the energy and engagement with which they were delivered:

"Thank you so much for all the positivity, energy, fun and laughter. You helped bring joy into the homes of our neighbours!" Craig Mahoney, Programme Coordinator
(Social Clubs) East London Cares

"This is a well organised and worthwhile project provided by IROKO"
Rhonda Brooks, Celebratory Projects and Health & Wellbeing, Redbridge Library

“Their expertise in music and engaging staff was excellent”
Sue Merchant, NELFT Wellbeing Team

Four of five partner survey respondents said that they would like the project to continue, or to participate in similar projects in future. IROKO received many requests for further workshops, illustrating that the demand for this kind of work is high:

“Thanks for offering the extra session - this is a real bonus for our service!” Dr Mike Devine, Consultant in Old Age Psychiatry, NEFLT, on Wellness Session

“Thank you so much for delivering the sessions at NELFT, our last one scheduled was on 24 February 2021 and staff have really enjoyed them and are asking for more! Please could you provide more free sessions for us?”
Tanya Joseph Project Support Officer - Staff Health and Wellbeing Team

Off the back of interest in *Forever Young*, IROKO have in fact, subsequently made an arrangement to run further wellbeing activities with NELFT NHS Trust, Staff Health and Wellbeing Team. They are also in discussion with East London NHS Foundation Trust, regarding the potential to run workshops, using African theatre performance techniques as a culturally appropriate vehicle for enhancing the Cultural Competence of East London NHS Foundation, Mental Health staff.

To surmise, the positive reception of *Forever Young* among health and wellbeing professionals and IROKO's partner organisations, attests strongly to the underutilised importance of the creative arts in this field. That IROKO found common cause, working with dedicated partners to realise a shared vision, is fantastic testimony to the power of (and need for) integrating creativity into work with older people. By equipping practitioners with the skills necessary to deliver this approach themselves, *Forever Young* went some way to realising this vision.



Reminiscence Workshop run for IROKO by partner organisation, the Museum of London Docklands

5. Activities

Outputs overview

As detailed in the Reach section, IROKO held 53 workshops and 3 Sharing Days across the project's lifespan. Below you can find a breakdown of the activities and their various successes and challenges, followed by a discussion of the changes required to deliver the programme digitally during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Activity	About
<p>Oral Storytelling Skills Development workshops</p>	<p>IROKO had extensive previous experience teaching Oral Storytelling techniques and were delighted to find the form to be particularly rewarding when working with older people. It proved an excellent way to give participants the confidence to tell their stories and raise awareness of the challenges of various health conditions.</p>
<p>African group music making and gentle movement workshops (Year One)</p> <p>Music For Wellbeing Workshops (Year Two)</p>	<p>Musical workshops were <i>Forever Young's</i> most popular activities with participants and partners. The benefits in terms of wellbeing included fostering a feeling of communality and connection, as well as being really uplifting.</p> <p>IROKO adapted the original programme to meet demand which was so strong that some venues even waived hire fees in order to allow more workshops to take place. They also found participatory demonstrations to be an important tool for both engaging older participants and publicising the project.</p> <p>Gentle movement and chair exercises were beneficial for circulation and muscular strength and for those with mobility issues. Raizel Fernandes, Assistant Psychologies at NELFT also noted that patients and their carers benefited from improved sleep.</p> <p>In Year Two, as drumming was such a popular activity during the first year of the project, IROKO put their heads together to come up with a way workshops could be held remotely and without the instruments. Participants were able to use body rhythms and improvised percussion instruments e.g. pots, pans, table tops, etc. Commenting on this resourceful adaptation Craig Mahoney, Programme Manager at East London Cares said:</p> <p><i>"I learned that any household item can be used in fun and interactive ways to engage with people and create percussion music together. Iroko's professionalism and warm, open, jovial personalities made participants feel at</i></p>

	<i>ease and in the company of friends, which boosted their confidence and enjoyment levels.”</i>
African bare-hand clay modelling, arts and crafts workshops	<p>Clay modelling was beneficial for older people, as it improves both manual dexterity and cognitive stimulation. It also acted as an aid to memory:</p> <p><i>“Some of the patients reminisced about their past experiences making clay objects when growing up and some tried to model objects or things that meant something to them.”</i> Raizel Fernandes, Assistant Psychologist</p> <p>Another benefit of this activity was that, unlike drumming or oral storytelling, staff at partner organisations could pick up the skills and confidence to take sessions themselves very easily.</p>
Museum of London Docklands’ ‘Memories of London’ workshops	<p>Three sessions were held in the first year, with the final proposed three workshops reprogrammed as Mindfulness and Wellbeing and Singing for Fun workshops (see below.) Everything was effectively coordinated through Aisling Serrant, Community Engagement Manager (Museum of London Docklands).</p> <p>The Reminiscence storytelling sessions (‘A Plateful of Fun’), enabled participants to reconnect with their past through feeling, touching and smelling of food items and spices from yesteryears. The workshops were particularly helpful for people living with dementia as they helped to stimulate their memory, thinking and conversation.</p>
Festive Sharing Days/Weekenders: picnics, celebratory events, etc	<p>The Sharing Days made for enjoyable and sociable closes to the first year of programming in all three boroughs. Combining the activities with celebrations lent a feeling of ‘special occasion’: around Christmas in Redbridge and Barking & Dagenham and marking International Women’s Day in Newham.</p>
Mindfulness and Wellness Workshops	<p>In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its attending pressures, IROKO decided to enlist Varsha Shukla, a Mindfulness specialist from Wellbeing and Wisdom Works, to deliver these workshops instead of clay-modelling which could not be done remotely. Workshops were offered to both NELFT patients and frontline workers.</p> <p>The breathing and relaxation techniques helped to alleviate anxiety and low mood and provided participants with a method for calming down during distressing times which outlasted the sessions themselves. This proved</p>

	especially helpful for participants with memory decline or dementia.
Singing For Fun Workshops	<p>The singing workshops were beneficial for wellbeing in that they provide an outlet for creativity and expression, as well as being a social activity.</p> <p>These activities replaced the 'Memories of London' workshops and it is interesting to note that they functioned as a form of reminiscence. Participants often recalled their favourite melodies or songs - sometimes sharing them with the group - bringing back fond memories and thus bringing happiness in the present.</p>

Table 4. Activities breakdown

COVID- 19 Response Activities

Through careful consultation with partner organisations and thanks to The Mercers' Company's lift on budgetary restrictions which allowed IROKO to reallocate budget headings, *Forever Young* took on a new online life after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The process of adapting activities included Zoom sessions which served both to test out ideas for the facilitators' use of the technology and train participants in its usage. An expert was engaged in order to overcome the digital barrier by familiarising participants and their carers - as well as IROKO staff and volunteers - with the platform's functions. It was also necessary to alter the content of some workshops (see table above).



Mindfulness ad Wellness Workshop held over Zoom

Delivering activities online came with both advantages and disadvantages. First and foremost, it allowed for group activity, during an extremely difficult time, which reduced the feeling of isolation and elevated stress:

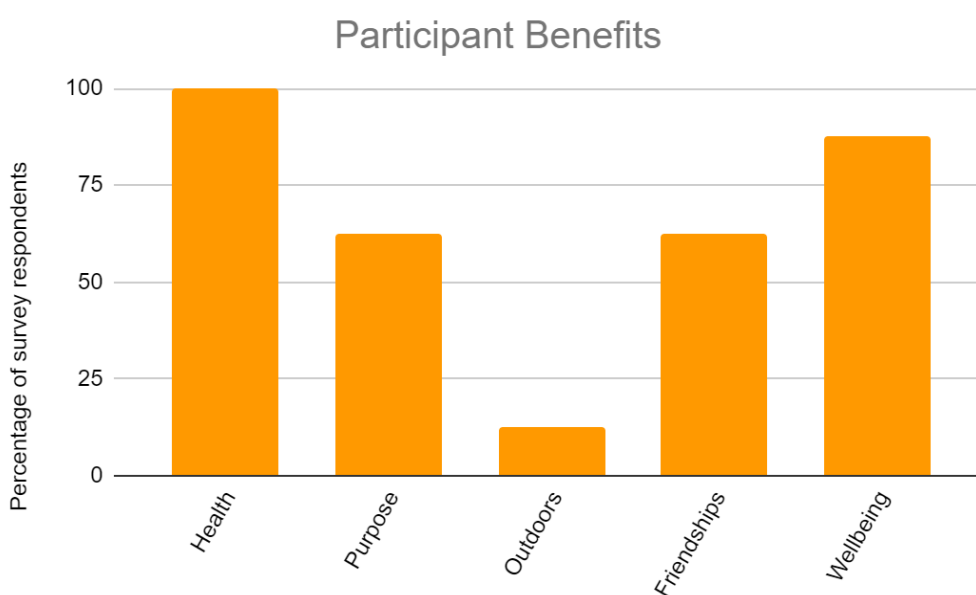
“Online sessions were like additional or sometimes the only fun activity to look forward to as the usual leisure time activities were starting to be boring for the clients due to the prolonged lockdown period.” Raizel Fernandes, Assistant Psychologist

The importance of reaching isolated older people in the safety of their homes during COVID-19, cannot be underestimated. Carers and health practitioners reported clients living with dementia became less confident during Covid-19 and were experiencing depression which made their memory problems worse. As Raizel’s comment draws attention to, *Forever Young* was in some cases the only thing to look forward to and brighten people’s day, improving mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. Another advantage, as already mentioned, include that IROKO were able to reallocate budget which would have been spent on venue hire and other costs, to programme in more workshops than initially planned for. This was possible due to Mercer’s Company’s considered and flexible approach to the pandemic, whereby revenue grant holders were free to use their grant funding for anything supporting their charitable objects.

This said, despite IROKO’s flexibility and creative content adaptation, digital delivery did pose inevitable difficulties. Most of these issues stemmed from the nature of the platform itself. For example, the levels of interaction were lowered and physical or cognitive stimulation was harder to sustain. Access to technology and the internet also regrettably prevented some participants from joining online sessions. Whilst working digitally was a steep learning curve and IROKO rose to the challenge, the sociability of face-to-face community work is ultimately invaluable for participant’s wellbeing.

Outcomes for Participants

IROKO originally proposed to monitor whether a difference had been made, by measuring the percentage of participants who reported experiencing a range of benefits. Collecting exhaustive participant feedback posed several challenges. Firstly, due to the conditions of the participants, their carers often had to feedback on their behalf. Online delivery during COVID-19 also made gathering feedback from everyone difficult. IROKO circumvented this issue by requesting oral feedback over Zoom. In the interest of ascertaining whether the aims in terms of beneficial experiences were met, the following graph uses surveys completed by 5 partner organisations and 3 workshop facilitators, all of whom had close contact with participants, as this represents the most complete data set.



Graph 1. Participant Benefits

Chart Categories	Breakdown
Health	Feeling healthier, livelier and happier
Purpose	Feeling an enhanced sense of purpose and self-worth
Outdoors	Increased desire to spend time outdoors
Friendship	Formed new friendships
Wellbeing	Enhanced emotional wellbeing - increased confidence and a positive sense of belonging

Table 5. Benefits breakdown

IROKO's proposal aimed for 75% of participants to feel an enhanced sense of purpose and self-worth and 60% to experience the four other benefits elaborated on above. As the chart shows, according to the data, these aims were met or exceeded across all categories, with the exception of increased desire to spend time outdoors. As a response to government regulation on social distancing, spending time outdoors was taken off the priority list.

Individual feedback from participants and their carers (a selection of which can be found below) consistently drew out how engaging and energising the sessions were, with many spotlighting how fun and enjoyable they found the activities. Comments regarding sociability and connectivity were also prevalent.

"As mum's Carer, I noticed that she 'comes to life' when engaging in these workshops. She is enthusiastic & talks about it and takes part & talks about it long after the events. This makes me happy that she is stimulated and her creativity is expressed, where she would not be bothered with such things at home. We both appreciate the skill of the workshop leaders who make it fun and interesting. Thank you"

"I feel we are so lucky to be offered this sort of therapy. Again, music is so good to lift people's moods and the drumming sessions certainly do this".

"Mum found the sessions enjoyable especially the relaxing exercises... she enjoyed being part of the group. When she was doing the relaxation her tremors in her hand would calm down [Parkinson's]".

"A real mood lifter. It's easier to move along to the beat and easy to follow. Explained well and physio involved."

"We are very grateful to have them and especially in these very terrible and frightening times we are going through we feel they have been a lifeline for lots of people."

"Very impressed with the methods used. This project is very useful for helping people overcoming their inhibitions and performing in front of an audience."

“The workshop was very enjoyable and enthusiastic. We were encouraged to be involved, creative and animated. Would recommend it highly and very knowledgeable.”

“Very interesting. Learnt to play a little bit of the drum. Feel more energised. Enjoyed myself immensely. Would like to do this again. Thank you!”



A thank you [tweet](#) from East London Cares

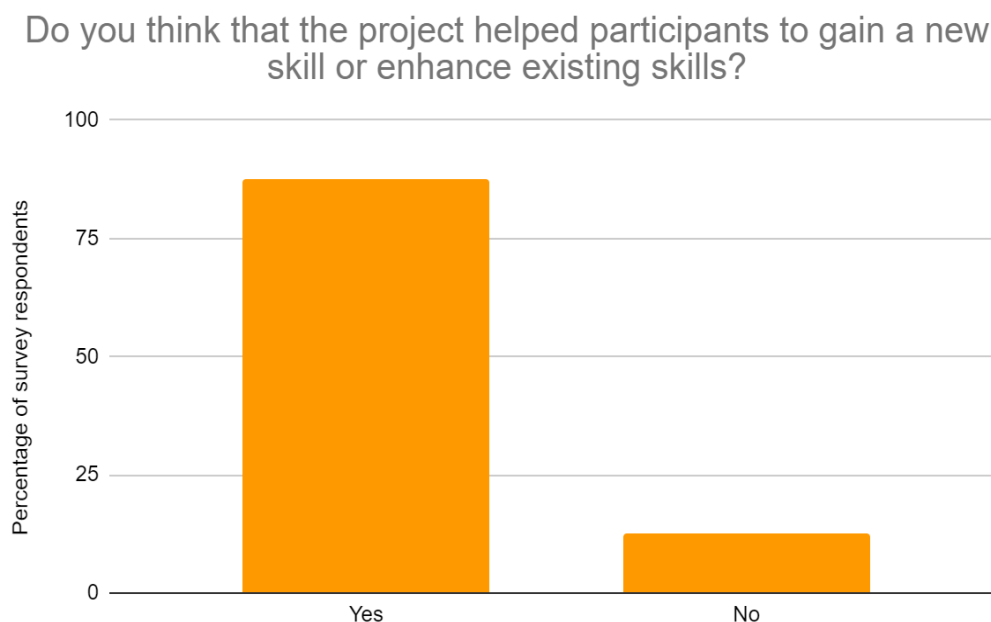
Another striking component of much of the feedback gathered are the moving expressions of thanks and gratitude, pointing to the poignancy and pertinence of *Forever Young's* achievements. One participant, who sadly passed away during the lifespan of the project, valued the workshops so highly that he kindly made a memorial cash donation to IROKO in his will. IROKO has proposed using a portion of this kind donation to programme four additional workshops for NELFT patients and staff, for free, continuing the legacy of *Forever Young*.



Clay modelling workshop participant

Skills

As well as improving wellbeing, *Forever Young* aimed to impart and enhance skills, with the proposal again aiming for 60% of participants as the benchmark of success.



Graph 2. Participants' Skills

According to the available data, this was far exceeded, with 87.5% of the partner organisation representatives and workshop leaders who were asked, believing that participants had gained a new skill or enhanced an existing one. This is backed up by individual feedback from participants:

"The workshop was very educative and insightful"
Oral Storytelling workshop participant

"I had not known much about this subject before but would now like to attend more of these sessions and find out more about it" Mindfulness workshop participant

"It was an amazing opportunity to improve communication skills" Volunteer from Dagenham School

6. Training and Volunteers

Volunteers

Over the course of the project, 12 older people took part in training workshops, introducing them to oral storytelling techniques. One participant said of the training:

“Excellent workshop. Alex and Ruki really gave me (and the other participants) an insight into the African traditional storytelling”

General opportunities to get involved with *Forever Young* through volunteering also proved both educative and enjoyable, giving insight into running community health and wellbeing events. As Rhonda Brooks, Celebratory Projects and Health & Wellbeing, Redbridge Library puts it:

“There were some local volunteers who benefitted from taking part in the events. Following the events from set-up to delivery to evaluation they gained many skills and also knowledge of the skills that IROKO was teaching including drumming skills.”

As previously touched upon, approximately 15 Year 13 school pupils volunteered on the project, through the collaborative working partnership between NELFT Volunteering Team and Dagenham Park School. With chances for intergenerational connection so rarely afforded or given due precedence in today’s society, this element of the project was exceedingly rewarding for all involved. The young people took part in sessions where they wore special body suits and eye glasses which replicate some of the health conditions which can affect older people. Volunteers reported that it was:

“An amazing opportunity for young people”

“A wonderful opportunity to work and support the elderly. I would definitely recommend this volunteering for anyone.”

“It helped me improve my knowledge of issues effecting the elderly”

Judging by the following feedback from a workshop participant, the involvement of young people brought great value to the project:

“The young people they have with them always include everyone and make sure that we are all having a good time.”

In addition, the collaborative partnership with East London Cares, who connect older neighbours with young volunteers in the community, was instructive for the intergenerational element of *Forever Young*.



Young volunteer and project participant displaying clay modelling efforts

IROKO's proposal stated that 10 people would receive certification through NOCN. Some of the older people volunteering on the project did not want certificates, so this offering was extended to the pupils from Dagenham Park School also. A total of 18 people gained certification in IROKO's '*Communications and Expressive Skills Development programme*'. It should be noted that ONE Award (part of the National Open College Network (NOCN)), took over the certification programme from NOCN.

For all the disruption and uncertainty brought on by the onset of COVID-19, it revealed just how dedicated those volunteering on *Forever Young* were. During lockdown, volunteers went out of their way to call other group members, in order to remind them about upcoming online workshops. This suggests that the spirit of connection and community was alive and well for those involved in *Forever Young* and that the project succeeded in its aim to reduce loneliness and isolation at a time when circumstances made these issues especially prescient.

Workshop Leaders

In addition to the skill development and knowledge exchange with IROKO's partners which has been discussed, *Forever Young* provided learning opportunities for workshop facilitators who created activities designed specifically for older people that they can carry into their future work:

"It was an opportunity to devise and create an interactive and informal workshop specifically designed for the elderly, using Food as a theme. I used resources and images from the Museum of Docklands and the Museum of Brands."

Ruth Briant, Plateful of Fun Facilitator, on Behalf of Museum of London Docklands

“The project has helped me to understand the needs of some patients with Dementia in a creative learning setting.” Juwon Ogungbe, Singing for Fun Facilitator

The four workshop leaders who completed feedback surveys commented positively on the experience of contributing to the project and working alongside IROKO, with Ruth Briant summarising the general feeling among staff and participants as *“uplifting, enjoyable, optimistic.”* Gabi Solano, who ran movement sessions, said:

“The Forever Young Project has been a highlight for myself (as a workshop leader) and for the elderly participants because music and dance clearly brings joy to everyone. During the sessions, the participants learned a series of simple percussion rhythms which has beneficial effects for their memories. They were also encouraged to sing out loud and, to our surprise, some even stood up and danced to the beat. Besides being a very good physical exercise, this brought out a joyous energy in all of them; they couldn’t stop smiling. The benefits for me as a workshop leader were an enormous sense of achievement and happiness at the end of each session.”

Equally, IROKO staff gained skills, attending various training programmes held by Flourishing Lives or Age UK London under their Age Allies Programme.



Community bonding at IROKO Festive Sharing Day in Redbridge.

7. Conclusion

302 workshop and event participants

130 attendees to the UCL Conference

14 partner organisations

12 older volunteers

15 young volunteers

18 ONE Award certificates

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Forever Young* exceeded its proposed reach by every measure. An integrated and organic approach to raising awareness and the dedication and shared values of partnerships were integral to this success. However, the real achievement of *Forever Young* rests in the minds, bodies and hearts of participants and cannot be counted or quantified so easily. It is clear that the project brought immeasurable benefits for those who participated, both in terms of improved physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and, perhaps most importantly, in fostering a sense of togetherness and shared joy in exceptionally trying times. As UEL Clinical and Community Psychology student Chiara Chong wrote in her Innovative Summary, assessing *Forever Young*'s Evaluation methodology:

“Despite the project being aimed at elderly people and being based around the African culture, it brought many people of different cultures and ages together and was appreciated by all involved.”

An anecdote imparted by IROKO's Artistic Director, Alex Oma-Pius, is a salient testament to *Forever Young*'s impact and influence. One participant of the music workshops in Dagenham - a predominantly white, working class area - by the name of Brian, surprised facilitators and fellow participants alike when he showed up on Zoom on the last day of workshops, with an African drum he had purchased! He had found the sessions so beneficial that he wanted to continue playing.

It is fair to say IROKO were pleasantly surprised by the interest, support and demand that *Forever Young* has garnered. The project illuminated the pressing need for creative arts to be utilised in the service of improving the health and wellbeing of vulnerable and isolated older people – a need which has only heightened in the long shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building on decades of honing their methodology and with the experience of *Forever Young* under their belt, IROKO intend to do everything they can to continue the project's legacy. They are currently in the process of compiling case studies and feedback and are conducting surveys and focus groups to evidence the essential nature of this work, with the aspiration of gaining future funding, enabling them to continue what *Forever Young* started. The project also afforded a steep learning curve in digital delivery.

This said, IROKO learned that nothing can replace face-to-face interaction and look forward to resuming sessions 'in real life' when it is safe to do so.

8. Forever Young Photobook



Click [here](#) to view pdf images of the project on Blurb

9. Appendix

Below you can find several examples of the feedback forms used to collect feedback.

IROKO
Theatre Company



Forever Young Project 2019 - 2020 Feedback Form

IROKO Theatre Company needs your help in evaluating its work and for reporting to our funders. In order to assist us we would be grateful if you could fill in this form.

Venue: Redbridge Library

Date: 2/11/19

1) Has the workshop provided you with the opportunity to interact more with other people?

Yes No

2) Do you feel livelier and happier by participating in the activities?

Yes No

3) Given the opportunity, would you be happy to take part in a similar activities again?

Yes No

Definitely

Any other comments that you may have:

Well Done Interactive - I've learnt new
drumming techniques - we covered a lot over just
2 hours and were treated with fruit & soft drink
warm up & warm down exercises and
gentle physical activity was just right

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire

Well done & thanks you to Iko ko

**Forever Young Project 2019 - 2020
Feedback Form
(VOLUNTEERS)**

IROKO Theatre Company needs your help in evaluating its work and for reporting to our funders. In order to assist us we would be grateful if you could fill in this form.

Venue: Broad Street Centre
Date: 13/11/19

- 1) Has the workshop provided you with the opportunity to interact more with the elderly?
Yes No
- 2) Have you learnt any new things about the issues affecting the elderly?
- 3) On a scale of 1 – 10 (1 being the lowest), how confident were you before the workshop to interact with the elderly?
9
- 4) On a scale of 1 – 10 (1 being the lowest), how confident are you now to interact with the elderly?
9

Please use this section to provide any other comments that you may have:

It's really refreshing to talk with people different from yourself, conversations that you would not find talking with other people appear, giving a very new experience.

OPTIONAL: If you would like IROKO to contact you regarding future activities, please provide us with your contact details below. IROKO will not release your details to any third party.

Email: _____













Telephone No: _____

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire

This is an example of the Museum of London's feedback forms, used for the 'Plateful of Fun' workshops.

A plateful of fun workshop evaluation

To what extent do you agree with the below? Please circle.

I enjoyed the session.				
I learnt something new.				
I felt fully involved and included in the session.				

Overall how would you rate the session?

			
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Any other comments?

Was there anything you particularly enjoyed or anything we could improve?