

“My world would be dark without them” Researching The Ark Trust’s Social Activities for People with Learning Disabilities and Autism

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Background

- Research has found that people with learning disabilities experience significantly higher rates of loneliness, low perceived social support and social isolation than people without disabilities, despite government policy recognising the importance of addressing this (Emerson et al, 2021)
- One way to increase social inclusion and access is to provide a relatively low-level support to help people access activities (Tilly, 2019).
- The Ark Trust is an award-winning charity based in Berkshire, which provides a wide range of services, including social activities for people with learning disabilities and/or autism. These activities include the Friday Night Project weekly disco, the Night Owls social group supporting people to ‘Stay Up Late’ to access social activities, Out and About monthly social outings, and Project 73 and Project 73 Plus social activities specifically for adults with autism. The Ark’s social activities have received informal positive feedback but to date there has been no formal evaluation.
- The current project to evaluate these social activities was funded by Royal Holloway University as part of its role as a Civic University.



Research question:

What are the benefits of and barriers to accessing social activities for individuals with a learning disability and/or autism?

Method

- Mixed methods design, online and paper easy read survey design, together with in-depth qualitative research interviews.
- Three participant groups: service users, family/carers & volunteers/employees.
- This research was approved by Royal Holloway University of London College Ethics Committee.

Survey:

- A total of 88 survey responses were collected, including responses from: 56 people who access The Ark, 38 of whom reported attending one of the specific social activities for people with learning disabilities and/or autism under evaluation in this project; 18 people who support someone who access The Ark; 15 people who volunteer or work for The Ark; 4 people who had heard about The Ark but not accessed their services. Some individuals gave multiple responses to reflect several ways they engage with The Ark social activities e.g. both user & volunteer.
- Demographics of those who responded to the survey who attend The Ark social activities (n=38): mean age = 34 years old; gender = 53% men; ethnicity = 76% White British/White other; living arrangements = 55% living with family, 18% in supported living, 13% living alone.

Interviews:

- 11 semi-structured interviews have been conducted in person or online. Six with individuals who access The Ark and identified as having a learning disability and/or autism, four with individuals who support someone to access The Ark and one with a volunteer at The Ark.
- Reflective Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to analyse the qualitative data.

Research Easy to Read Summary

Why did we do this research?

- People with disabilities are lonelier than other people. Supporting people to go to social activities can help them feel less lonely.
- The Ark is a charity that helps people with learning disabilities and/or autism to go to social activities, like the weekly Friday Night Project disco, monthly Out and About daytime social outings, and Night Owls evening and late-night social group which goes to places like pubs, concerts, night clubs or the cinema.
- This research aimed to find out what people think about The Ark’s social activities.

What did we do?

- We asked people who go to The Ark social activities, carers, volunteers and staff to give their feedback on The Ark.
- 88 people gave their feedback on a survey and 11 people took part in an interview.

What did we find out?

- Most of the feedback was very positive and everyone who went to the Ark said they ‘loved’ or ‘liked’ going to the social activities.
- There were **6** main themes from what people said:
 - 4** themes spoke about how people valued The Ark’s social activities and opportunities to meet people and spend time with friends. People said it made them feel good and feel included.
 - 2** themes highlighted barriers, or what stopped people getting to the social activities, like transport, cost and support.

What does the research tell us?

- The study told us how important The Ark is to people.
- It also told us some of the barriers people face. This feedback can help make the activities even better and spread awareness of what The Ark can offer to people with learning disabilities and/or autism.
- We made 2 videos to help people learn more about The Ark.

Results

Qualitative Survey & Semi-Structured Interviews Findings:

5 themes emerged from the survey and 6 main themes emerged from the interviews. The table highlights the overlap between themes.

Qualitative Findings	
Themes from the Survey Findings	Themes from the Interviews
1. Opportunities provided by The Ark social activities	1. Valuing The Ark’s social activities
2. Social Interactions: Seeing friends and meeting new people	2. “He goes there for the people”: Creating Social Opportunities
3. “My world would be dark without them”: Impact for wellbeing, feeling valued and developing skills	3. Social inclusion, well-being and personal growth
4. Going “above and beyond”: Valuing The Ark’s Ethos	4. “We all like one big family”: Valuing the Community The Ark Creates
5. Barriers to Accessing and Attending The Ark social activities	5. Practical barriers to accessing The Ark
	6. Challenges to Social Inclusion, Accessibility and Communication

“Happy. Excited... I enjoyed it all!” (Ark user)

“Help me connect with people I knew from years ago that I lost contact with.” (Ark user)

“Help my self-confidence.” (Ark user)

“Boost my independence going to places... on my own...” (Ark user)

“They are fun, accepting of all disabilities, and you always come out with a smile on your face.” (Ark user)

“It's been brilliant for our son. Night Owls offers the opportunity to access mainstream activities/venues that would be too difficult otherwise.” (Carer)

“I wish more people know about [The Ark], because not many people know about us still.” (Ark user)

“If if they can offer the taxi services or bus services, something that would help, I think.” (Ark user)

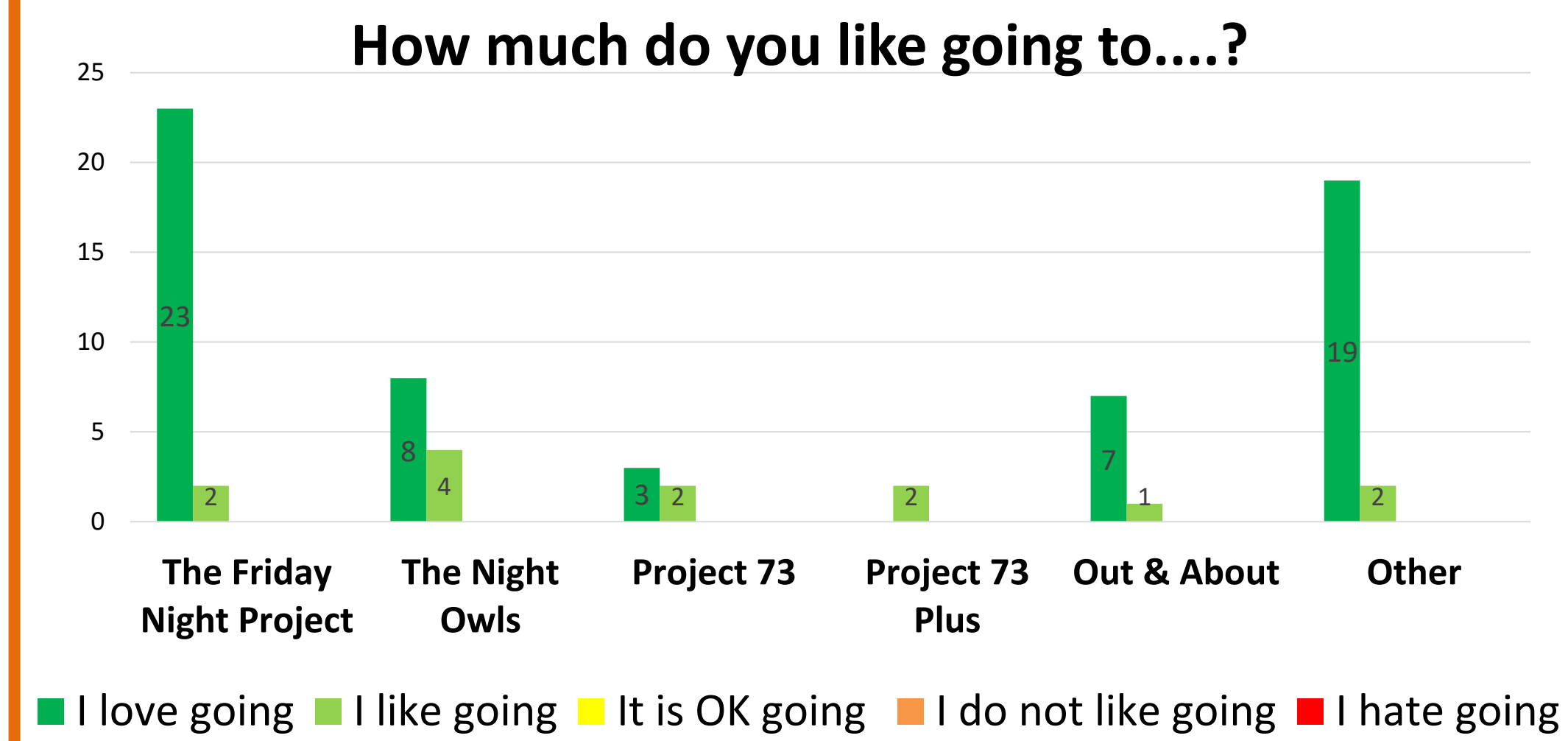
“If my support worker is ill unable to go” (Ark user)

“It is not always about the activities, but the friendships made with the group.” (Ark user and volunteer/employee)

“We get to be ourselves and have a lot of support to help motivate us to get out and see people. We feel safe.” (Ark user)

“I just want to say they do a great job. I think the Ark are a fantastic charity and it needs to continue.” (Carer/Volunteer)

“I find sometimes it's hard to kind of... get to be with them 'cause it could be like for me a language barrier or I don't know their way of communication.” (Ark user)



Quantitative Survey Findings:

- All those who said they access The Ark social activities reported that they ‘love’ or ‘like’ going.
- No respondents (service users/carers/volunteers) reported disliking attending.
- When asked if there are any barriers to accessing activities 21% (n=8) of Ark users, 39% (n=7) of carers and 40% (n=4) of volunteers/employees said ‘Yes’ or ‘Maybe’.
- Barriers reported were cost of activity (n=3), cost to travel (n=3), location (n=3), type of activity (n=3), accessibility (n=1), support for traveling (n=2), or other barriers (n=1).

Key Findings:

- What was most important:
- Having opportunities for range of activities.
 - Having social opportunities provided through the activities.
 - Positive impact on wellbeing.
 - Feeling valued.
 - Having opportunities for self-development and building skills.
 - Increasing self-confidence.
 - A safe, inclusive environment.
 - Creating a sense of community for members.

Recommendations:

- Overall, the feedback was very positive, but some recommendations were suggested:
- Increasing ways information is shared about the activities themselves.
 - Having a clearer breakdown of additional costs in advance.
 - Supporting with transport to activities.
 - Increasing range of times and frequency of activities.
 - Increasing range of social activities provided (e.g., new activities, smaller groups, increased input from Ark users about choice of activity & increase opportunities for dating and socialising).
 - Ensuring range of activities that are inclusive for all.
 - Increasing support for people attending activities.

Strengths & Limitations of the research

Strengths

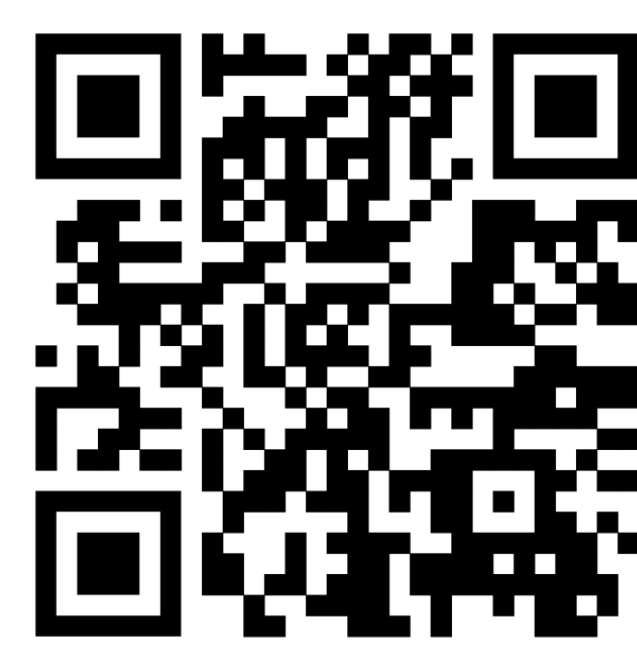
- Experts by experience involved in developing interview schedule, easy-read research materials, making sense of and sharing the findings.
- High survey response rate.
- Mixed methodology.

Limitations

- Generalisability of findings to other services providing social activities.
- Difficult to distinguish feedback about specific activities.
- May not represent feedback from people with more significant learning disabilities or communication difficulties.
- Not capturing experiences of those who do not access activities at all.
- Co-production in the research could have been enhanced further.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to **The Ark Trust** for their ongoing support with this project and to all the individuals who have shared their experiences with us.
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We made 2 short videos to show the experiences of those using The Ark’s social activities. Scan the QR code to view:

Sharing our research:

- We have shared the findings with The Ark Trustees and Chief Executive, staff and volunteers, local services and through conferences.
- We plan to share more by writing and publishing an article together.
- Full report, easy read report and videos are available at: <https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/en/projects/my-world-would-be-dark-without-them-evaluating-the-ark-trusts-soc>
- You can contact: kate.theodore@rhul.ac.uk