

Cambridge Centre
for Housing &
Planning Research

Evaluating the Public Health Outcomes of Cambridgeshire Time Credits

Working paper 7

The impact of timebanking on individuals,
communities and wider society: case study
of Littleport and Ely Timebank

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Evaluation

The Public Health Practice Evaluation Scheme (PHPES) enables people who are introducing innovative public health initiatives to work in partnership with the National Institute for Health Research School for Public Health Research (NIHR SPHR) to conduct rigorous evaluations of their effectiveness. This scheme is particularly focused on local initiatives.

The aim of the evaluation of the public health outcomes of the Cambridgeshire Time Credits project in Wisbech is to determine its potential to tackle social exclusion, loneliness and deprivation and to assess the extent to which it can reduce health inequalities. The Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) is carrying out this research in collaboration with the Cambridgeshire County Council Community Engagement Team, Spice, and the Cambridge Institute of Public Health (CIPH).

The research uses a mixed methods approach that engages service users, practitioners and policy makers through interviews, surveys, focus groups and ethnographic research methods. One of the key research objectives is to analyse how this type of project can best secure positive health outcomes and how it could be sustainably established in other localities, should these benefits be demonstrated.

The main outputs will consist of an interim and final report with research findings detailing project outcomes for individuals, organisations and the wider community, disseminated in a range of accessible formats, e.g. a film, and a user guide aimed at local authorities, those commissioning and delivering health and social care services and those involved in establishing Time Credit projects.

For more information about the evaluation please contact Dr Gemma Burgess on glb36@cam.ac.uk or 01223 764547.

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1 Introduction

This report is part of a series of working papers, each of which focuses on a separate aspect of the research¹. The first working paper provided an overview of timebanking and Time Credits, how they work, the benefits associated with timebanking and Time Credits, and their key characteristics and core values. The second and third working papers examined the concept of co-production, in relation to research and service provision. The fourth working paper put forward a conceptual model, outlining how different activities associated with earning and spending Time Credits could generate public health outcomes and reduce health inequalities. The fifth working paper provided an introduction to Wisbech and outlined the context in which the Time Credits programme operates. The sixth working paper provided an introduction to ethnographic methods. This seventh working paper aims to explore the impact of involvement in a timebank in depth, using one local timebank as a case study. It also aims to explore the relationship between Time Credits and more traditional timebanking, through looking at the use of Time Credits within a timebank.

1.1 Timebanking

A timebank is a time-based community currency where participants trade skills, resources and expertise with individuals in their local area:

“for every hour participants ‘deposit’ in a timebank by giving practical help and support to others, they are able to ‘withdraw’ equivalent support in time when they themselves need something doing”. (Timebanking UK, 2011, p.8).

The exact origins of the timebanking concept are unclear, but the concept itself is known to date back to the 19th century (Boyle and Bird, 2014). Some variants of this approach are known to have been operating in Japan in the immediate post-war era (Bretherton and Pleace, 2014). The Member Organized Resource Exchange (MORE) programme at the Grace Hill Settlement in St. Louis is believed to be the first modern timebanking project in the U.S. From this project, the American Civil Rights Lawyer and activist Edgar Cahn developed his Time Dollars model in the 1980s. Cahn saw timebanks as a vehicle for including members of society that are excluded from the market economy, suggesting that the market economy depends on unpaid work that is done in the non-market economy, including raising children, caring for the elderly and building communities, but that this work is currently undervalued (Cahn, 2000). Cahn suggests that timebanking can bridge the gap between the market and non-market economies, by treating all people as assets, and recognising that even those typically excluded from the traditional job market can make a valuable contribution. Timebanking allows people to quantify and exchange activities that have previously not been formally tracked, using ‘time dollars’ or ‘time credits’ (Cahn, 2000). Cahn argues that the system enables people’s contribution to be “acknowledged, recorded, and externally validated” (Cahn, 2000, p.34), and therefore all participants feel needed and valued.

¹ <http://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/Projects/Start-Year/2015/Evaluating-Public-Health-Outcomes-Cambridgeshire-Time-Credits-Project>

Reciprocity is a key aspect of timebanking which separates it from traditional volunteering. Cahn suggests that, under the timebanking framework, it is easier for people to ask for help from others, because everyone has something to offer, and therefore they can repay the help they receive:

“individuals want to be able to secure help without acquiescing in a framework of dependence.” (Cahn, 2000, p.34)

In the first working paper of this project, Markkanen and Burgess (2015, p.8) summarise the core values of timebanking as:

- inclusion
- the recognition of people as assets
- redefinition of work to include unpaid work in the community
- equal valuation of everyone’s skills
- development of reciprocal social relationships instead of dependency
- social capital: development of supportive social networks.

Timebanks were introduced into the UK by the New Economics Foundation in 1997. The first UK timebank was set up in Gloucestershire in 1998 and Timebanking UK estimate that there are now around 300 active timebanks in the UK.

There are now eight timebanks in Cambridgeshire. A pilot timebank was set up in Somersham in 2011 by Somersham Parish Council with support from Cambridgeshire County Council, and following the success of this pilot further timebanks were set up in other locations.

1.2 Littleport and Ely Timebank

Littleport Timebank was set up in 2012. It was established by CHS Group, who chose Littleport as a location after carrying out a needs analysis of locations in Cambridgeshire. At the end of 2016 the timebank officially expanded to include Ely, and the name was changed to Littleport and Ely Timebank². The timebank currently has 140 members.

Littleport and Ely Timebank is connected to other timebanks in the county through a partnership group supported by Cambridgeshire County Council. The County Council provide in-kind support to the timebanks, and some financial support. CHS Group support the role of a part-time coordinator through funding from a variety of sources including grants from LEP, the Local Government Association and self-generated funds. The coordinator recruits new timebank members through poster campaigns, social media and information stalls at community events, which are manned by existing timebank members. The coordinator also facilitates and records exchanges, organises community trips and fundraising events, and represents the timebank among other community groups and organisations.

² A significant proportion of the members of Littleport Timebank already came from Ely prior to this change

1.3 Introduction to Littleport and Ely

Littleport is a large village in East Cambridgeshire, with an estimated population of 9,040 (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2014). Littleport is currently experiencing a significant amount of development, with an estimated 1,700 new dwellings being built between 2011 and 2032, in addition to a new secondary school and two new primary schools (East Cambridgeshire District Council, 2011). Littleport scores highly in measures of deprivation. Two of the five LSOAs (Lower-layer Super Output Areas) in Littleport were ranked in the top 15 percent of LSOAs in Cambridgeshire by levels of deprivation, and two others were ranked in the top 30 percent (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2015). It is for this reason that it was chosen as a location for a timebank by CHS Group in 2012.

Ely is a small city in East Cambridgeshire, located about 6 miles from Littleport. It has an estimated population of 20,600 (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2014.) Overall Ely ranks lower than Littleport in terms of deprivation: half of the 12 LSOAs in Ely ranked in the bottom 50 percent of LSOAs. However, there are pockets of higher deprivation in Ely, with a third of the twelve LSOAs ranked in the top 30 percent (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2015).

Overall, East Cambridgeshire is a rural area dominated by the agricultural, manufacturing, processing and construction industries. The district has more than twice the national proportion of businesses in agriculture, forestry and fishing and these industries employ a high proportion of migrant labour. The overall employment rate in the district is high, but average employee earnings are low (Cambridgeshire Insight, 2013)

1.4 Time Credits

Time Credits is an example of an adaptation of the timebanking model that enables organisations and existing service providers to play a greater role. Set up in 2009 by a social enterprise called Spice, the model uses Time Credits as a way of recognising people for volunteering in a similar way to timebanking, but the individual participants give their time to a local organisation, community group, volunteer group or a statutory sector service provider. In exchange for their contribution, they 'earn' printed Time Credit notes, one for every hour they give, which they can then 'spend' on a range of leisure and other opportunities, typically donated by organisations, local businesses and corporations to allow the community members to take advantage of their spare capacity (Weaver et al, 2015). Spice now operate in seven regions across England and Wales.

The Cambridgeshire Time Credits programme was set up in collaboration with Spice in July 2014, following a successful completion of a nine-month pilot in Wisbech. It is jointly funded by Cambridgeshire County Council and CHS Group. The idea to support the development of multiple Time Credits networks across the county emerged in part as a response to the budget cuts that forced the County Council to identify new tangible ways to engage local communities, to build up community resilience, and to reduce and prevent the escalation of need. The purpose of the Time Credits programme was to help bring the timebanking model to new areas in a way that would enable organisations alongside individuals to act as the driving force to generate momentum for the movement, and that would enable larger numbers of people to get involved. Positive feedback from the pilot partners encouraged the

Community Engagement team to seek further funding to commission Spice to expand the Time Credits programme to include other parts of Cambridgeshire, with an ultimate objective of developing a county-wide network of local Time Credit projects. In 2014, the Cambridgeshire Time Credit programme was allocated a total budget of £251,000 over three years, of which £30,000 comes from CHS Group and the rest from the County Council. The project works towards the following priorities: strengthening families, skills and employment and older people.

Cambridgeshire timebanks have linked up with Time Credits. Timebanks are now 'earn partners', meaning that timebank members can exchange hours they have earned through volunteering for Time Credit notes. Timebank members are allowed to exchange up to 10 hours per month, which they can then spend at various spend partners in the Spice Time Credits network including cinemas, theatres and sports centres.

2 Existing evaluations of timebanking

Timebanking UK refer to the benefits that individuals gain from being more connected to the people that live locally to them, through participating in timebanking:

“Timebanking builds social networks of people who give and receive support from each other... generating social capital in this way can be an important determinant of health, wellbeing and resilience, all of which can prevent needs arising.”
(Timebanking UK, no date)

Research and evaluation focused on timebanking remains fairly limited but studies have found benefits of participating:

2.1 Social capital

Burgess (2014) surveyed 166 members of Cambridgeshire timebanks and conducted follow-up interviews with a sample of these. She found evidence that timebanking increased members' local networks, enabling them to feel part of their local community and reducing social isolation. Simon (2003) explains how timebanks “offer people a safe framework for involvement and act as a letter of introduction to a network of local people they can trust” (Simon, 2003, p.9). Ozanne (2010) conducted a qualitative study of the members of the first timebank in New Zealand, using focus groups. She explicitly linked participating to an increase in social capital, highlighting that participation:

- increased individual's sense of being part of the community, particularly for people who were new to the area or lived alone.
- made people more willing to get involved in local activities.
- made people feel safer in their communities.

2.2 Employability

Boyle (2014) suggests that timebanks can have impacts on employability by preparing members for the job market, suggesting that timebanks are most beneficial at an early stage in the process of becoming work-ready, for example supporting people with depression or other chronic problems to become less isolated. A doctor at a London health centre that developed a timebank explained:

“It is often very difficult to... start filling in forms, applying for jobs and integrating back into a working environment. Some specific barriers to achieving this are low self-esteem, social isolation and lack of experience. These barriers often seem so great that people can't even take the first step.” (Boyle and Bird, 2014).

Bretherton and Pleace (2014) evaluated a timebank in London that was specifically for those who were homeless or vulnerably housed. They found that the timebank increased

members' employability. For some members this was at an early stage, providing structure and activity during the day to people whose lives were previously quite chaotic. For other members, participating in the timebank had improved their employability through building their practical or I.T. skills, and giving them work experience. Some clients transitioned from timebanking directly into paid work, external training or formal volunteering.

2.3 Physical and mental health

Timebanks are used by Public Health England as an example of an organisation that can strengthen community capacity to have a positive impact on health (South, 2014). They share findings that social isolation and loneliness are associated with higher risks of mortality and morbidity, and that interventions to improve social connections can reduce social isolation and loneliness. They also suggest that wellbeing and mental health can be improved through community life and social connections, developed through organisations such as timebanks. There is solid evidence that increased levels of community engagement and social participation have a positive impact on health behaviours, physical and emotional health, and self-confidence, especially among disadvantaged populations (O'Mara-Eves et al, 2013; Public Health England, 2015). These benefits are so widely acknowledged that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance endorses community engagement as a strategy for health improvement (Public Health England, 2015: 6).

Researchers have found indications of timebanks having positive effects on health. Boyle (2014) conducted research on ten timebanks. He found that timebanks appeared to positively impact member's health in three ways: by providing volunteer support for people recovering from ill health after receiving direct professional care, by providing people with new social networks, and by encouraging people on the margins to understand that they have a role to play in those networks. Ryan-Collins et al. (2008) studied 11 timebanks across the UK and found evidence of their ability to improve mental ill health, reduce isolation and improve the health of older people. However, the strength of these findings is limited by the design consisting of comparative case-studies, rather than before-after studies or randomised controlled trials (RCTs). Simon (2003) suggests that the health and wellbeing of timebank participants improves because "the more outward looking and active people become, the less prone they appear to be to depression and disease." (Simon, 2003, p.9).

Boyle and Bird (2014) cite evidence that timebanking can be beneficial for those suffering from physical health conditions, with one study finding that volunteers suffering from chronic pain receive benefits from helping others even beyond what could be achieved with medical care, including declines in intensity and frequency of physical pain and reductions in depression. However, this study was based on a small sample, and did not have an element of comparison with a control group.

2.3.1 Prevention agenda

Potential health benefits of community interventions are particularly relevant in light of the current prevention agenda. There is a recognition that demographic changes, particularly the aging population, are putting increasing pressure on health and social care services, and this will continue to increase in the future, as more people are likely to have care and support

needs linked to old age (Humphries et al., 2016). This increasing pressure is coinciding with budget cuts which are part of the government's programme of austerity. The gap between need and funding in social care has widened since 2010, with local authority spending on the essential care and support needed by older and disabled people falling by 11 per cent in real terms (Humphries et al., 2016).

Cuts to health and social care budgets have been justified through a shift towards investment in prevention services. It is hoped that preventative services will improve the health, wellbeing and quality of life of individuals overall, and that investing early should reduce and delay the need for crisis intervention later, including admissions to hospital and residential and domiciliary care. There is an increased emphasis on the role that civil society can play:

“The transfer of public health to local government, has created opportunities for public health and healthcare to become more person and community centred, enabling individuals to realise their potential and to contribute to building healthier, more resilient communities.” (South, 2014, p.7)

Glasby et al. (2015) highlight three types of prevention services:

- primary services that prevent people becoming unwell or disabled,
- secondary services that slow down or avoid a worsening in people's conditions,
- tertiary services that enable people to recover from a crisis or minimise the social impacts of a disability or illness.

The Care Act 2014 states that local authorities must provide services which prevent or delay the need for care and support, working together with partners in health, welfare, housing and employment services. Glasby et al. (2015) also suggest there is an increased recognition that activities that individuals take part in (including paid and voluntary work and maintaining friends and family) are beneficial to people's wellbeing and that local community resources are often central to the establishment and supportive networks. They commend this “whole-system, asset-based, person-centred and locally permissive approach” (ibid, p.94) that underlies the increased focus on prevention in social care.

Ryan-Collins et. al (2008) cite the potential of timebanks to help with the prevention agenda, suggesting that they can:

“increase the resilience of individuals and communities... to prevent needs arising. This will reduce demand for services and safeguard resources for meeting unavoidable needs.” (2008, p.4)

Boyle and Bird (2014) advocate for the integration of timebanks into public services, especially GP practices, drawing on successful examples such as the Rushey Green Timebank in London which has been running since 1999. In these examples doctors can refer people to the timebank if they feel they would benefit from involvement in a group activity. Evaluations have found that these timebanks build social networks and make people

feel better. Boyle and Bird (ibid.) suggest that this should be extended so that all patients, especially older patients, could be joined up to their local timebanks on an opt-out basis, concluding that “an NHS with a timebanking dimension would be broader in what it can achieve, more flexible and more human for patients and their families.” (Boyle and Bird, 2014, p.76)

2.4 Other benefits

An often-cited advantage of timebanks is that they are open to all and value everyone’s participation equally, and can therefore include people who were previously marginalised and increase social justice:

“Timebanking helps to bridge previously unbridgeable divides: race, class, gender, national origin.” (Timebanking UK, no date)

Timebanking has also been found to attract people who would not be involved in traditional volunteering, such as those on a low income, not in formal employment and those who are ill or have disabilities (Seyfang, 2003). Experimental and cohort studies show participation in volunteering is strongly associated with better health, lower mortality, better functioning, life satisfaction and decrease in depression (South, 2014); timebanking therefore enables more people to experience these benefits.

2.5 Limitations of existing evidence

Overall, the evidence base remains limited. Most of the evidence on the outcomes is qualitative or based on surveys that rely on self-recall rather than more robust designs, such as a pre-test post-test design (Markkanen and Burgess, 2015). Many of the positive outcomes linked to timebanking, such as increased wellbeing or employability, are extremely complex, and therefore cause-and-effect conclusions are likely to be oversimplified.

3 Methodology

Interviews were conducted with eleven members of Littleport and Ely Timebank, and three stakeholders from Littleport and Ely Timebank, Cambridgeshire County Council and Spice, from February - March 2017.

Members information:

- Seven were female, four were male.
- Five were retired, five were working and one was a full-time carer.
- Five lived with a spouse or partner, three lived alone, two lived with their partner and children, and one was a single parent who lived with her children.
- Members ages ranged from 27 to 91, but the majority were aged over 50.
- Four had lived in the area for five years or less, another four had lived in the area for between five and twenty years, and three had lived in the area for over twenty years.
- Seven of the interviewees had been involved in the timebank for less than two years, while four had been involved for longer.

All of the interviewees had done other volunteering in the past, and many continued to volunteer alongside their work with the timebank.

4 Findings

4.1 How members use the timebank

The activity of the timebank can be broadly categorised into two areas: individual exchanges, where someone volunteers directly for another member, and organisational exchanges, where someone volunteers their time for the timebank or another community organisation.

Individual exchanges included befriending, cat sitting, fixing computers, gardening and agricultural help.

Organisational exchanges included attending coffee mornings, running events, litter picking, baking, stewarding or marshalling, delivering community magazines, graphic design and social media directly for the timebank.

Some members had both given and spent individual exchanges, and also contributed to organisational exchanges. Others had only given exchanges, only received these, or only done organisational exchanges.

A positive aspect of the timebank identified in the interviews is that it gives people options of how to volunteer, they can choose to volunteer directly for individuals, or for the organisation or a mixture. They can also volunteer as much or as little time as suits them. This flexibility opens it up as an opportunity for more people to be involved.

“Some people don’t like the commitment of, say, going to volunteer in their local charity shop and having to give four hours a week on a Thursday... what they do like is the fact that [coordinator] will send an email out saying “can anybody bake a cake for the bake sale in 6 weeks’ time, and they think “yeah, I can do that!”

4.2 Outcomes for individuals

4.2.1 Expanding social networks

All of the interviewees cited that one of the main benefits of being involved in the timebank was gaining a new set of people to socialise with. Weekly coffee mornings are held in both Littleport and Ely. Many of the interviewees regularly attended these coffee mornings and enjoyed chatting to other members:

“They have a coffee morning once a week, so that’s nice to go and catch up, and to sit down and meet people really.”

Some members saw the variety of people involved in the timebank as a strength. Timebank members vary enormously in terms of age, background and skills, and people valued the

opportunity to get to know others who were different to themselves. Timebanking was seen as a social leveller, for example, participants reported:

“You do get to meet so many different levels of people ... people that aren’t able to come out of their houses, to people that are in an office... you speak to them as though they’re exactly the same type of education, they’re just people! And it’s nice to feel as though you’re unified.”

People recognised the importance of human connection, including intergenerational relationships. One woman described the importance of this for her:

“My children had left home, my grandchildren I don’t see very often, so this little girl sort of filled that place of a youngster around.”

Some of the interviewees mentioned that they had made friends through the timebank who they now met up with socially. It was clear that acts of friendship and were meaningful and enriched the life of the people involved.

“I’ve formed a couple of special friendships through this so I’m very pleased.”

4.2.2 Integrating into community

Several interviewees were relative newcomers to the village, and said that their involvement in the timebank had helped them integrate into the community more quickly. Several participants reported that they placed a lot of value on being able to walk through the village and bump into people they knew from the timebank. For example, one man who had recently moved to the village said:

“We’re getting to the stage now that people are coming up to us to say hello... when you come from another county it takes a long time to establish that, so it has made a huge difference to us.”

Other people had been in the area for longer but had found it difficult to integrate. The timebank offered them a way to integrate more effectively. One member described how after retiring he had lost touch with a lot of people, so the timebank had increased the number of people he socialised with.

A stakeholder talked about the value of the timebank being in the “simple stuff”. She said:

“Timebanks giving you an excuse to knock on someone else’s door... just giving you that mechanism to be friendly with people that live near you.”

4.2.3 Preventing social isolation

Some of the interviewees explicitly acknowledged the preventative role of their involvement in the timebank, for example, suggesting that the timebank helped prevent them from being socially isolated. One young woman was new to the area and found the timebank stopping

her from feeling alone. She said:

“It was quite, kind of, lonely I suppose, and then [the timebank] just really helped break the ice... I don't meet up with [other members] really regularly but... even just contacting people via email, or when people drop stuff off at your house, little things like that, it's just kind of helps me kind of feel at home here.”

Many people talked about the ability of the timebank to reduce social isolation for others. The regular coffee morning was viewed as a good place to achieve this. The exchanges themselves were also seen as chances to engage those who may be isolated. There was a recognition that the exchanges were about more than just getting a task done, as one interviewee explained:

“The timebank isn't necessarily about getting a job done, it's about trying to ease social isolation.... someone who's sitting on their own who wants to talk to someone, [doing an exchange] that's an excuse to get involved and go round someone's house, have a cup of tea and a chat... Whatever the task is, you're sociable around it, it's not like you've paid a workman to come, do the job and go! It's not like that!”

Some interviewees were very aware of the benefits of volunteering for other members, and suggested that their motivation for asking for help through the timebank was partly the knowledge of what others would gain by volunteering to help them:

“You've got to think “What do I want to do? Who can help me?” and you think “Oh, I can do that myself” but then actually you're depriving someone potentially of the opportunity to get out of their house and talk to someone.”

The role of the community broker is important in reaching out to those in the community who would not usually engage in volunteering, and encouraging them to get involved. A stakeholder explains why this is important:

“Timebanks, I think because of the coordinator's role, have a really deep reach into the communities... a timebank coordinator knows Mrs Miggins at number 36 and is able to go “right, this is the way we can reach out to her”, and to particular individuals who are vulnerable.”

By actively reaching out to community members in this way, it is clear that timebanks provide a mechanism to have benefits for people who are socially isolated or vulnerable, and therefore may have the potential to achieve some of the prevention outcomes desired by the government.

4.2.4 Health and wellbeing

Many of the interviewees spoke about the positive impact participating in the timebank had on their wellbeing. They explained how being a member encouraged them to “get out and do things”. One interviewee described how taking part in the craft group helped her to relax. Other interviewees reported that the timebank was good for their peace of mind, they got

comfort from knowing that there were people locally they could call on if they needed any help, one man explained:

“I know there’s people there now, if I need anything I can ring up, when my computer goes wrong I just ring up one of the members and say “can you look at this”. I think it’s the support, and it’s the community relationship that we have, the friendship.”

Three interviewees who had experienced physical or mental health problems in recent years explained that the timebank is good for their wellbeing because it gives them something positive to focus on. One man with physical health problems said:

“I think if you didn’t meet other people you’d tend to soon start dwelling on your own sort of minor problems, that would then sort of get blown out of proportion, if you want to call it that. It helps you to sort of think about something else.”

Another member who has had a knee replacement described how he gets direct emotional support from other members in the timebank who have had the same operation. There are a group of six timebank members who have had new knees, who call themselves the “wonky knee club”, and he finds it very beneficial to be able to talk to people who understand what he is experiencing. Other members had talked about the benefits for their mental health, and that it had helped them through periods of depression

4.2.5 Skills and confidence

The timebank also offered members the opportunity to learn new skills. The timebank organised a range of training courses including computer skills, iPad skills, assertiveness and mental health first aid. These courses were often run in conjunction with other local charities. Some members had learnt new skills through attending the courses, which in turn enabled them to support other members.

Another interviewee spoke about how the timebank allowed her to use skills she had used in previous jobs, highlighting a profound personal impact that reached beyond giving and receiving exchanges. She said:

“I think the nice thing about timebanking is it allows you to be everything you’ve ever been. So if you’ve moved on in life ... you may go on to another career but you don’t want to actually lose what you were, because it was part of the fabric of you.”

One interviewees explained that the timebank had given her the confidence to apply for a different kind of work. Another explained how the support of the timebank members helped him through the process of applying for jobs after a period of unemployment:

“It lifts you out of the groove of your record you’re playing at present, and you jump forward to a couple more songs further down the album, you really do... other people backing you up through the social side of things, and just being friendly and just having a coffee... saying “you stick with it”, you know.”

Another interviewee said that taking part in the timebank had given her confidence to join other groups in the area that she would not otherwise have joined.

4.2.6 Practical and financial help

A few members mentioned the financial benefits of taking part in the timebank. However, this was the minority because, as mentioned, many interviewees did not receive individual exchanges. One interviewee had had timebank volunteers help him remove a hedge, that he would otherwise have had to pay a contractor to do, which he estimated would cost £40-£50. He said this was a big help:

“Today everybody’s got to watch pennies, especially when you’re retired and you’re on a fixed income so if you can get any help like then it’s really, really welcome.”

In other cases, interviewees hinted that they would not have the work done as frequently if they had to pay for it rather than having it done through the timebank, or not done the work at all:

“I suppose I’d probably have to pay for someone to do it. The garden would have to go to rack and ruin probably.”

If they had not been able to spend credits they would have missed out on this support. Using the mechanism of the timebank to receive help also brokered trust in the community.

4.2.7 Level of impact varied

Some interviewees stated that the timebank did not have any impact on their health, wellbeing or confidence levels, despite it being a pleasurable social activity and building their social networks. These tended to be members who reported that they who were already very involved in the community and didn’t have any mental or physical health problems at the current time.

“I don’t think it’s had any impact of health, because I’ve got a large circle of friends, I’m not stuck indoors and I go out quite a lot of the time, so it doesn’t really have any impact on my health.”

4.3 Outcomes for the community

Volunteering in the timebank takes the form of individual exchanges and organisational exchanges. Organisational exchanges involve supporting existing community activities. Littleport and Ely Timebank is affiliated with the local leisure centre, and interviewees had volunteered through marshalling their Fun Run, and helping with their Fun Day. Timebank volunteers also deliver community magazines which help keep local people informed about

community events and activities in the area, and coordinate community litter picks which help keep the area tidy. One member suggested that helping at community events was her favourite element of timebanking:

“I think the thing I enjoy the most is just the general volunteering... you get that good feeling because you know that you’re helping this community...grow and I think that feeling’s probably the best part.”

A stakeholder explains how benefitting the community is the main reason people sign up to become members of the timebank:

“Even though we say “you can get these skills for free” nobody joins thinking they’re saving themselves money, people join because they want to help, that’s the common thread, they want to give back to their community.”

Timebank members have also set up new events for the community. The coordinator supported two members to set up a craft group, a separate community group linked to the timebank. The crafting group meets twice a month, and is open for everyone to join. They run regular events for the whole community, including a mask-painting workshop for children at Halloween and a Christmas Fair. Timebank members helped to run these events.

“It’s open to everybody, you know, just because you’re not a timebank member doesn’t mean you can’t come. So I would say it has a really big impact.”

This relates to building social capital - the timebank members feel happier, safer and more supported in their communities, and they spread these benefits to the wider community through the community events they run.

One stakeholder describes how, at the organisational level, timebanks can have a positive influence on the community, describing them as a “catalyst for greater community cohesion”. She gives the actions of the facilitator of another Cambridgeshire timebank as an example:

“She was convening a group of a variety of local community leaders, various people from adult learning, to young people’s stuff to faith groups, to a community car scheme, and just kind of bringing everybody together, to go “how can we connect better so we can do what our community needs us to do?”

4.4 Public services

The stakeholders interviewed spoke about possible cost savings of the timebank, in terms of reduced public spending on health and adult social care. It was clear that they were influenced by the prevention agenda and the greater financial implications of preventing or delaying someone’s access to the health service or social care:

“It sounds really clinical, but there is a monetary factor attached to this... does it mean that we’ve saved money by someone not going to the doctor and therefore not

getting their prescription of pills and therefore being more drain on resources?”

“I think we have got individual stories where you can be almost certain that people would have ended up in care had they not had the support of the timebank, and just that single intervention means we’ve saved absolutely thousands and thousands in terms of care...just one person would make that, because the average timebank costs £14,000 a year.... you’d pay way more than that on a care plan.”

5 Issues raised

5.1 Unspent hours

An important finding was that people spent far fewer credits than they earned. One interviewee had spent around half the credits she had earned, but four had spent a quarter or less of their credits and four had not spent any. The remaining two members did not know how many credits they had earned or spent as they did not keep track of this:

“I have no idea, I don’t even know how to check! It should be quite a bit by now, after 2 years.”

Overall, members gave a lot more hours to the timebank than they spent. Several members joked that they were ‘saving them up’. The reasons given for not requesting help from other timebank members were lack of need, and a focus on helping others rather than thinking about what help they themselves needed.

“I haven’t had any because I haven’t really required it.”

“Because I’ve been so busy doing everything for everyone else I haven’t thought about myself. But I have asked them just to confirm how much my credit is, then I’m going to go on a timebank blitz!”

Some of the members did not keep a count of the hours they had done because they were a member of the timebank to help others, rather than to have help done for themselves.

“No I haven’t... because I don’t really do it for the time credits, I do it because people need help, you know, and to be honest with you, if I’ve got the time to do what they need doing, then it keeps me off the streets, as they say.”

A stakeholder believes people are reluctant to claim back the hours they have earned because they don’t like the idea of taking or feel they can manage without help. Littleport and Ely Timebank tries to address this issue by persuading people that others are happy to help them:

“What I have to say is ‘there’s no shame in asking for help, this is what the timebank’s about, and if you can’t do it, don’t be afraid, people want to do it, people are happy.’”

Littleport and Ely Timebank also offer a ‘community pot’ as a mechanism for members to donate unwanted credits back to the timebank, to be used by others. But none of the interviewees mentioned that they had done this.

5.2 Coffee morning

Some members were not able to attend the weekly coffee mornings because of childcare arrangements, or because they worked full time.

“I cannot go to the meetings every week. I can only go when partner is off and he can stay with the children, otherwise I cannot go, I cannot participate... the problem is there is not space for children.”

“I haven't managed to go to any of the coffee mornings because obviously I work, so it has been a little bit tricky to get those exchanges”

It was suggested by several interviewees that an additional regular evening or weekend meet up would help the social aspect of the timebank to be more inclusive, and that the recent inclusion of Ely in the timebank may make this more achievable, as there would be a bigger pool of people to draw on, and also an increased number of potential venues to host a social event.

5.3 Timebank members who are vulnerable or have a high level of need

Another issue raised was timebank members who are vulnerable or have a high level of needs. The timebank coordinator meets with individuals before they join the timebank and requires them to fill in a form detailing any health issues. Sometimes members with physical or mental health needs are paired with other members to complete exchanges, if they request this support.

However, one interviewee highlighted that the potential for safeguarding issues to arise still remains, because members' mental and physical health could deteriorate at any time, resulting in them putting themselves or others at risk by volunteering to do tasks they are no longer capable of doing safely.

The interviewee also suggested that people's needs sometimes become acute, and that this can put other members at risk if they attempt to provide support for these needs within the timebank.

“You can find yourself in something that's legitimately timebanking, and then suddenly it escalates into something that would become a care matter... you need to know when what you're doing has actually reached a point where somebody from social services needs to be assessing the person's needs.”

They suggested there could be greater awareness within the timebank about situations where members' needs were too great to be met by timebanking, and a referral to health or social care services was needed. They suggested that one way of achieving this would be induction training for new members, covering safeguarding and information about when an issue should be passed on to social services.

Careful thought needs to go into how to promote the timebank to new members. This is especially pertinent because of the prevention agenda. The timebank coordinator seeks out those who would benefit from involvement, sometimes because they are isolated or have certain needs, but there is a risk of these individual's needs becoming too great for the timebank to manage. Community activity can clearly have extremely positive effects for members, and by keeping members active and independent it may mean that they have less need for public services. However, in the context of public sector cuts and the rolling back of the state it should be made clear that community interventions cannot replace the need for formal service provision for those with high needs, and attempting to do so could put other members at risk.

6 Time Credits in a timebank

Members of Littleport and Ely Timebank are able to exchange up to ten hours per month into Spice Time Credit notes, which can be spent with various spend partners. Half of the interviewees had done this; the activities they had used the vouchers for included beauty treatments, exercise classes and going to the cinema. A few of the interviewees gave the Time Credits to their family members as gifts:

“My time credits tend to be converted to Spice Credits and I give them to my grandchildren... they go to the cinemas, they go swimming, they go to leisure activities.”

Most of those who had not yet converted any of their hours to Time Credits were interested in the idea of doing so in the future.

6.1 Benefits of using Time Credits

6.1.1 Attract volunteers from a different demographic

A key advantage of the timebank being able to award Time Credit notes is that these can be used to reward volunteers who may not require any help from the skills-exchange side of the timebank. This is particularly true of young people. The coordinator has involved members of a youth group in the timebank. A common activity is for them to deliver a community magazine and use the Time Credit vouchers they earn to go to the cinema. A stakeholder does not feel it would have been possible to engage this group without the Time Credits:

“The biggest users of Time Credits are the... youth group because they don’t need their lawns mowing, they don’t need, you know, practical help.”

“It’s engaging young people...it’s engaging them and getting them involved in the community, so that was one aspect I really liked about that.”

Timebank members were also using the notes to involve their own, younger, children in timebanking:

“It’s absolutely brilliant, my kids love it.... they do a little bit of litter-picking and they can go to the cinema.”

6.1.2 Added value for existing members

The Time Credit notes also add value to existing members of the timebank by giving them more options of how to spend the hours they accrue. A stakeholder explained how some of the activities accessible through Time Credits could help members improve their health and wellbeing. Interviewees had spent their Time Credits on gym classes and health and beauty

treatments, which they described as having a positive impact. The activities offered by spend partners were often things seen as luxuries, and may not have been accessible to members without the Time Credit vouchers:

“It’s nice to think “actually, you know, I can get a massage” ... sometimes if you are a bit tight for money you just don't get that opportunity to kind of treat yourself to that sort of thing.”

A stakeholder added that the spend opportunities offered through Time Credits could expand the geographical horizons of timebank members, as they could use their Time Credits to attend activities or events in other UK locations (such as the Tower of London).

6.1.3 Increased scalability

One stakeholder suggested that Time Credits had the ability to complement timebanks by adding an element of scalability, while timebanks offered depth:

“Timebanks, I think because of the coordinators role, have a really deep reach into the communities, which Time Credits don’t have...Time Credits scale much more quickly, but are less deep rooted within communities, and so I think if you bring the two together you have a real strength.”

6.1.4 Connect community partners in new ways

Spice hold networking events throughout the year between all their partners. Access to such a broad range of organisations offers the potential to extend the work the timebanks already do in connecting community organisations. One stakeholder saw this as having a lot of potential benefits for building the local community:

“The Time Credits have all their earn partners of which the timebanks are just one... they all come together once a quarter within their area and chat about how Time Credits are going, and all sorts of other community stuff, and start linking up those different organisations within that area... I think there’s huge power in that... it’s about putting us all on an equal footing and just having a conversation about how what each of us bring can slot together in that community to make it work.”

6.2 Challenges of incorporating Time Credits

6.2.1. Confusion

One of the main stated challenges with integrating Time Credits into a timebank was that members were not using them at first, because they didn’t understand how they worked. But this has now improved:

“It was a good few months before people really started exchanging the Time Credits for timebank hours. But now that’s flowing more”

A stakeholder stressed the importance of timebank coordinators being knowledgeable about Time Credits, in order to avoid confusion. They gave Littleport and Ely as an example of where the integration of Time Credits in a timebank was working well. None of the interviewees who had not exchanged any of their hours for Time Credits suggested that they did not know how to do this, which would suggest that the members are well informed about this option.

6.2.2 Encouraging spending

Offering timebank members the option of swapping some of their hours for Time Credits would appear to be a good way of addressing the problem of unspent hours, but this depends on the reason why individual members are not claiming their hours back. Some of those who said they were not claiming their hours because they did not feel that they needed anything doing were converting their hours to Time Credits. But there were some members who were motivated by wanting only give to others rather than claim anything for themselves, and these people were less likely to be converting and spending their hours.

7 Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

This research suggests that timebanks can have varied and profound effects, both on individual members and the communities in which they are based. Many of the interviewees suggested that their involvement in the timebank had helped them expand their social networks, integrate into the community and prevent social isolation, both for themselves and other members. Some interviewees also spoke about how their involvement had had a direct positive effect on their health and wellbeing, skills and confidence. It was clear that the impacts of the timebank reached far further than the members themselves; interviewees shared details of many existing community activities that timebank members regularly supported, and several events and activities that they had started up themselves, for the benefit of the whole community. The policy implication of these positive findings is that timebanks should be financially supported to continue their work. The current funding streams for timebanks are patchy and differ between areas. Studies such as this could be used to make the case for more local government support.

Several issues with the timebank were raised during the interviews. The suggestion of organising more social activities at different times of day to include more members could be easily actioned. In terms of the underspending of hours, it was clear that members had many different reasons for not wanting to spend what they had earned. Two possible alternatives are now on offer to members who do not want to claim exchanges: donating hours to the 'community pot' and converting hours into Time Credits to spend with other community partners. Further research is needed to understand why some members do not take advantage of either of these options, and whether any other options would better meet their needs.

A further issue raised relates to recognition of the inherent limits of timebanks. Timebanks are fragile organisations, usually with only one paid member of staff. If timebanks are attempting to care for vulnerable people, there is a danger they will encounter safeguarding issues which will put members at risk. There is also a danger that this will reduce the positive effects experienced by other members. Timebank coordinators and organisers should develop clear policies demarcating where the actions of timebank members should end and intervention from statutory agencies begin.

This research investigated Time Credits being integrated into a timebank. This was something that the majority of interviewees were very positive about, and half were already making use of the ability to swap their hours for Time Credits. It was seen as a bonus for existing members, and a key strength was seen as its ability to attract younger members, who would not otherwise be engaged in timebanking, such as the youth group. There was some initial confusion around how it worked, but provided the timebank coordinators could be clear and support members through any uncertainty, the opportunities created by this collaboration seem to be considerable.

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