

Delivering digital projects for people aged 50+ experiencing social isolation – learning from Ageing Better

Introduction

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme. It is collecting information and insights from across 14 partnerships to identify learning that will be useful for other programmes and organisations delivering activities aimed at reducing social isolation in people aged 50+.

Ageing Better has been operating for seven years, the last two during the Covid-19 pandemic. Delivering digitally became a significant feature of the Ageing Better response from March 2020 onwards as Covid-19 significantly reduced the number of things that were possible to achieve without digital access. Digital sessions had a huge impact for people in certain situations. Some, who had been housebound and isolated for many years were more connected than before as a result of the expansion of online activity and services. Many Connectors or Social Prescribers working with a person who was housebound had great difficulty in connecting them to a group or activity accessible to them. The irony is that there have, for some people been more opportunities for connection as a result of Covid.

Digital provision can also help provide activities in areas where there aren't enough accessible venues or in locations with poor transport links etc., Partnerships identified new participants with low levels of confidence specifically joining online activities as they could both participate and meet people in a way that felt less daunting.

Digital delivery can help people who may struggle to get out because of caring responsibilities, transport difficulties, their own mobility or external conditions like the weather. Crucially this means that having “opened the door” to this group of people and with the increased opportunities it presents for social connection, digital platforms will play an ongoing part of future delivery models.

This report shares our learning about digital delivery. It covers three key areas:

- Getting people connected - the first challenge of digital delivery is reaching people who are not yet digitally engaged. We share our learning around specific projects that seek to increase digital skills. We also share insights for projects seeking to provide a digital component and factors to consider when aiming to engage people who are socially isolated and lonely through digital projects.
- Delivering a digital session - highlighting some of the specific features and actions that are critical for delivering a digital activity including specific elements that are key for audiences that are less familiar and confident with the technology.
- Hybrid delivery - highlighting the increasing importance of offering both face-to-face and digital delivery as part of the same project or programme.

Getting people connected

We know that for many projects the biggest challenge will always be getting people from the target group to join a digital session.

We have identified a wide range of factors which result in people aged 50+ being unwilling or unable to access digital content. There is no doubt that for a group of people either the cost of the equipment itself (smart phone, tablet or computer) and/or the on-going costs (internet or data packages) make it unaffordable for them.

As with some of our other Ageing Better learning, however, cost can also be used or quoted as a “mask” for other issues. Ageing Better areas identified how people can think it is too late for them to join the digital age or may feel overwhelmed by the technical language and specifically about the choices of package or equipment available. We heard that people’s digital confidence levels are also a very real issue.

Ageing Better in Camden categorised four groups of people according to their interest in technology:

- People who can’t afford technology but do have the skills.
- People who can’t afford technology and who don’t have the skills or have no interest in/or fear looking stupid or of scams.
- People who can afford technology but who don’t have the skills or have no interest/or fear looking stupid or of scams.
- People who can afford technology but don’t have the skills but are interested/keen in trying to use (we include here people who may be able to open an email but not make a video call etc., and so want or need to be upskilled).

This “categorisation” can be useful in helping to identify where a person is on the digital skills/attitude spectrum and so can help organisations consider where to focus their resources and then design the appropriate response to these different groups.

This idea of a digital spectrum is also helpful as it demonstrates and allows organisations to recognise that people are at different points on it. Some may need support overcoming fears, and raising their confidence, others may need support in choosing devices, whilst others may feel they need to know and be able to access support from a friendly/trusted ear in case they get stuck.

Use of technology is now an important component for many people in leading a thriving life and/or in maintaining their independence. But it is important to

recognise that it is a spectrum and the pace, interest and motivation that people have to move along this spectrum will vary.

The key insight around encouraging someone to make any behaviour shift is the importance of first finding the “hook” or incentive that works for that individual. This “digital hook” will be different for each person but could include the opportunity to undertake video calls and so see family and friends, being able to do their own online shopping (&/or banking) or the opportunity to watch films or programmes and particularly for some groups, to do so in their first language. In general terms the key focus when encouraging people to make a shift from offline to online needs to be about identifying the benefits that being online will bring to them. This means that offering a specific project or programme that is something a person wants to engage with can be sufficient to motivate and then help them make that shift.

Key Message: Many people aged 50+ have managed a thriving life without access to digital technologies. The importance of being able to access these technologies as a means to improve both the quality of their life and the quality of their connections has grown for many as a result of Covid. People will have different levels and combinations of income, motivation, confidence and skills and organisations need to recognise where people are in order to then target and focus resources appropriately.

Practical help and support to get people online

All our insights from Ageing Better point to the need for ongoing, friendly and patient person centred support. This needs to be available to help people with their use of technology but also to help them troubleshoot. We have identified four general areas for practical support in moving people online:

- Initial packages or kit
- Bespoke support
- Guides and training
- Digital connector role

Initial packages or kit

For some people the cost of purchasing or using the technology is just not affordable and options will be needed to provide them with access to the initial package of kit. This could include providing tablets equipped with data (which don't require on-going internet contracts), relevant apps and training which people can access through the device. Telephone support is then provided to help access the device together with further ongoing support.

Some people, however, although they have the means to afford to purchase really do not know how or what to get. There is a role here for a trusted individual/supplier to provide a selection of products that will cover a range of services and requirements and which are pre-loaded and ready to go. This, for some people would also help with the challenge around the huge variety of technology that is present in the marketplace and knowing what is right for them.

We heard how many areas have been working hard to help fund raise for these resources. We found that whilst gifts of or funding for the kit is generally easier to access, there is less understanding or appreciation of the time commitment/person

hours needed in supporting an individual and building their confidence in order to go online. This is proving much harder to find funding for.

There are the additional challenges in supporting people with low levels of functional literacy to get online as it is very difficult to assist through normal online guides or in supporting people to navigate via what is written on keyboard keys. There is considerable stigma associated with poor literacy and this is an area that digital connectors and those supporting people to get online need to be aware of in working with individuals and in adapting resources as a result.

Bespoke Support

We know that as well as people getting kit for the first time, there is also a group of people who, although they have a smartphone, tablet or laptop have either never used it or have lost the confidence or skills needed.

This group of people need some support to get them started and to make initial use of the technology. We would also include here people who can maybe undertake one or two limited elements such as replying to an email but not online shopping or video calling and so need support and confidence to extend their digital range. The number one piece of learning across all digital inclusion work is the need for support from a person who not only has knowledge, but also patience combined with good listening skills.

We heard that it can be helpful to provide an introduction to the technology, then an opportunity for people to have a go themselves, before providing a further opportunity to ask questions and gain support. This may need to be repeated several times to help people slowly move along the digital spectrum.

This support can also help teach people new to technology some of the digital etiquette.

Peer support

Throughout Ageing Better we have identified the value of peer support and this also holds true in helping people access technology. The role and impact of peer support can include that of a “trusted ambassador”, sharing information about an app, service or activity that may be useful or enjoyable which can in turn help motivate someone to access technology. It can also allow people to speak to someone ‘like them’, so helping people feel more comfortable asking crucial questions which they may feel are “stupid”.

Peer support can also work well within a group situation because it links to:

- Motivation - people present are all keen to connect with each other and the task.
- Reciprocity - supporting each other to solve problems and work towards a common goal. People value the opportunity to support each other.
- Trust - there is trust in the group with people feeling happy to ask questions and learn together without the fear of being embarrassed.

Guides & training

There is also a role for “how to guides” with screenshots and step by step guidance. These are useful for people who are confident and want to develop their skills further as well as useful reminders for people for whom the knowledge that they are available can also boost confidence to use technology.

Ageing Better learning also points to the need for a mixed economy of learning. This includes sessions people can access for themselves at their own pace and in their own time, visual guides that provide step by step pointers of what to do as well as being able to talk to someone via telephone support.

We heard how offering “tea and technology” type sessions can help get people started and begin to gain more confidence with IT. Well run digital sessions can also help to build social connections in themselves as well as helping to develop long term skills. Face-to-face digital sessions can often be hugely helpful in identifying the range of additional barriers which an individual may be facing.

Organisations have also offered digital support in groups to help people make better use of and access the range of opportunities provided online. These happen by first investing time through phone calls and “how to” guides to help people get online, before holding group sessions that allow them to connect with other people embarking on a similar digital journey. This support includes supplying the technical know how and how to guides whilst also providing mentoring and increasing a person’s confidence in using the technology.

Wherever possible, we have heard that it is important not only for people during training etc., to be able to use their own devices but that the support person also has a ‘mirrored’ device that means they can then easily follow the steps and the person providing the support can more easily diagnose any problems/issues.

Key Message: Providing someone with digital support requires patience and a recognition that the pace at which someone progresses with the technology will vary considerably. Wherever possible it is valuable to provide support using a mirrored device and access to digital technology can be promoted by using pre-loaded tablets together with personal support.

Digital Connector role

Across all our Ageing Better learning we have highlighted the importance of working with people in a holistic person centred way. The first connection for people who are socially isolated is often via a *connector role*. This digital connector function has a specific role helping people identify where they are on the “digital spectrum”. Part of this involves understanding the “push & pull” to go from offline to online and helping to identify both the specific “digital hook” as well as exploring more about the specific barriers to going online for that individual.

In many cases this will require specific training. Digital connectors ideally need to have some technological know-how, but more importantly have patience, good listening skills and the ability to communicate and talk through actions in easy-to-understand steps. They need to be able to communicate without jargon or technical language and to explore what the person might want to achieve by going online and being prepared to revisit this with people as well as providing the tailored support to do so.

Telephone befriending has a considerable role as a route into having these conversations. In common with the person centred approach it is important to recognise people may not yet be in the right ‘place’ to consider technology and may be dismissive of the offer or support when it is first raised. However, it may be appropriate to raise the opportunity at different times and as the relationship builds.

Key Message: Telephone befriending can be used to introduce people to the opportunities of going digital but this should be done when it is appropriate and if

the right digital support is available. The important role of a Digital Connector which can cover a range of work going from peer support or advocate for technology, identifying the barriers and then accessing the appropriate support.

Digital delivery in groups

Digital groups will be different from face-to-face groups and subsequently the experience they offer to people will also be different. Online offers a type of social interaction requiring different skills, focus and approach. The most successful digital delivery doesn't just try to replicate what is offered in face-to-face sessions. This difference needs to be acknowledged and embraced by organisations/groups so that the digital activity can then be judged on its own merits and applied where it provides greatest potential.

This means looking at it as a different medium - not as "simply" moving a class or group online.

Practicalities

As identified, digital sessions are one of the tools that can be used to help create meaningful connections and so help tackle social isolation and loneliness. But how the groups themselves actually operate is also hugely important. Effective groups operate in a way that helps build members confidence, making them feel welcome and valued. These are crucial features in supporting people to connect and feel part of a community which in turn helps reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

A key feature of Ageing Better learning to date has been the importance of being able to offer a wide variety of activities because one of the ways in which we make a social connection and develop a friendship with someone is by having a shared interest. Having a variety of activities increases the opportunities for people to go on and make those connections. Shared activities work well online, for example reading groups and even cooking. Activities that involve a presenter also translate well online and can include physical activity sessions such as yoga or pilates as well as talks.

It is hugely valuable to provide the space for people to create meaningful connections and friendships by creating opportunities for informal social interaction at the start and end of a session whether face-to-face or online. Additional ways to develop this social interaction and connectedness include setting up WhatsApp or Facebook groups alongside activities so that people can chat between sessions. We heard that it was particularly valuable to have a "getting to know you" session for telephone groups, due to the absence of body language and other visual clues.

We continue to find that for many online Ageing Better activities and groups keeping the sessions and activities authentically local remains important. This links back to learning around having a hook, base or point of shared interest for people. This is an important part of helping people to connect with each other through their local areas for example by being able to discuss local landmarks and shops etc. Additionally, digital platforms can also play an important role in helping dispersed groups to connect. Again the range of online activities represent a greater chance of there being a group that an individual wants to be part of and connect with.

We found across Ageing Better a wide range of tools and techniques being used to reach people. These included non-digital tools, such as printed newsletters, directing people to digital opportunities as well as social media. A key insight was how useful social media could be as family and friends would often use this to link people to opportunities.

The role of facilitator can be critical. The facilitator helps to set the group's culture

as well as its rules and expectations. These include for example, etiquette around “muting”, rules on speaking in the group, what to do if people lose internet connection and use of names before speaking.

The facilitator also plays an important role in supporting everyone to engage with the session. Taking part in a digital session requires people to feel supported so that they are able not only to contribute but equally to allow others to speak and be an active listener. People experiencing loneliness can, when they join a group often either say very little or be the participant who is speaking all the time and both behaviours can be a challenge when facilitating a group online.

Online groups require the facilitator role to effectively cover two functions - that of the traditional facilitator and that of the technology organiser. The facilitator helps spark social interactions in the group. The technology lead helps organise the technology but also keeps participants aware of digital privacy and online safety. They can also help manage break out rooms or provide the one-to-one support a person may need to get online or if they lose connection during the session etc., Having two facilitators can therefore be particularly beneficial in running a successful online group, allowing one person to manage the technology and any issues arising whilst the other can focus on the group. It also provides a back-up in case one of the facilitators experiences internet problems themselves on the day.

Our learning was that groups of 8 to 12 people were the optimum size, although they could be larger if the session was a talk or presentation.

Key Learning: Many different types of groups have translated well to digital platforms. Shared activities work as do those where there is a presenter. All activities benefit from opportunities for social interaction. As with face-to-face activities it remains important to offer as wide a selection as possible (including a range of activities and interests or geography) to increase the opportunities for people to meet and connect with others. We found that people could be communicated with to join sessions via both on and offline means.

Telephone groups

Alongside the groups that take place online we also heard about the importance of telephone groups. Much of the learning highlighted during this work around digital platforms applies equally to telephone groups. These “phone in” groups play an important role. They are a vital means for those people who are unable or unwilling to go online to still benefit from meaningful connections with others via the phone. These groups may provide a stepping stone in supporting members to move into the online world but it is important to recognise that telephone groups offer members something equally valuable in themselves for those who use them to connect.

Most of the telephone groups use the format of participants phoning in. Many people are confident with doing this, but it does mean that it is not accessible for everyone e.g. it usually involves inputting a pin/access code, which some people may find tricky. In some cases, the facilitator will ‘phone out’ to the participants so that all they need to do is answer the phone. This makes it more accessible but whether this is possible depends on the phone system being used as well as the size of the group.

Learning was that the maximum optimum size for a telephone group was 4 or 5 so as to ensure people weren’t talking over each other. We also found that phone groups might need to be shorter than online groups, as it can be uncomfortable to hold the

phone to your ear for a long period of time.

Online volunteers & role of peer support

Previous established good practice in working with volunteers can be revisited and adapted for online delivery and volunteering opportunities. For example, identifying the “new” roles and functions so that people are clear about what is involved as well as the support and training which would be available. In the case of online groups some volunteers might be very happy to concentrate on covering the technology side during online sessions whilst others prefer to facilitate or act as social convener during the session. A key piece of learning from across Ageing Better is how important it is to create time to check in with and support volunteers in the same way as for participants.

We have also seen that a “new” cohort of volunteers have been motivated to get active and contribute within their community through the pandemic. In some settings the digital opportunities have opened up the volunteering opportunities to a much wider range of people. Many organisations have now adapted training and induction sessions to take place online meaning that these can be accessed by people who either didn't have the time or mobility to attend face-to-face sessions during working hours or at a particular location. Online training sessions can also run regardless of the volunteer's location meaning it can be accessed more quickly so reducing waiting times. This is a potential opportunity to develop in the future.

Key Learning: There is huge diversity in the volunteer pool and what people may be happy to lead on or support with. As with earlier learning it is important that we support volunteers through a person centred approach. In general, across Ageing Better we found some volunteers were reluctant to lead on digital sessions and so this is another reason to have both a technical lead and a facilitator in digital groups. Covid-19 has also broadened the number of people interested in volunteering.

Hybrid delivery – an evolving model

Over the last 12 months we have witnessed an evolving model within Ageing Better, that of hybrid delivery. As Covid-19 restrictions have eased some face-to-face activity has resumed. But as set out at the start for some, a digital element remains hugely important. We are taking a broad definition of hybrid delivery to include delivering activities and projects across multiple platforms. These include face-to-face, telephone and digital. It covers those projects and activities that offer a combination of these approaches. For example, offering a programme of yoga or keep fit activities face-to-face or online. It also includes activities or projects that use a variety of different tools to connect with people. For example, a social prescribing project that offers people the opportunity to connect initially via face-to-face or telephone.

In most cases people delivering this hybrid model are offering activities across one or more platforms but are not trying to combine them i.e. there will be a face-to-face offer and a digital offer but they will be for separate groups or times. Ageing Better areas are also increasingly offering a combination of face-to-face and digital at the same time. The insight from Ageing Better is this often works most effectively when someone is “teaching” the group either formally or informally. It can also work well

in other settings, but the critical success factor is having enough people to manage the contributions from the digital group. In other words you need a person delivering the session and a person looking after the digital attendees.

Understanding the role of hybrid delivery

As highlighted earlier, digital opportunities can provide a gateway for people who may otherwise struggle to connect face-to-face as a result of the wider challenges happening in their life. These could include caring responsibilities or their own physical health and wellbeing. The digital offer has therefore provided them with something which they would otherwise have been unable to access.

We have also heard from Ageing Better areas that platforms like telephone and digital have allowed connectors/social prescribers to build relationships with people at a slower pace. This has helped to build relationships with people who have traditionally been less likely to engage, including older men. These alternative platforms have allowed the relationship to build both at a pace and via a method that suits the individual. There is then a potential to transition to face-to-face when the opportunities arise.

But it is important to again highlight that there continues to be a group of people who are excluded from the benefits of digital and for whom using the telephone is challenging. These include people with physical impairments as well as those where digital remains a physical barrier or something they don't wish to engage with.

In some Ageing Better areas this has led to the "triple hybrid" - offering activities face-to-face, via telephone and via digital platforms. There are a number of additional reasons for maintaining a range of delivery methods on a longer-term basis. These include:

- The need to maintain flexibility in order to be able to quickly respond to any future Covid related restrictions.
- The need to be able to provide the flexibility to allow people to continue to engage with groups and activities despite fluctuating health.
- The emerging insight about how many people welcome the potential to plan to have face-to-face activity during the summer but then move to online delivery during the winter months.
- The importance of maintaining the digital skills that many older people have developed during the pandemic - maintaining some online activities will mean that these skills don't disappear but can be maintained and further supported.

Key message: The ongoing provision of activities via a range of delivery methods would appear to be the ideal, resulting in a choice of access routes to suit an individual's requirements, their "digital" and physical abilities and importantly how they want to engage.

Finding the resource balance

Resources are finite and for most organisations offering a complete package of face-to-face opportunities alongside a complete digital or telephone offer is unrealistic. Organisations will therefore be looking to find the balance between continuing some

digital opportunities but also offering the equally vital face-to-face opportunities to help people reconnect as part of the Covid-19 recovery.

There is good reason to maintain a hybrid model of delivery. The challenge for the sector is to work together to meet this evolving need. Now that so many online and telephone offers have been developed and proved effective we need to keep those - they have represented a lifeline for many and have shown how important they are as part of a flexible package to support people through changes in health, seasons and mood.

One interesting insight from the hybrid delivery work we have undertaken is the need for an “attitude investment”. Those organisations that have recognised digital is here to stay in the medium to long term appear to be reaping the rewards of their investment, not just in technology but in the ongoing engagement with people through digital tools.

Across 7 years of operation, Ageing Better areas have been able to offer a varied programme of activity. This has seen the third sector work collaboratively to offer a range of different activities and opportunities. In our learning work we have called this the “Ecosystem”. The ecosystem works to provide a wide range of different opportunities that help prevent social isolation and loneliness or provide an exit route for those who have been supported to be more socially connected. The key message of the Ageing Better ecosystem is that no one organisation alone can prevent social isolation or loneliness - to work effectively the ecosystem depends on collaboration and a network of partnership working.

Not everything will return to face-to-face but equally online does not work for all. Within the sector and when looking at individual local ecosystems it will be important to recognise that some organisations and agencies are best suited to delivering in particular ways and to specific client groups as a result of language, sensory impairment, health conditions etc., There will be a need to look locally during this period of rebalancing and be honest about areas where there may be too much similar delivery as well as in identifying any gaps in provision for particular groups.

Key message: Hybrid delivery that offers choices and different platforms to engage will continue to be hugely important but not all organisations need to necessarily offer all the platforms. Some service providers have found they can reach more people through telephone or digital platforms and are slower to return to face-to-face models. This is a further transition point for the sector in finding a new balance in the market in terms of delivery methods and provision. Through more collaborative working and effective signposting people aged 50+ can have more choice in how they engage with their social connections.

Delivering digitally

This learning paper provides insight for projects specifically delivering digital inclusion projects but it also includes insight for projects delivering wider projects with a digital element. In this final section we summarise the key learning around delivering digitally:

- People are disengaged from digital for a huge variety of reasons. Cost is a very real barrier for some people. But it is also sometimes used as a mask for a lack of confidence. Taking the sensitive and person centred approach can help unpick and understand what the individual barriers are and then support the

person through them.

- The motivation for someone going online is hugely important. Helping someone understand the personal benefits to *them* of going online or engaging with a digital project will help encourage them to engage. If you are developing a project with a digital component, incorporate time to allow those vital one-to-one conversations to help people connect online, as your project may be the motivation they need.
- The digital world can, for some, just seem too big and so it is important to “chunk it down” into more relatable “bitesize” elements. This is particularly important for those projects that are specifically looking to build digital skills. We also heard about the importance of providing or packaging the support to allow people to achieve the thing they had identified - sometimes that will mean using only a part of an App. This also includes offering people the opportunity to take small steps and without the expectation to do all things digital all at once.
- It is very easy to use a lot of jargon when talking about the online world and this can be very off-putting to people who already lack confidence or are nervous of appearing stupid. Ideally don't start conversations about how to use specific technology by name i.e. social media but instead build on the conversation you had with the individual concentrating on the thing they wanted to achieve. Talking about doing the grocery shop, or being able to see a grandchild etc., rather than Skype, downloading and access
- Delivering a digital offer that engages people who are socially isolated or lonely is not necessarily a way of delivering activities cheaply. Good digital sessions require multiple staff or volunteers and they need skilled facilitators, confident working in the digital environment. Incorporating a digital component should be viewed as a clear, costed component, not an add on that can be delivered without any additional resource
- Hybrid delivery is likely to be an increasingly important component of projects delivered by the third sector. Digital delivery helps those people who are house bound, find it difficult to get out or have caring responsibilities that limit what they can do. However, social isolation can be damaging to people and offering face-to-face opportunities is equally important. It is important to factor the cost of both into budgets and to allow sufficient resource for both.

Further information

- Ageing Better national learning reports
[Telephone Befriending](#)
[Groups](#)
- Age Better in Birmingham - [Staying Connected - Guidance for AB groups in adapting to Covid-19](#)
[Maintaining social connections with older people remotely](#)
- Age Better in Sheffield - [Smart Phones Smart Friends](#)

- Ageing Better in Camden - [Creating a warm welcome to maintain older people's sense of belonging in the context of Covid-19: a practitioners guide](#)
[Providing support for digital engagement](#)
- Ageing Better in Middlesbrough - [Supporting people over 50 to become digitally included](#)
- Ageless Thanet Film - [How many activities do you think you can do online](#)
- Ambition for Ageing (Greater Manchester) - [Developing social contact models in a time of social distancing](#)

Literature review [Use of information and Communication Technologies to support social connections for older people](#)

- Bristol Ageing Better - [What has the Bristol Support Hub for Older People learnt about online and group activities](#)

[Using technology to reach and engage with people aged 50+](#)

- Connect Hackney - [Can the use of technology help to reduce social isolation and loneliness](#)
- East Lindsey (TED) - [Digital Inclusion](#)
[ConnecTED at distance?](#)

[How to Guides](#)

- Time to Shine (Leeds) - [Exploring the online world](#)
[Helping people to get online](#)
[Sharing creative ideas to keep Zoom groups fresh and fun](#)

More detail on our wider insights from across the Programme to date together with an overview summary of our learning to date are available at [Ageing Better](#)