

Groups

– 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+.

We have grouped our national learning around Ageing Better into three themes:

- **CONTEXT** - We know from Ageing Better that the reasons for social isolation are many and varied and happen for a myriad of reasons including macro issues such as inequalities and deprivation as well as personal circumstances. These often occur in combination meaning people's situations are complex.
- **CONNECTIONS** - The people who are most socially isolated (where isolation is entrenched and embedded) will need some level of one-to-one support to help address their isolation.
- **ECOSYSTEM** - The Ecosystem is fundamental to addressing social isolation as it is the space where individuals connect with the community. It works preventatively to keep people socially connected and steps in when social isolation occurs. It includes interventions that people 'need'; activities and groups people 'want' to engage with; opportunities and provision for people to set up their own groups and community development, that includes age friendly activity.

This paper focuses on our learning around Groups. It fits into our national learning in the following ways:

- **Developing the ECOSYSTEM** - providing activities and groups people 'want' to engage with and opportunities and provision for people to set up their own groups

Role of groups in reducing social isolation

Our learning from Ageing Better is that active participation in some form of shared social experience has a wide range of positive benefits to people's levels of social

isolation, loneliness and overall wellbeing.

We have referenced in many of our learning reports the important role which groups play. We have found that people who are part of a group(s) can be “buffered” against some of the risk factors for social isolation. In addition, we have also found that groups are an important exit route and “connection” into other things for people who are being supported to manage their own social isolation and loneliness. Being a member of and feeling part of a group provides people with some resilience when they experience one or more further risk factors for social isolation such as bereavement, ill health etc.,

Groups do this by providing people with an opportunity for regular social connection as well as a sense of purpose. This can be by providing structure (a regular event) to their day or week or by providing people with something positive and focussed to do and engage with. Groups work in many different ways to help reduce people’s individual levels of social isolation as well as helping to prevent social isolation happening in the first place.

People frequently comment that attending groups face-to-face enables them to get out of their home, meet new people, socialise and not be alone. Increased social contact in a friendly environment helps them to feel less isolated and encourages them to go out again as a result. Developing and running groups that people actually want to attend, however, is crucial. The activity provided by or in a group can be a “hook” to encourage participation.

Groups can have a wide range of different foci and purpose. They can bring people together to share food, to discuss or engage in a shared interest or a shared life experience (e.g. being a carer) or they can be informal arrangements that bring people together over a cup of tea.

Some people are attracted to groups that offer an opportunity to socialise. However, our learning is that this isn’t usually the “hook” for older men to join groups and that they are more likely to be interested in pursuing a particular interest, pastime or helping out with particular tasks. We have also learnt that whatever the focus of the group it is important to make space and time for people to simply chat to one another - providing an environment within which natural friendships can develop.

Across Ageing Better we have, broadly speaking, worked and supported three types of activity around groups:

1. Supporting people aged 50+ to establish their own group.
2. Providing support to existing groups to make their group more stable, open to new members, or more welcoming to a wider range of people.
3. Setting up new groups (with paid staff support) that respond to need/s in the local community.

Regardless of their focus or specialism all groups benefit from people aged 50+ being active leaders in the design, management and organisation of the activity.

Key Message: Groups have an important role to play in both the prevention of social isolation and loneliness and as an exit route and connection to other things as people become less socially isolated and lonely. Groups have an important role in providing social connection but also in providing people with a structure and purpose. All groups benefit from people aged 50+ playing an active role within them.

Groups and the support they need

Ageing Better aims to learn about and address social isolation in communities and a substantial amount of resource has gone into developing different types of groups. We fully recognise that many groups operate without support and are fully run and managed by the community. However, our learning also highlights the importance and need for some input from paid staff to get groups started, to support groups to grow and sometimes to run and manage them.

Ageing Better has also specifically focused on people aged 50+ who are socially isolated. Our learning is that for groups to be effective and meaningful, especially for socially isolated older people, they need a skilled facilitator. Although some groups are able to find this in a volunteer, they will often need training and support and there is an ongoing role for paid staff to support people with more complex needs to attend groups.

Groups need different support when they are setting up and when they are growing (throughout their lifecycle) and we set out our learning below.

Establishing and supporting groups

Volunteer led groups

Through Ageing Better funding, areas have been able to provide resource to develop volunteer led groups.

Some areas, such as Ageing Well Torbay, have taken a pure Asset Based Community Development approach to developing groups. In this model a paid community worker, nurtures a person's idea or skill, often leading to the development of an informal group. Over time this could be supported to develop into a more formal group.

In other areas, such as Age Better in Sheffield, small pots of funding and paid support were made available to people to help establish their own groups. In other cases, such as Time to Shine (Leeds), people aged 50+ identified a gap in the local community and worked with a local organisation and their paid staff, to help establish something in the community, responding to that need or gap.

We found a wide variety of different people could be supported to start groups. This includes people aged 50+ who have a wide range of expertise from their personal and/or professional lives which they could apply when establishing their own volunteer led groups. With support from Ageing Better they have been encouraged and supported to take part in and often then lead groups. Here the support will often have been around the practical elements of establishing and running a group such as where they can look for funding, active listening or skills development.

Ageing Better has also been able to support people over a much longer period than many programmes can. This has been key as we know social isolation and loneliness impacts on people's levels of self confidence and esteem. This ability to work with people experiencing social isolation and loneliness over a longer period of time, working in a person centred way and developing a relationship built on trust has been a key piece of learning throughout Ageing Better and very much applies to our learning around groups. The longevity of the support on offer through Ageing Better means people have been able to take more time in building up an individual's level of self-confidence before taking on leadership or other roles within a group.

A key insight from our learning is that when developing groups they will often start slowly. There may be several weeks with only a small number of people taking part. We have heard that it is important to "keep the faith" at this stage allowing time for the group to develop and gain traction.

As a group becomes more established, they may have a range of potential practical support requirements. This can include support to become a constituted group or help with informal advice and support. Often there is a need to be able to check the rules with someone or see whether its ok to do something e.g. for example sharing phone numbers with each other. Our learning from Ageing Better is that a group at this stage of development benefits from a clear point of contact where they can gain the advice they need. This point of connection also means groups can be linked into wider support structures for example advice on how to apply for funding, constitute or specific training such as using Social Media.

We also found support could be helpful when navigating contact with other organisations. Often, Ageing Better groups are established or connected to reach people who may be “target” groups for other bodies. This can mean they want to use the group to further their own agenda. Although in many cases this can be mutually beneficial for both the group and the agency, the group may need support to say “no” sometimes or to negotiate the most appropriate time for outside agencies to attend.

Groups led and organised by paid staff

Although, as we have already mentioned, all groups benefit from involving their members in decision making, there is an important role for groups that are led and managed by paid staff.

Groups led by paid staff can often manage more complex referrals and can provide support to people with more complex needs. This is particularly important when considering referrals from social prescribing projects or from adult social care. This professional input also allows an assessment of a person’s needs to be made when joining a group.

Across Ageing Better we found some groups and their members e.g. carers or people living with dementia benefited from the opportunity to connect regularly with people in a similar situation. But they had so many other demands on their time and resources that they valued and benefited from the opportunity to be able to “just” attend without the added pressure of running or organising the sessions themselves.

Key Message: Groups can be started by volunteers or by paid staff. Anyone can be supported to start a group but the longevity of Ageing Better means socially isolated people could be supported over a longer period to develop their confidence and skills. A range of practical support is needed for groups as they establish. There is an important role for groups organised and run by paid staff as they allow more complex referrals and a reach to people who do not have time to volunteer.

Growing groups and making people feel welcome

Once groups are established they often need support to grow. Although some volunteer led groups will have a stable membership, most groups benefit from new members and growing or expanding their membership.

Marketing and promotion

Throughout the Ageing Better Programme we have learnt how important the use of language is and the impact that the “wrong” terms can have. This is equally true in work linked to groups.

It is important to use positive language when marketing and promoting groups as well as in promoting the benefits of the activity, such as making new friends and learning new things. Many people don't see themselves as 'old' or may be reluctant to admit they are isolated. People might be put off joining if the group or activity is advertised as for 'older' people or has the aim of reducing loneliness. Many areas have learnt to try and avoid jargon and words that suggest groups or activity are for people who may be struggling.

We have also learnt that when trying to encourage people to get involved, words like 'volunteer' may also be off-putting for some people, as this suggests a regular commitment or hard work, when what is needed might be more informal, flexible and enjoyable.

Making people feel welcome

We have learnt how important building relationships are, of taking the time to get to know an individual and being person centred. Building a personal element into developing a group is important - making sure people feel that they are cared for, listened to and that activities and groups are interested in them as an individual. This can be particularly important if people perceive or encounter "cliques" at groups which can make them feel excluded.

All of the Ageing Better areas have identified the importance of providing a warm welcome in order to have successful groups. Research by Ageing Better in Camden found the level of welcome in community groups impacted on older people's wellbeing, both in the short and long term, as well as on their attendance - older people will stop attending groups they perceive as unwelcoming. To address this they identified a range of factors that are fundamental to creating a welcoming atmosphere in community activities. These include meeting and greeting, introductions, seating arrangements, opportunities for social interaction and relationship building, fostering a sense of community and various communication strategies. They have also developed a specific training package and support offer that encourages this warm welcome.

Group facilitator

A further key learning from Ageing Better is the important role the facilitator plays in making the group a success and in helping groups to grow and welcome new members. In this context the facilitator is the formal or informal position leading the group. The facilitator can be paid or unpaid and the role can also be split across several different people, but the "facilitator" plays a critical role in helping groups to be successful.

For many the idea of attending a group is nerve wracking and many find reasons not to attend as the fear can be overwhelming. When an individual attends a group and has a positive experience they can flourish, develop friendships and feel a connection to the community. If the experience is a negative one however, and the individual feels unwelcome or excluded this is likely to put them off attending this or other groups in the future. Creating a warm welcome is a particularly critical responsibility for facilitators. This responsibility needs to be enabled through appropriate resourcing and training.

A welcoming approach needs to be built into activity design - to allow opportunities for social interaction within the session itself or at the start or end. Facilitators should be able to spend time with individuals and participants need to have time to talk together either during or after an activity.

Facilitators need to manage group dynamics in order to allow friendships to form,

encourage attendance, but also to ensure new people are able to join without feeling excluded from those already established relationships. Strategies include: encouraging inclusion; making extra effort with unfriendly individuals, adjusting seating arrangements, and reiterating and/or formalising the ethos of being welcoming.

A facilitator needs to have a range of skills including a sense of humour, a positive attitude and a warm, caring, non-judgemental and encouraging personality. Ideally they have good people skills and help make people feel good about themselves throughout the session. This is key to supporting people want to be a member and remain part of a group. Across the groups established through Ageing Better, we kept hearing about the vital importance of making people feel welcomed and supporting them to integrate into the group. Running supportive and welcoming groups requires ongoing work and commitment including regular reviews to assess whether the group continues to be open and friendly.

Being neutral is also a key criterion - older people who had experienced conflict with others in groups reported the importance of impartiality. They appreciated facilitators who do not show favouritism and who tried to engage with everyone in the same way.

Key Message: Attracting new group members and encouraging existing members to support the group often requires careful use of language to attract and engage people. Making people feel welcome is a key part to supporting people to attend initially and continue to attend sessions. A group facilitator plays a critical role in helping the group function well.

Digital Groups and Hybrid delivery

Covid-19 fundamentally changed how some groups are delivered. Some groups shifted to a solely digital offer and there is now a clearly evolving hybrid model of delivery. Our 'Delivering Digital Projects' learning report provides more insight around the practical elements of digital delivery.

Hybrid delivery includes delivering activities and projects across multiple platforms, including 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.

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.

Embracing the difference of digital delivery

Digital groups will be different from face to face groups and subsequently the experience they offer 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. The 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 the greatest potential.

This means looking at it as a different medium - not as "simply" moving a class or group online. There is a wider spectrum of support needs and organisational requirements to consider including ensuring that people have the right kit and the right on-going support for them to use it as well as also thinking about the best way to organise and facilitate an activity online.

Co-production has been a key principle within Ageing Better but projects found that when first introducing and supporting people to access digital sessions or opportunities it was more helpful to start in a more directive way with an initial narrow range of options from which people could select. This then allows people to gain more confidence more quickly. Being too optimistic and opening the door to the huge opportunities presented by technology initially can, for many be overwhelming and lead to decision paralysis.

Running effective online groups requires both a facilitator or chair and someone to look after the technical side. It therefore needs to be remembered and acknowledged by organisations and commissioners looking to deliver effective digital activities to this demographic that such delivery does not necessarily mean "cheaper".

Telephone groups

"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 to support 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 participant 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.

The maximum optimum size for a telephone group seems to be 4 or 5 so as to ensure people aren'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.

Practicalities to consider when running telephone or online groups

There are some specific considerations to consider when running groups that include a telephone or digital element. These include:

- Create opportunities for informal social interaction at the start and end of a session whether face to face or online. Additional ways to develop the social interaction and connectedness include setting up WhatsApp or Facebook groups alongside activities so that people can chat between sessions.
- Have a “getting to know you” session for telephone groups - particularly important due to the lack of body language and other visual clues.
- Continue to look at creating a warm welcome for participants - many of the principles continue to be adaptable for online and telephone groups.
- Think local - for many online Ageing Better activities and groups keeping the sessions and activities authentically local remains important. This links back to earlier 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.
- Utilise the opportunities online provides for wider connection and greater choice - digital platforms also play an important role in helping dispersed groups to connect. The range of online activities increases the chance of there being a group that an individual wants to be part of and connect with.
- Continue to use a wide range of tools and techniques to reach people. These include non-digital tools, such as printed newsletters, directing people to digital opportunities as well as social media. Social media can be very useful as a way for family and friends to access to link people to opportunities.
- Provide a technology “lead” or facilitator - Online groups require the facilitator role to effectively cover two elements, 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 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.
- Support the facilitator to adapt to the needs of online groups. The facilitator helps to set the group’s culture as well as its rules and expectations. In the online environment these include etiquette around “muting”, rules on speaking in the group, what to do if people lose internet connection and use of names before speaking.
- Support people to engage with the session - Taking part in a digital session requires people to feel supported so that they are able to not only contribute but equally to be an active listener and allow others to speak. 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.
- Think about group numbers - groups of 8 to 12 people seem to be the optimum

size, although numbers can be larger if the session is more of a talk or presentation.

Practical considerations for all groups

Our learning also identified a range of practical considerations to have in place when supporting and growing groups. This includes both face to face, digital and hybrid delivery.

- **The growth of groups needs to be managed carefully** - We found it was unhelpful if a group was suddenly flooded with new members as it could be damaging to the existing group dynamic. There was considerable benefit in a slow and steady rise in group members. Some groups also have a natural size to them and supporting groups to say no to new members was sometimes needed as much as supporting groups to be open to new members. This applies equally to digital groups. An influx of new members means it can be difficult for some of the important social connections to be made.
- **Providing drop-in or welcome sessions can help new members attend for the first time** - Drop-in or welcome sessions for new members can provide a stepping stone to existing groups and can help reduce some barriers. We also identified that groups with a clear purpose and target audience work well e.g. bereavement, carers support as there is a shared purpose and understanding of members' needs. This common bond can be beneficial and encourage openness and empathy - attending can be a stepping stone and provide an opportunity to develop bonds with others in a safe environment. Small groups have enabled individuals to build confidence, recognise their own strengths and rediscover their ability to make conversation.
- **Groups are not there to provide a “sitting” service** - It is important for all stakeholders working with people aged 50+ to recognise that groups are not designed to provide a “sitting” function i.e. to look after and care for people. This is not to say people with additional needs will not be welcomed in groups, rather it is important for wider partners, particularly those referring people to the group (such as Link Workers) to understand the role of any particular group and its capacity.
- **Some groups are not open to new members** - Although the aim is that all groups will be welcoming to all - there will be times when an established group is working effectively for its membership but is not “open” to new members. This needs to be identified and acknowledged and where possible a new group formed for new members to join.
- **Successful groups involve group members in decision making** - Older people at the heart of decision-making is a key ethos within Ageing Better. Successful groups involve their members in running them. Active involvement helps to build a sense of community and friendship among those attending. This helps to create a stronger, more resilient group, with a greater chance of it continuing and being sustainable. It is important to take the time to speak to people to find out how they wish to be involved and to match this with what they can offer. Small and larger groups have worked well when all participants are able to shape and contribute to their development. This can be as simple as asking people for a theme for the next discussion or to shape a plan of activities. Skilled and sensitive workers and volunteers can help harness the contribution of those who may feel they have little to contribute. We have also found within Ageing Better that volunteers are often recruited from

previous participants who have been encouraged to value and identify their own skills.

- **Contributions to running a group can be different** - Remember that people are different and there are lots of ways in which people can contribute to making the activity or group a success - this includes bringing food to share, welcoming newcomers, making refreshments as well as sharing ideas, skills and talents. There are a range of elements needed in making a group successful and these will also appeal to different people - such as finding a suitable venue, organising refreshments, handling money or arranging speakers or tutors. Having a range of people with different skills is an advantage. Be clear on the roles and expectations of volunteers and ask them to help you, creating new roles as required.
- **Sharing roles and responsibilities within a group can improve its sustainability** - Over-reliance on one or two individuals can be a reason for some groups being unable to continue. When these individuals can no longer take on the same level of responsibility (e.g. because of changes in interests or life circumstances) then others in the group are often unwilling to step up, sometimes because they have seen the level of responsibility that it can involve. A group which shares roles and responsibilities amongst its members is more likely to be sustainable in the longer-term.
- **Reciprocity can extend beyond helping out at the group** - We have learnt the vital importance of reciprocity, being able to 'give something back' and its role in helping people to feel valued. Think about how a group contributes to the community or good causes, for example, some craft groups make articles that are sold to raise money for charity and gardening groups help to make community spaces more attractive.
- **Some groups will only work if they start at a particular time of year** - Start groups at the right time of year. For example, starting groups that make use of the outdoors often worked better when established in spring. We also found some groups could be seasonal, taking place over the winter when less outdoor activity was available.
- **The timing of a group can impact attendance** - Think about how long and how often your group will meet. Activities need to be long enough for people to feel attending is worthwhile, but not so long that it is seen as a chore. We found it important to avoid timing activities so that people have to travel during rush hour or when free bus travel is not available.
- **Regular groups work better than one off events** - Groups that meet regularly tend to be more successful in tackling social isolation than one-off events. But we found groups could effectively use trips and celebrations (such as Christmas lunches) as a way to encourage new members to join and to help generate new friendships.
- **Think about the people attending and what their barriers to attending might be** - For some older people getting out of the front door is one of the biggest hurdles to overcoming loneliness. This might be due to safety concerns, lack of confidence in doing something new, cost or mobility difficulties. We found it important for groups to think about how these issues could be overcome during the planning phase. The location of your activity is important. Some people may be prepared to travel, so links with public transport are important, but many often prefer to attend activities locally and

within walking distance. If transport is necessary, we found it useful to see whether members could travel together e.g. using a trusted taxi service that sees people to their door. We also found it was important to be flexible about your venue. Groups don't always need a formal meeting room (which you may need to pay for); some work well in an informal setting such as a local café.

- **Think inclusivity** - consider some of the broader barriers there may be to wider attendance. This may include a venue's disabled access, availability of toilets as well as how people attending with a visual or hearing impairment will be included. It also includes considering whether it represents a safe space for LGBT+ or other marginalised communities¹.
- **Only run groups weekly or monthly** - Finally we found groups worked best when they were either weekly or monthly. Any other frequency was confusing for everyone involved!

Further information

- Ageing Better national learning
Delivering Digital projects
[Role of food in building connections & relationships](#)
[Telephone befriending](#)
[Use of language](#)
[Index to Ageing Better national learning reports](#)
 - Age Better Bristol - [Making your project more accessible & inclusive](#)
[Engaging older people with sight loss, hearing loss, dual sensory loss or experience of substance misuse](#)
[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+](#)
 - Age Better in Birmingham - [Staying Connected - Guidance for AB groups in adapting to Covid-19](#)
[Maintaining social connections with older people remotely](#)
[Tackling social isolation and loneliness in older people - Top Tips for a successful activity](#)
 - Ageing Better in Camden - [Like a whole big family- what makes groups](#)
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[welcoming to older people?](#)

[Warm Welcome Toolkit](#)

[Practitioners Guide](#)

[Creating a warm welcome to maintain older people's sense of belonging in the context of Covid-19: a practitioner's guide](#)

[Providing support for digital engagement](#)

- Ageless Thanet - film [Lessons learnt from running group activities](#)
- 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](#)

- Connect Hackney - [Can the use of technology help to reduce social isolation and loneliness](#)
- Time to Shine (Leeds) - Shared Tables [Shared Tables](#)
[Setting up a Shared Tables project in your area](#)
Film about [Community Connections through shared meals](#)
[Exploring the online world](#)
[Sharing creative ideas to keep Zoom groups fresh and fun](#)
[Running a supportive and welcoming group - Toolkit](#)
[Ideas on how to include people with a learning disability](#) (Bee Together)

More information on the Ageing Better Programme together including insights from across the programme are available at [Ageing Better](#)