

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

It is based on the learning and insights from eight Ageing Better areas: Leeds, Leicester, Thanet and Torbay who all attended a workshop to explore this theme plus learning reports produced by Birmingham, Bristol, Camden and Leeds.

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 our earlier papers on Community Connectors, Working with Community Assets, Working and Engaging with Older Men and Positive Mental Wellbeing 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. We have also heard that 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 enable them to get out of their homes, 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 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 because they share a 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 or 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.

<p>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</p>
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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 groups.

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, to respond 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 in 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. We found with this group 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.

However, Ageing Better has also been able to support people over a much longer period than many programmes can (up to 4-5 years). This means it has also been able to support people who have less confidence in their own skills. This ability to work with people experiencing social isolation and loneliness over a period of time and so able to build a trusted relationship and work in a person centred way 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 their confidence before taking on such leadership or other roles within a group.

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

As a group becomes 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 connected 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 are “target” groups for other agencies. 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 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 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 and to promote 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 with 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 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 impacts on older people's wellbeing, both in the short and long term, and 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 and we have provided more detail on this in Appendix 1.

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 of 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 people 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 negative 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 whether throughout a session or at times around it. 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 which allow friendships to form, which encourage attendance, but also ensure new people are able to join without feeling excluded from those 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 they make people feel good about themselves throughout the session. This is key to making people want to be 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 as well as 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 they need impartiality. They appreciated facilitators who do not show favouritism and try 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 sessions. A group facilitator plays a critical role in helping the group function well.

Wider considerations

Our learning also identified a range of practical considerations to check are in place when supporting and growing groups.

- **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.
- **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. one group uses 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!

<p>Key Message: Ongoing communication is needed with referral partners so they understand the role of any particular group. Growth of groups needs to be</p>

¹ Please see our Ageing Better learning reports and linked resources below which share our wider learning on working with a range of groups including carers

managed carefully and some groups have a natural size to them. It is important to start groups at the right time of year depending on the activity and to hold groups weekly or monthly to help people remember when they are on.

Appendix 1 – Warm Welcome

All of the Ageing Better areas have identified the importance of providing a warm welcome in order to have successful groups, with Camden in particular having looked very closely at what this means and ways to achieve it. The level of welcome in community groups impacts on older people's wellbeing, both short and long term, and on their attendance - older people will stop attending groups they perceive as unwelcoming.

The ethos of a welcoming group is critical, with an explicit recognition of, and commitment to, providing a welcoming environment. This should be a top down approach from senior management to volunteers and requires buy-in from all front facing staff with reception being a key role. Staff carrying out the various tasks identified as creating a positive welcome, and crucially in modelling welcoming behaviour helps the entire group take on the shared responsibility of a welcoming atmosphere.

What makes a group welcoming?

- A clear ethos and shared responsibility for being welcoming

Whilst everyone should take some responsibility for making a group welcoming, it is the facilitator who needs to have an overview of how the approach is working in practice and to ensure it is happening on the ground on a continual basis. This is an ongoing responsibility for the duration of the activity/session which goes beyond the initial welcome. This must also be revisited over time to ensure that groups remain welcoming for newcomers and more established members alike.

Reception staff are often the first point of contact for older people arriving at an activity. For those who are hesitant about joining, the interaction with reception staff can define whether they perceive a group as welcoming or not, and even influence whether they return. Reception staff should look directly at people arriving (rather than at their computers), ask names, help them to understand who everyone is and try to get to know people who come back regularly.

The key factor is that someone, whatever their role, should meet and greet new arrivals, acknowledging them, smiling, and helping them to find where they need to be.

- Introductions

The facilitator of an activity should introduce new people to an existing group. This is especially helpful in the initial moments of meeting a group, but knowing names facilitates ongoing conversation and helps people to have a sense of belonging in a group. So how groups handle introductions can have a longer lasting impact than might be initially understood.

While facilitators should introduce all newcomers, this can be done in a variety of ways e.g. to one other person or to the whole group, names only or more background information, or through a blurb in a members' newsletter. In some groups all members give their names at the beginning of the session as a way of helping to "break the ice" for everybody coming back together as well as helping those new to the group.

- Refreshments

Refreshments are commonly available in community activities. These help people feel welcome in a group and offer an easy opportunity to speak to someone i.e. saying hello and offering tea or coffee go hand in hand. This is also a task that could be carried out by anyone in the group, not only the facilitator but by group members themselves; anyone can offer or make those arriving a tea or coffee or let them know they can help themselves.

- Group size/staffing ratios

Smaller groups are more welcoming; larger groups make it harder for participants to get to know each other. However, this may also be affected by staffing ratios. Larger groups can still be welcoming as long as there are enough staff to spend time with participants.

- Being aware of individual needs

For participants to feel like they 'fit' in a group, facilitators need to be aware of different needs and adapt activities to suit, whether this is physical, language-related or related to levels of experience. This may include facilitators explaining things to everyone individually if needed, going around the room checking to ensure all understand, or keeping an eye out for those who may need additional support or reassurance to feel welcome.

It also reflects that staff have taken time to get to know someone; knowing that someone has remembered something they mentioned makes people feel cared for and valued.

- Seating arrangements

Seating arrangements can make a huge difference to maximising opportunities for conversation and friendly social interactions. It can be useful to change the seating every week not allowing set places for people and so trying to avoid "cliques" developing. Think about using small tables and/or circular seating to encourage conversations. Also think about using small group activities to break up larger groups to encourage people to change tables, move around and mix with others.

Reserved seats can be very unwelcoming to new and regular participants but there may be reasons why people need to be able to sit in usual seats at certain groups, either because of friendship or because they help specific people with difficulties e.g. Parkinson's or disability. Facilitators can help by being aware of seating issues,

finding seats for newcomers and making introductions, and intervening to prevent or resolve any conflict which arises over seating.

- Encouraging social interactions

Although many participants will be attending groups because they want to talk to others, some may not. There is sometimes a balance between trying to make someone feel included and being intrusive. Community groups can set out to encourage social interaction as sometimes it doesn't happen naturally, but also be aware of different personalities and needs in the group.

Having someone, usually a facilitator or volunteer, who encourages conversation or social interactions helps to create an atmosphere and an ethos that people talk to each other in this setting. Light-hearted activities and humour (e.g. dance, theatre, exercise, icebreakers) create a certain atmosphere which may be more welcoming or friendlier, by generating jokes or shared laughter at something the group is doing. Design activities to include opportunities for social interaction. Some activities allow a great deal of conversation at the same time e.g. craft activities, while others mean individuals are task-focused, and may need additional opportunities, such as scheduled trips, or a dedicated time for tea/coffee at the end of a session.

Groups like coffee mornings can be really beneficial but project workers have found it useful to have activities like quizzes, or games so that everyone can be part of the group without necessarily having the pressure to engage in conversation

- Developing relationships & fostering a sense of belonging

Getting to know each other creates a friendly and welcoming atmosphere where people then want to return to. This ranges from people expressing concern for each other during activities to friendships where people see each other outside groups. Relationships develop through the opportunities for social interaction described above, as participants recognise each other, ask after each other, notice if someone is not well, and are remembered if they have not attended the group for a while.

- Communication beyond group activities

Some groups participants receive weekly texts or phone calls for activities they regularly attend. Reminders (via phone, text and in some cases WhatsApp groups), can be especially welcomed by those with memory issues, and others appreciate the fact that it indicates that they are remembered and viewed as a member of a group. Other people may not want or welcome such reminders and can be given the opportunity to opt out.

A reminder phone call can also act as a way of checking in with the person and can be particularly helpful after an absence as a way of communicating concern and that the person was missed.

Further information

- Time to Shine (Leeds) - Shared Tables [Shared Tables](#)
Setting up a shared table - [Toolkit](#)
Film about [Community Connections through shared meals](#)

Running a supportive and welcoming group - [Toolkit](#)
[Ideas on how to include people with a learning disability](#) (Bee Together)
Leeds Community Connect - setting up groups in rural villages - [Casestudy](#)
- Age Better Camden - [Like a whole big family- what makes groups welcoming to older people?](#)
- Ageing Better in Birmingham - [Tackling social isolation and loneliness in older people - Top Tips for a successful activity](#)
- Age Better Bristol - [Reaching & engaging older people with dementia](#)
[Making your project more accessible & inclusive](#)
[Engaging older people with sight loss, hearing loss, dual sensory loss or experience of substance misuse](#)
- Ageless Thanet - film [Lessons learnt from running group activities](#)

Adapting to Covid-19

- Age Better in Birmingham - [Staying Connected - Guidance for AB groups in adapting to Covid-19](#)
- Bristol Ageing Better - [What has the Bristol Support Hub for Older People learnt about online and group activities](#)
- Ambition for Ageing (Greater Manchester) - [Developing social contact models in a time of social distancing](#)

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