



Micro-funding decision making panel, Oldham, Greater Manchester

Ageing Better



Ageing Better: How we are responding to COVID-19

The Ageing Better programme

Ageing Better is a six-year programme which has funded 14 England-wide partnerships to address the issues of loneliness and social isolation in communities of people aged over 50. Commencing in 2015, the programme was entering its sixth year when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. This is the first in a series of rapid review papers, which summarise key features of Ageing Better partnerships' responses, in reorganising their support to reach people over 50 most affected by the pandemic. Each paper will explore a different theme and culminate in a longer review due to be published in the Autumn.

Please visit: [tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/ageing-better](https://www.communityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/ageing-better) to find out more.

We know that before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, social isolation and loneliness presented enduring challenges for society. Research found that 17% of older people report they are in contact with family, friends and neighbours less than once a week; 11% report this contact is as infrequent as less than once a month¹. Of people aged 55 and over, more than one quarter of men and two fifths of women report feeling lonely always or some of the time². The impacts of lockdown policies on social isolation and loneliness are yet to be fully realised. However, in a survey conducted in April, 26% of older people said they had felt lonely in the past 7 days³.

In response, individuals and organisations across the UK are working tirelessly to support people experiencing social isolation and loneliness. The COVID-19 pandemic presents unprecedented challenges for community initiatives. In the short-term, the ‘stay-at-home’ mandate, shielding the most vulnerable and social distancing measures brought many activities to a halt.

Before the pandemic, Ageing Better activities were primarily delivered in-person, complemented by some telephone and digital initiatives. The majority of these in-person activities are currently paused. This ranges from one-to-one support provided through social prescribing models⁴, mental health and counselling support⁵, through to diverse community group activities⁶.

The Ageing Better programme is underpinned by asset-based volunteering. Activities range from people over 50 volunteering on commissioning panels and delivering activities⁷, as well as providing practical peer support such as face-to-face befriending. Much of this activity is currently paused in response to government guidelines around shielding and social distancing.

¹ Age UK (2015) cited in Age UK (2019) Later Life in the United Kingdom 2019

https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/late_life_uk_factsheet.pdf

² British Red Cross (2016), Isolation and Loneliness: An overview of the literature

<https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/health-social-care-and-support/co-op-isolation-loneliness-overview.pdf>

³ Office for National Statistics (2020) Coronavirus and loneliness

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandloneliness>

⁴ For further information on Ageing Better’s initiatives linked to social prescribing, please view our

Community Connectors report https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/prog_fulfilling_lives_ageing_better_learning_report_2.pdf?mtime=20181219102827&focal=none

⁵ Positive Mental Health – learning from Ageing Better

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Positive-Mental-Health.pdf?mtime=20200131160425&focal=none>

⁶ For further information on Ageing Better’s group activities, please view our Marginalisation report:

https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/prog_fulfilling_lives_ageing_better_learning_report_4.pdf?mtime=20200313105446&focal=none

Adapting approaches

Alternative approaches to delivery were rapidly assessed by Ageing Better partnerships, and where possible, activities adapted to continue remotely. The Ageing Better national evaluation team are working with partnerships to identify learning about the transition to remote service delivery. These approaches are complementing the beginning of some socially distanced face-to-face activities, to support inclusive recovery and strengthen community connections. There are challenges in responding to demand since new people have stepped forward with needs during the pandemic. New needs are also emerging amongst existing participants/service users, such as people shielding or in lockdown experiencing mental health challenges. The Ageing Better programme is adapting in response to these challenges.

In this paper, we consider two key questions:

- *How have Ageing Better partnerships continued to support social connections during the COVID-19 pandemic?*
- *What are we learning that can enable the longer-term recovery of our communities?*

How has Ageing Better continued to support social connections during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Community organisations across the UK are continuing to support people over 50 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ageing Better partnerships re-designed face-to-face services to provide remote support as best they could and where feasible. Here we reflect on new approaches to aid the response and explore how some initiatives have continued with modifications.

New approaches supporting immediate needs and social connection during the lockdown

The COVID-19 outbreak requires people to connect with their communities in new and flexible ways. In response, Ageing Better partnerships have forged new partnerships and ways of working to enhance their support offer.

Building neighbourliness⁸ and reciprocity

There are new groups of people who have found themselves isolated and in need of support during the pandemic. Ageing Better partnerships have risen to this challenge, extending their reach through localised responses and using tried and tested ways of working to reach some of the most vulnerable. Asset-based, person-centred approaches⁹ continue to empower people, both to maintain their own connections and support others locally. Neighbourliness is known to have a positive effect on people's feelings of connection¹⁰. Neighbourliness has increased through the community response to COVID-19, and these social connections will hopefully be maintained to support community recovery.

The pandemic has highlighted the difference everyone can make by engaging in local community action and contributing to their community. This approach builds on asset-based principles, which empower local people to take the lead in designing and delivering local activities¹¹. Ageing Better responses are focusing on supporting older people to remain in the lead, rather than feeling disempowered by the pandemic. This sense of “all being in this together” is strengthening community spirit and may help reduce some of the psychological impacts caused by the pandemic¹². For example, in Torbay, Ageing Better is building this ethos into its service redesign, to increase agility in the longer term.

“It’s about fostering neighbourliness. We think that’s actually the future, rather than structured volunteering, which needs to be coordinated with resources we haven’t got.” (Ageing Better Partnership lead)

Ageing Better Torbay’s revised model complements community action with a coordinated helpline, which provides direct support and signposting to other services. The model is based on encouraging reciprocity, which Ageing Better partnerships have highlighted is central to building meaningful connections and relationships. By asking

⁸ Neighbourliness is defined as ‘the quality of being friendly or helpful to your neighbours.’
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/neighbourliness>

⁹ Working with community assets – learning from Ageing Better
<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Working-with-community-assets.pdf?mtime=20200519110231&focal=none>

¹⁰ British Red Cross (2020),

¹¹ For further information, please view our Micro-funding film and reports, which embody this approach.
<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/ageing-better#section-1>

¹² Covid-19 – learning from Ageing Better https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing_better_Covid19.pdf?mtime=20200408124030&focal=none

people how they can help and contribute, as well as checking if they need assistance, they can feel empowered to redefine their sense of purpose and rebuild confidence and motivation¹³.

“Underpinning our model...are two principles: harnessing kindness and fostering reciprocity. We’ve reached out to all....known isolated people over 50 through ourselves and other delivery partners—and where appropriate—we linked those into this new system we’ve created...[the] Torbay Community Coronavirus Helpline.”
(Ageing Better Partnership lead)

Ageing Better partnerships have also joined forces with other local partners, providing coordinated support through community hubs. For example, the Sheffield and Bristol partnerships are providing telephone assistance, offering emotional and practical support, and signposting to online activities.

Reconfiguring ‘bumping spaces’ through creative digital activity

Over time, Ageing Better partnerships have highlighted the importance of ‘bumping spaces’¹⁴, which provide opportunities for informal and light touch connections¹⁵. The transition to remote support is redefining these ‘bumping spaces’, particularly through the move to online activities. In response, some Ageing Better participants have become more responsive to digital services and learning digital skills. However, the pandemic has heightened the imperative of tackling the digital divide, to enable more people to adapt their social connections to online environments¹⁶.

Ageing Better partnerships are using a variety of approaches to enhance people over 50s digital inclusion. Approaches include providing telephone tech-support as some people are more comfortable and familiar with it¹⁷. Across the Ageing Better programme, telephone befriending services are providing essential support to

¹³ Covid-19 – learning from Ageing Better https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing_better_Covid19.pdf?mtime=20200408124030&focal=none

¹⁴ ‘Bumping spaces’ are defined as places designed to encourage people to meet up in informal settings. O’Donnell G et al. (2014) Wellbeing and Policy. Legatum Limited: The Legatum Institute

¹⁵ Covid-19 – learning from Ageing Better https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing_better_Covid19.pdf?mtime=20200408124030&focal=none

¹⁶ Covid-19 – learning from Ageing Better https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing_better_Covid19.pdf?mtime=20200408124030&focal=none

¹⁷ For example, in Sheffield, the Smart Phone Smart Friends project supported Chinese community members to build connections using mobile devices <https://www.agebettersheff.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SPSF-Project-Report-2-1.pdf>

vulnerable people, ranging from general wellbeing to tailored mental health support¹⁸. Middlesbrough's Ageing Better partnership highlights the value of telephone befriending in providing meaningful human contact and maintaining personal connections¹⁹.

Highlight: Adapting local responses

East Lindsey's Ageing Better partnership has built on existing approaches, adapting services to meet local needs and reduce social isolation and loneliness across a very rural area during the pandemic. Support is now available through a telephone befriending service, and signposting to other agencies. Fortnightly packs are emailed to participants, featuring news, reviews, quizzes, short stories, and recipes. This is complemented by a dedicated YouTube channel encouraging people to engage in purposeful activity, including exercise, healthy eating and using technology to stay connected. For example, the KnitTED Together campaign enables people to share pictures of creative knitting via social media.

Several Ageing Better partnerships, such as Bristol and the Isle of Wight, are also creating 'bumping spaces' through radio programmes coproduced by people over 50. The radio programmes create virtual 'bumping spaces' for people to co-design and co-deliver content together, and engage their local communities in discussion. For example, in response to the pandemic, the Babbers group in Bristol have developed skills to use new technology, with support, to produce their regular radio programme from their own homes instead of a local radio station. The group are united by a common purpose; to be part of the solution and motivated through peer support and common interests²⁰.

Approaches that have been adapted

The core principles underpinning many Ageing Better projects remain unaffected by the pandemic.

¹⁸ Telephone Befriending – learning from Ageing Better
<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Telephone-befriending.pdf?mtime=20200417150006&focal=none>

¹⁹ Ageing Better Middlesbrough. COVID 19 – New ways of working
<https://www.ageingbettermiddlesbrough.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/May-RSA-write-up-final-with-logos-1.pdf>

²⁰ Bridging the Digital Divide – learning from Ageing Better
<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Bridging-the-digital-divide.pdf?mtime=20200519104603&focal=none>

The role of ‘trusted’ individuals and organisations, and communities of interest

The most socially isolated people over 50 continue to need one-to-one support to help address their isolation²¹. Ageing Better partnerships know their local populations well, enabling them to tailor approaches to ensure marginalised groups, including some that are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, such as men and BAME²² groups, stay connected during this challenging time. For example, in Torbay trusted individuals known as ‘community builders’, embedded in neighbourhoods, are supporting vulnerable residents, including men living alone, ensuring they have access to essentials such as food, prescriptions, social contact and more. The Torbay model connects people around shared passion and interest. Torbay’s COVID-19 support is predicated on matching requests to the nearest offer, neighbours helping neighbours.

Meanwhile, BAME communities in Camden are reaching out to trusted organisations for support in a range of community languages; for example, Bangladeshi groups highlight the importance of connecting to others with common experiences at this time²³. This highlights the continued importance of communities of interest in building connections and providing peer support. Both before and during the pandemic, people over 50 are keen to connect with peers of the same ethnic origin, language, sexual orientation, health condition, in addition to people with shared hobbies and interests. Men in particular are keen to join in with a defined activity, and many can engage via telephone, video calls, or Skype whilst social distancing restrictions remain in place²⁴. Ageing Better in Birmingham has designed an accessible guide to support common interest groups to create ‘remote networks’²⁵.

Extending telephone befriending

The telephone provides a low-cost, accessible option for reaching vulnerable people over 50. Before the pandemic telephone support was often combined with face-to-face interventions. For some people over 50, a landline remains the most effective

²¹ Age Friendly - learning from Ageing Better <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/ageing-better#section-4>

²² Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities.

²³ For further information on supporting vulnerable groups, please view our Marginalisation report: https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/prog_fulfilling_lives_ageing_better_learning_report_4.pdf?mtime=20200313105446&focal=none

²⁴ Covid-19 – learning from Ageing Better https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing_better_Covid19.pdf?mtime=20200408124030&focal=none

²⁵ Ageing Better Birmingham. Maintaining social connections with older people remotely <https://www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk/media/attachments/2020/06/09/birmingham-ageing-better-learning-maintaining-social-connections-2020.pdf>

form of remote connection, partly because the cost of purchasing other equipment (smart phones, tablets or computers) and/or on-going data costs (internet or data packages) can be prohibitive²⁶.

Over time, Ageing Better partnerships have demonstrated the ability of telephone befriending to reach vulnerable people. This approach has provided a familiar lifeline for many Ageing Better participants during the pandemic.

Highlight: Enhancing connections through familiar routes

Birmingham's Ageing Better partnership has utilised telephone befriending services, to provide one-to-one support at scheduled times for a long time. This tried and tested inclusive approach works, as most people have a landline or mobile they are comfortable using.

Telephone befriending can also be a tool for introducing people to digital opportunities, combined with appropriate digital support²⁷. In this way, interventions have been enhanced to help participants and service users develop online connections safely and securely.

Diversifying digital activity already taking place

Although some digital activities were taking place on the Ageing Better programme before the pandemic, social distancing measures have increased interest amongst the over 50s in this communication channel. Ageing Better projects have adapted some face-to-face activities for delivery online, empowering people to maintain their independence and connections during the pandemic²⁸. Ageing Better in Camden has developed a digital skills/attitude spectrum to help organisations decide where to focus their resources by designing responses for groups with different levels of digital confidence, interest, skills, and support needs. Projects have incorporated their core principles into online delivery mechanisms; ensuring approaches remain person-centred and can be enjoyed at the pace of each individual. Approaches include

²⁶ Bridging the Digital Divide – learning from Ageing Better

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Bridging-the-digital-divide.pdf?mtime=20200519104603&focal=none>

²⁷ Bridging the Digital Divide – learning from Ageing Better

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Bridging-the-digital-divide.pdf?mtime=20200519104603&focal=none>

²⁸ Bridging the Digital Divide – learning from Ageing Better

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Bridging-the-digital-divide.pdf?mtime=20200519104603&focal=none>

providing “digital hooks” such as connecting with family and friends via video calls, shopping online, watching programmes in community languages, and keeping up with a hobby or interest²⁹.

Ageing Better partnerships also consistently highlight the value of providing friendly and patient support to assist people to use technology and develop troubleshooting know-how and skills. This should be accompanied by initial training, reference guides, and on-going bespoke support as needed. For example, Ageing Better Middlesbrough introduce people to technology, encourage them to test it, and offer follow-up support sessions to answer any questions. Ageing Better partnerships also highlight the importance of packaging digital support into “bitesize” chunks in everyday language that people can easily relate to³⁰. In this way, digital approaches are bringing continuity to some vulnerable people’s lives during an otherwise uncertain time.

Delivering support and activities within social distancing guidelines

Delivery systems are changing in response to COVID-19 and remote delivery, including digital services, are key to community recovery. Ageing Better partnerships are redesigning training for staff and volunteers, helping to recalibrate services for the ‘new normal’. For example, during the pandemic social prescribers in Middlesbrough have been supporting their caseloads remotely, and this approach may feature longer-term in delivery models³¹.

Ageing Better partnerships have also adapted some activities to take place in-person, adhering to social distancing guidelines. For example, in Leeds, street bingo sessions are enabling people to connect with their neighbours from a safe distance³². Ageing Better in Camden have also incorporated social distancing measures into a range of activities including buddy walks, tennis, door-step conversations and concerts in

²⁹ Bridging the Digital Divide – learning from Ageing Better

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Bridging-the-digital-divide.pdf?mtime=20200519104603&focal=none>

³⁰ Bridging the Digital Divide – learning from Ageing Better

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Bridging-the-digital-divide.pdf?mtime=20200519104603&focal=none>

³¹ Discussed at the *Tackling Loneliness During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic* online event in May 2020. Summary information available online https://drive.google.com/file/d/1b_s1HWHPVMO-TDhmQVz6Q_GqD1YCjqlR/view?mc_cid=1224d56988&mc_eid=3eb5659038

³² Ageing Better in Leeds website <https://timetoshineleeds.org/blog/street-bingo-people-cant-come-to-us-so-well-go-to-them>

sheltered housing locations. The Greater Manchester, Ambition for Ageing, partnership is currently researching the potential effects of social distancing on vulnerable groups in order to enable VCS organisations to continue to deliver in the longer term³³.

What are we learning that can enable the longer-term recovery of our communities?

The developments above resonate with views from the wider community sector, and suggest that longer term community recovery could:

- Recognise the "power" of social connections, placing social connections at the heart of Covid-19 recovery planning. How can we ensure the quality of social connections in the new 'normal'?
- Create opportunities for more people to utilise their assets and skills to strengthen community efforts. How can we harness recent developments to sustain communities in recovery?
- Establish neighbourliness as the norm, as the basis for a sustainable future in which local people support each other. How can we maintain the energy and drive for neighbourliness which developed during lockdown?
- Rethink digital connections. How can we support people over 50 to further embrace digital connections as part of the 'new normal'?'³⁴

Looking forward

In our role at Ecorys as the independent evaluator and learning partner for the Ageing Better programme, we are working with TNLCF and Ageing Better partnerships to generate programme insights and will share this through future leaning papers and events to influence wider service design. This paper has been written by Ecorys, in collaboration with TNLCF. We are producing a series of rapid review papers over the next few months summarising Ageing Better's response to the pandemic. Forthcoming papers will focus on topics including: building social capital and neighbourliness; tackling the digital divide and alternative support; and developing protective factors. Details on the **wider evidence base** generated by the evaluation can be found on [The National Lottery Community Fund website](#).

³³ Ageing Better in Greater Manchester <https://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/news>

³⁴ Suggestions informed by discussions held at the *Tackling Loneliness During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic* online event in May 2020. Summary information available online https://drive.google.com/file/d/1b_s1HWHPvMO-TDhmQVz6Q_GqD1YCjqlR/view?mc_cid=1224d56988&mc_eid=3eb5659038