Working and engaging with older people living in Sheltered Housing – 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 Ageing Better national learning around 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 working and engaging with people living in Sheltered Housing. It links into our national learning in the following ways:

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- Understanding the CONTEXT – understanding why people in sheltered housing can be at risk social isolation and loneliness

- Developing the ECOSYSTEM – identifying ways to develop an offer with people in sheltered accommodation that reflects what they *want* to engage with

It is based on the learning and insights from eight Ageing Better areas : Birmingham, Bristol, Camden, Cheshire, East Lindsey, Leicester, Thanet and Torbay.

Sheltered housing – definition

For the purposes of this paper we are using a broad definition of sheltered housing to include sheltered housing managed by either housing associations or private providers. It includes any accommodation with a warden, scheme manager or support staff overseeing the accommodation and some shared facilities. For the purposes of this report we use the term "warden" to cover this support role.

The availability of sheltered housing varies considerably around the country. There are often criteria in place as to who can occupy the accommodation, and this varies by scheme. In some places access is limited to a certain age group, in others the age group is broader, but people may need to meet particular health criteria and so residents will have a more varied range of needs.

Starting point for this paper

Ageing Better as a Programme takes an asset-based approach. This means working with people to build on their strengths. Many sheltered housing developments are thriving communities providing active social connections for the people living within them with supportive wardens and well maintained and busy communal spaces.

Ageing Better's learning largely does not come from working within housing developments where there is already a thriving community as described above. Ageing Better programmes have worked in a preventative way by developing the Ecosystem that supports people to stay connected. We have produced a separate paper (link at the end of the document) that helps Housing Associations and sheltered housing providers consider ways they can work proactively to ensure social isolation and loneliness does not develop.

But our Ageing Better work with sheltered housing has largely focused on those places where social connections have already weakened and for some has become more entrenched. This paper provides learning for third sector organisations interested in providing activities within sheltered accommodation. The scope of this paper is solely linked to our learning around working within sheltered housing schemes to support residents to feel more connected and less socially isolated. The learning described is focussed on the delivery of specific interventions necessary to begin the engagement upon which to develop and build meaningful social connections.

Context

Ageing Better areas identified that the variety of types and thresholds for accommodation led to sheltered housing units having people from a broad mix of

different backgrounds and ages i.e. people of working age as well older people and people with health needs. This resulting variety and range of occupiers of sheltered housing units can mean that residents have little in common other than their address. They can be a disparate community comprising different people at different life stages and with different needs. The learning from Ageing Better is that '*putting a group of people in a building does not necessarily make a community*'.

Ageing Better areas also identified that the point that someone enters sheltered housing often coincides with them experiencing one or more "transition" points in their lives. These could (but not necessarily) include a loss of some kind for an individual such as bereavement, retirement, reduction in mobility or change in physical and/or mental health. We know from our wider Ageing Better learning that these transition points act as risk factors for people experiencing social isolation and loneliness. Moving may also mean that people have left a place where they had family or friends as well as the "bumping places" where they connected with people locally such as shops and parks etc.,

Areas identified that an individual's move into sheltered accommodation combined with other life transitions can then lead to a loss of confidence. Add this to any health and mobility needs and there is a situation where for a variety of reasons someone may not feel either psychologically or physically able to get out and socialise. New arrivals in sheltered housing can also be nervous about stepping out and introducing themselves when they feel the rest of the accommodation is well established.

Areas also highlighted that there was often a "psychology" associated with some sheltered accommodation which could further reinforce feelings of social isolation and loneliness. We heard that some people felt that by moving into sheltered housing they were moving into a phase representing the end of their lives - losing some of their 'zest' and enthusiasm. As we set out above this links into a potentially complex mix of feelings of loss, change and transition which a move to sheltered housing may represent.

Within the sheltered housing there is likely to be a range of complex set of permissions and cultural expectations at play. These could include perceptions around what the communal areas are for, who they belong to and who decides what goes on in them. Over time, ideas about the communal areas and who and how they are used can become embedded. For example, people may perceive there is nothing going on, or that the activities that are put on are not for them. This can make the wider community reluctant to join activities or to start new ones up.

Throughout, it is hugely important to remember that this is someone's home. This adds a dimension and risk to any activities being delivered within sheltered housing. At the end of most other Ageing Better activities people go "home" and can choose whether to return. Living within sheltered housing means there is less opportunity to do this. As a result, the personalities and relationships with the other individuals become more important and, in some respects, means there is more jeopardy involved. On the one hand there is more incentive for residents to engage and get involved to create the community that they wish to live in. On the other hand, there is also potentially a greater risk to the individual if they commit and get involved and it then goes wrong. It is unsurprising that some people lack the confidence or decide it is easier or safer to stay within their own four walls.

This is one reason why it is important to think not just about providing activities and groups within the sheltered accommodation but to also consider linking and connecting people to groups and activities externally and to connect people to local

"bumping places". Ideally think about whether any communal gardens or spaces could be used for wider community purposes so encouraging the wider community onto the premises thereby extending the connections and groups of people interacting with each other and in turn increasing the potential to make additional connections and friendships.

Role of the warden

We heard from areas just how key the role of warden was. Wardens are often highly experienced with a background of supporting residents in sheltered housing as well as in other related housing posts or social care. This can be both a strength and a weakness. Many sheltered housing units have seen a change in what they are able to offer to residents and in the way this is done. We heard that in some areas the role of warden is far more "managerial" with the post holder having a number of properties for which they are responsible. As a result the warden may not be on the premises as much as in the past. Wardens having to cover multiple sites can mean they are harder to reach and can also hinder practical considerations such as being able to gain access to the site.

This shift in a warden's role may mean that they are no longer able to undertake the social element of their role - helping to forge and maintain the connections between residents on a day to day basis. Similarly, they may be used to working in a more traditional way, where activities are provided to residents. This contrasts with some of the approaches within Ageing Better where the aim can be to support residents in organising activities for themselves. This means when working with a sheltered housing unit for the first time it is important to get to know the warden, take time to build a relationship with them and understand the history of the accommodation.

A key piece of learning from Ageing Better is that if the wardens are committed to the approach then they will be a key asset in helping to mobilise and engage people. They know their residents and will be able to signpost to individuals who they know are isolated or lonely. They will also be able to identify and point out the "Connectors" and "Builders" in the community as well as the people with particular skills and strengths to engage and build with. The warden will also be a "trusted source" and so have a crucial role in advocating for people to engage with you. They can reassure and encourage residents as well as answering any questions when you're not on the premises. This can help fast track the relationship building phase with residents.

Key Message: Sheltered housing is not automatically a community. There will be a range of people from a variety of different backgrounds. People may also be at risk of slipping into social isolation and loneliness as their arrival in sheltered housing coincides with transition points in their lives that amplify this risk. Sheltered housing can engender entrenched ideas in both residents and the wardens that need challenging through effective relationship building.

Connections

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 also heard that being a member of and feeling part of a group or community provides people with some resilience when they experience one or more further risk factors for social isolation such as

bereavement, ill health etc., by providing people with an opportunity for vital regular social connection which is right for them.

Barriers to engaging with people in sheltered housing

Connecting with people in sheltered housing can mean acknowledging and overcoming both practical and psychological barriers.

The communal spaces themselves may feel physically unwelcoming either because they are of poor quality or don't feel like they are spaces where people want to spend time. Although this is not universal, it is an important consideration when planning to work in these spaces.

Individuals living in sheltered housing can also have practical barriers to engaging or accessing any opportunities already on offer. For example, someone who uses a wheelchair may need additional support to access the communal spaces, but their existing care package may not coincide with the times of any running activity. Taking a person-centered approach, working with the individual, warden and any other care providers can often help identify practical ways to overcome these barriers through additional support.

There can also be a practical challenge for agencies in actually gaining access to the sheltered accommodation. We heard that in some cases delivery partners had arrived to set up an activity only to find that there was no-one onsite to let them in. Understanding the particular circumstances of each sheltered housing unit and developing relationships with the managers or wardens is important when starting the first connections.

Residents in sheltered housing may also not feel that the offer available through the sheltered accommodation is for them. They may not see themselves as a "coffee morning person" or in need of support and so not engage with the opportunities on offer seeing them as designed for "others". Making connections depends on getting to know people, working with them to provide an "offer" that resonates with them.

One of the biggest challenges encountered by Ageing Better areas working in sheltered accommodation, however, was often the history and social dynamics within the sheltered housing unit. Ageing Better areas identified that "people who live close together often fall out". Each of the areas had encountered situations of varying degrees of seriousness where the community had become fractured because of historical disagreements which had quickly become entrenched.

Ageing Better also identified how in some sheltered housing the communal areas did not feel welcoming or open to all because a regular group of people met there as a "clique". It could just be that this group used the space regularly and didn't welcome new people joining or were more proactively making others trying to use the space feel uncomfortable. When making connections in sheltered housing which has experienced these challenges it is important to acknowledge that it will take time to rebuild relationships. We also heard how useful it could be in these situations to have people from outside the accommodation coming into the space bringing new faces, group dynamics and energy.

Many Ageing Better areas work in an asset-based way, building on the strengths, skills and interests that individuals have. This is a different model and way of working for some sheltered housing provision where residents may be more used to activities being provided to and for them. Changing this requires an alternative approach on a number of levels which can again mean it takes longer to get activities and services up and running.

Tools and techniques to engage

Much of the learning about how to reach and engage with people is common across all of our learning papers. When working with people who are or are at risk of being socially isolated, we know how important it is to work in a person centred, holistic way. One size or one service does not fit all, and it is vital to support and recognise people for the individuals they are. This means understanding the individual circumstances of each sheltered housing unit as well as each individual to then jointly craft an offer. This applies equally to any work happening in sheltered housing. Working in this way takes time and this needs to be factored into project plans.

Linked to earlier points about history and previous events we heard of situations where residents were reluctant to engage with a new activity perhaps because of the short term nature of previous activities – "it's not worth my making the effort as it'll have disappeared in a month".

Building trust with people takes time and perseverance. This is likely to be particularly the case in sheltered housing units where there has been a history of disagreements or cliques. Across Ageing Better areas we found the most effective ways to start building these trusting relationships was:

- Letter drop – provide each unit in the sheltered housing with a letter setting out who you are, what you plan to do and when you plan to do it. Include a phone number or contact. Areas also found it useful to include a photo of who would be making subsequent contact.

- Door knocking – knocking on everyone's door to introduce yourself and raise awareness of what was happening. We heard how time consuming this was but also how vital it was overall in building an individual connection. The conversations you have with an individual at this point will be important in finding out what they would like to do as well as what may be preventing them from being involved. Some areas found they needed to knock on some doors 2 or 3 times before someone was willing to speak to them or engage. Have promotional material on hand to leave with people for reference even if they are reluctant to engage initially.

- First connection – start the first engagement session as an open chat rather than a formal meeting. Think carefully about the language used to describe the session such as avoiding terms such as social isolation or loneliness. "Coffee and cake", worked better in some settings than "a coffee morning" which had connotations and was viewed as something to avoid.

- Start small and build up – offering too many options or possibilities initially can be overwhelming. Plus cancelling or stopping things in the early stages can be demotivating for everyone when what you are trying to do is engender confidence, develop trust and foster relationships. So start with a small number of activities so that people see that you deliver what you say you will and then take time to find out what people want to be involved in or join.

- Use word of mouth and established connections to encourage people to attend – when encouraging people to come along, reference the other people nearby who also plan to attend and get other people on the same corridor to encourage others to attend.

> **Key Message:** Connecting with people who live in sheltered housing can be surprisingly challenging. There are both practical and psychological barriers that prevent people from connecting to the opportunities that may be available. Ageing Better areas found a letter drop, followed by door knocking on each unit was an effective way of beginning to connect with people in sheltered housing.

What works?

Types of activity

As we have discussed in more detail in our learning papers on Groups (links available at the end of this report) the most effective and sustainable activities will be those that are based on an idea that has come from one or more of the residents. But we found the types of activity that worked in sheltered housing included:

- Taster sessions – we found taster sessions could be an effective way of engaging with residents and offering them a range of opportunities they could try for a few weeks prior to needing to commit.

- Using food to engage – we found using food was a powerful way of connecting people. At its simplest offering a drink and snack at the end of an activity or meeting is a way of creating a space for connections and friendships to develop and is a way of demonstrating that people are important and cared about. The actual activity itself could have a food focus - providing information to improve nutrition or supporting with particular diets. It could also bring people together over food reminiscence or around the preparation of food and to share recipes that reflect culture or geography (more information on the role of Food in helping to reduce social isolation and loneliness is available in a link at the end of this report).

- Special occasions and dates – we found making use of special occasions and dates helped engage people. This could be film days or celebrating particular event - all helped encourage larger numbers to engage.

- Linking groups to external opportunities – we have talked about the importance of generating a sense of community and connection within the sheltered housing unit itself. Ideally look to widen the connections further so that the unit itself is part of the wider community and the individuals have a greater number of connections so increasing their resilience and networks. This will also help to reduce the possibility of cliques developing. We found that linking groups from sheltered housing to activities outside was a good way of maintaining engagement. This included creating singing groups that performed more widely or making crafts for sale or donation to other charities or events as well as inviting groups from outside to deliver activities or make more use of shared spaces.

Important considerations

We also found that there were important considerations for projects or activities that are delivered in sheltered housing. These include:

- Language – think about the language used during the first engagement opportunity. Also avoid any reference to loneliness or social isolation in any publicity as you can have these conversations once you have begun to develop

relationships of trust. We found both through this work and our wider work engaging men who are socially isolated (link available at the end of this report) that it is helpful to offer something specific and as a drop in rather than a set time. For example, "we would love to see you for a coffee" instead of coming to our "coffee morning".

- Mindful of workloads – wardens in sheltered housing have large workloads. Engagement can be most effective when you are clear about what you are asking them to do and so be frank and honest about that "ask". There might also be an assumption that it will cause work for others when in fact your offer is reducing another's workload which when understood could increase buy-in. Wardens may want to do more but are restricted by other commitments, so it is important to be mindful of this in any approach.

- Be prepared to re-knock on doors – Ageing Better experience is that someone will say they want an activity but then not turn up. Our previous work across Ageing Better highlights the part someone's lack of confidence can play in this. It can take a number of attempts before someone feels able to join in. While it is absolutely fine for someone to change their mind, it is also important to allow enough staff time to re-knock on doors and remind or encourage someone to attend. We found it could take knocking multiple times to get someone to engage and multiple events to help support a community to connect. Even if someone isn't connecting keep talking to them and maintaining the links and invitations – we heard how one individual really appreciated still being asked!

- Groups will change and evolve – Ageing Better has produced a more detailed paper on Groups (link available at the end of a report) and groups in sheltered housing can experience many of the same challenges around dominating personalities and other issues. We talk about the importance of adopting a "warm welcome approach" and this model is directly applicable to working within sheltered housing.

- Keep reviewing and adapting – a community doesn't stand still and the needs and wants of the people within it will change. So even if there are a number of successful groups, continue to door knock and talk to the people who aren't engaging. Look to develop new groups and opportunities as a result of your conversations with people. In sheltered housing an additional challenge can be the death of volunteers who organised the groups and so be open and flexible to the groups changing and evolving with their members.

- Be resident led – coproduction is a key principle of Ageing Better work. To be effective you need residents to want to engage in the activities being developed. It is important to ensure that you continue to consult with the range of residents in a variety of ways on an ongoing basis. This will also assist with the longer-term sustainability.

- Making wider connections – Take a partnership approach and continue to develop and build on your local networks. Don't just think about providing activities and groups within the sheltered accommodation but also think about helping to link and connect people to groups and activities in the wider community and to connect people to local "bumping places". Ideally think about whether any communal gardens or spaces could be used for community purposes, widening the connections and groups of people interacting with each other and so increasing the possible connections and friendships possible.

- Sort the logistics – accessing sheltered housing can be a challenge so make sure that the logistics and permissions around access are in place.

> **Key Message:** Many of the tools and techniques to engage people in sheltered housing are similar to those across wider Ageing Better learning. But there is more opportunity and incentive to build connections as it is a more structured community. Using food, special occasions, external links and taster sessions can help achieve this. Be aware engaging and connecting people will still take time and need to evolve so ensure enough staff resource is allocated to do this.

Further information

Ageing Better national learning reports

- [Groups](#)

- [Working and engaging with older men](#)

- [Role of food in building connections and relationships](#)

- [Use of language](#)

- Ageing Better in Sheffield - [Working with older people to reduce social isolation and loneliness - a guide for Housing Associations](#)

- Bristol Ageing Better - [Your Food Your Health](#)

- Ageing Better in Camden – [The Warm Welcome approach - a practitioner's guide](#)

  [Older people's views of outreach in sheltered housing](#)

- Ageing Better in Middlesbrough - [Spotlight on Social Isolation and Supported Living](#)

- East Lindsey (TED) - [Role housing plays in reducing social isolation](#)

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