

Ageing Better
Dissemination Events Series

The Importance of Connectors During Covid-19 and Beyond
11 February 2021

Insights Pack

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On the day: Purpose

On Thursday 11th February 2021, partnerships from the Ageing Better programme and practitioners and experts from around the UK convened for this digital event. Around 120 people attended, and the event aimed to meet the following objectives:

- Explore what partnerships have learned about the importance of community connectors in tackling loneliness and social isolation, and how the roles of connectors and social prescribing have become even more critical during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Explore what partnerships have learned about challenges for connectors, specific to the Covid-19 context including:
 - a. Having fewer available services to refer people to
 - b. How to be a connector in a digital context
 - c. Reconnecting people who have been shielding
- Help connect organisations with each other, allowing them to compare and contrast their learning.



On the day: Who joined us?

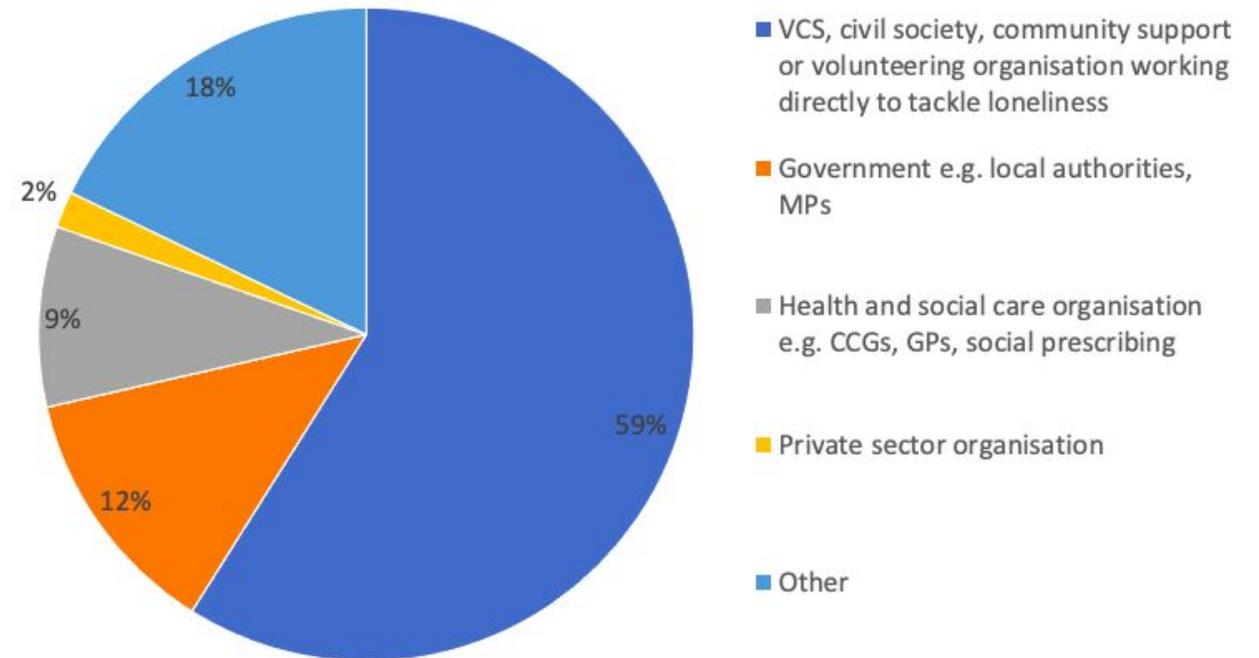
We first asked participants:

How would you primarily describe your organisation?

- A. VCS, civil society, community support or volunteering organisation working directly to tackle loneliness
- B. Government e.g. local authorities, MPs
- C. Health and social care organisation e.g. CCGs, GPs, social prescribing
- D. Private sector organisation
- E. Other

As shown in the graph on the right, the majority of participants (59%) were from VCS, civil society, community support or volunteering organisation working directly to tackle loneliness.

How would you primarily describe your organisation?



On the day: Who joined us?

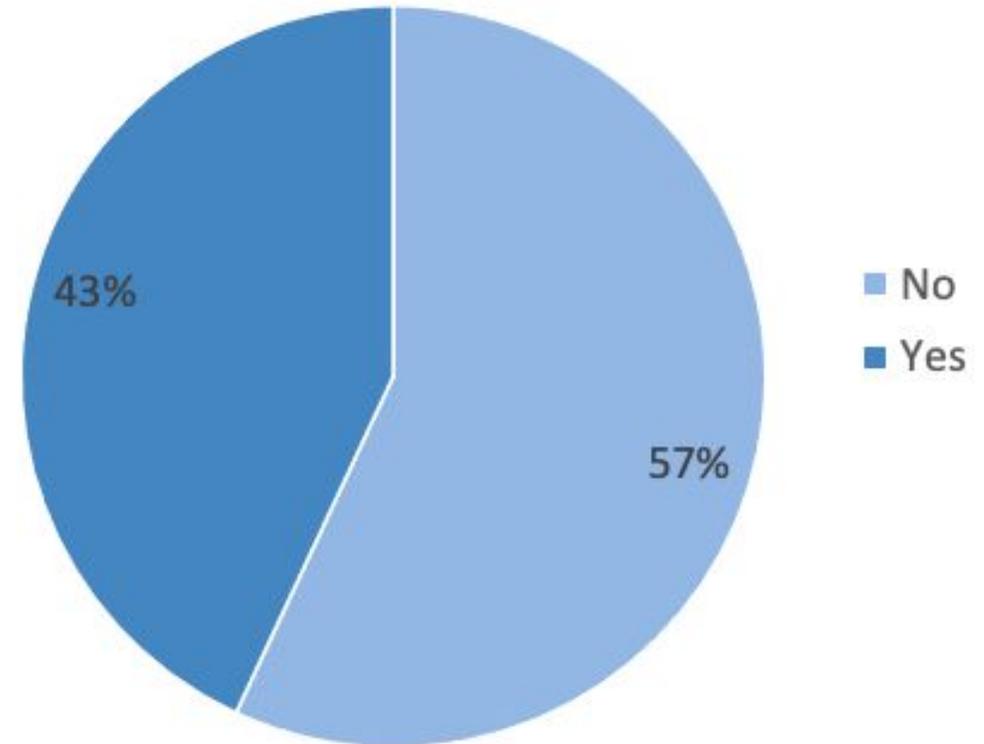
We then asked participants:

Have you been to an Ageing Better event before?

- A. No
- B. Yes

As shown in the graph on the right, for the majority of participants (57%), this was their first event.

Have you been to an Ageing Better event before?



Introduction: Ruth Bamford - The National Lottery Community Fund

- Ageing Better is 7 year programme aimed at learning how to reduce loneliness and social isolation in people aged over 50
- The Programme is delivered through 14 partnerships throughout England who have worked with over 134,000 people. Over 19.5K volunteers contributed almost 630,000 hours of their time - that's 83,000 working days.
- 3 key messages from national learning:
 - The reasons for social isolation are many and varied. Understanding a person's **context** (the macro and micro issues impacting on them) is key to supporting them well.
 - Where social isolation is entrenched and embedded, people need some level of one-to-one support; we call this **connections**.
 - The **ecosystem** is the space where individuals connect with the community. It's the services, routes, responses, people and touchpoints that help prevent social isolation.
- Social prescribing is a form of "connector" service. Ageing Better focuses on social prescribing because:
 - Social Prescribing connects people to community groups and services through the support of Link Workers. It provides a person-centred approach to suit individual social, emotional and practical needs.
 - Support can be 'Short Term' (8-10 weeks) to help access a benefit or caring support, or 'Longer Term' (3+ months) to address more complex issues. A personalised plan is co-created based on what an individual wants to achieve.
 - Covid-19 has changed the interventions and activities that people can connect to and some "exit routes" from connector services are missing. However, the connector model has shown its adaptability and new roles such as "digital connector" and "shielding connector" have been established.

Ruth Bamford

Funding & Relationship Manager

To view a recording of this presentation, please [click here](#).

Speaker perspectives

Our speakers



David Coffin
Relationship
Manager



Lynne Humphries
Engagement and
Volunteer Manager



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Bharti Mistry
Community
Connector



Christine Durrant
Community Builder



Speaker perspectives: the overarching narrative

We heard perspectives from two of the local Ageing Better programme partnerships who shared how they have approached 'connector models' and what they have learnt. Two local connectors also shared what they have learnt in their role and the challenges they are facing, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Common themes included:

- Connectors play a crucial role not just in referring people to services but also engaging them in services, activities and groups; and helping to establish new ones
- It is important to listen to what people want and build around that
- Digital options open up possibilities for creative engagement and the involvement of a wide range of people
- Connectors and volunteers are crucial to ensuring sustainability of activities
- The future is likely to involve a hybrid model of delivery consisting of face-to-face, digital (e.g. Zoom) and non-digital (e.g. telephone) remote approaches



AGEING
BETTER IN
BIRMINGHAM



Leicester
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Together

Brightlife

Speaker perspectives: David Coffin

- David spoke about the work of Ageing Better in Birmingham to reduce social isolation for people over 50. In order to make Birmingham a better place to age, a key principle of their approach is to harness active citizenship to reduce isolation and to prevent it from happening in the future.
- Three specific things are key to the work of Ageing Better in Birmingham:
 - **Ageing Better Networks:** Networks are self-organising groups of people that re-engage people over 50 with their local community. To support them, Ageing Better in Birmingham funded community-based staff called Network Enablers.
 - **Network Enablers:** Five Network Enablers advise and support Ageing Better Networks. The Network Enablers are based in five Ageing Better Hubs, 1 City wide, 2 geographically focused and 2 thematic. The Network Enablers facilitate community connections.
 - **Service Portal:** a service directory for social prescribing. Route2wellbeing lists all Ageing Better network activity and makes it easy to signpost to local services and activities that promote good health and wellbeing.
- This work has a significant impact to date. 9000 people have taken part in activities designed to help build bridges between people. 3000 people have been identified as lonely or isolated by a peer, friend or support worker. 63% of Ageing Better in Birmingham participants show an improvement in their overall wellbeing. 41% of the programme participants came from BAME and mixed ethnic backgrounds.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has presented challenges such as: a drop off in active groups; confusion over Covid restrictions; limited funds to ensure Covid security; shielding members; a lack of digital skills and equipment; and low morale amongst groups and members.
- In order to adapt to the challenges posed by Covid-19, a number of steps were taken: FAQs on Covid restrictions were targeted at grassroots groups; micro funding was given to adapt activity; support was provided with risk assessment; informal contact between members was encouraged; digital upskilling and guidance was given; group leads were regularly contacted to boost morale; and best practice and ideas were shared across hubs and groups.



David Coffin
Relationship
Manager

To view a recording of this presentation please [click here](#).

Speaker perspectives: Lynne Humphries

- Lynne spoke about the work of Brightlife Cheshire, one of the 14 Ageing Better partnerships. Their programme of work started in 2015 and by the end of their initial 5 years they had extensively tested their social prescribing model and were extending to further rural areas in Cheshire West.
- Before Covid-19 hit last year, they were in a good position with their social prescribers and connector volunteers who had built up trusted relationships with people by taking a person-centred approach. In this approach connectors consider what's needed, what's wanted and what is possible with the participants being supported.
- Drop-in groups were an unexpected addition to Cheshire's social prescribing approach. They were developed as casual sessions to allow people to take a step back into society, without the pressure of a membership group or organised activity. They have developed into friendship groups with volunteer leadership and an approach which seeks to find the common ground between people and builds on the trusted relationship started by the social prescribing teams.
- While there were adaptations needed in response to Covid-19, some elements of the work stayed the same. The focus remained on the person being supported, taking the time to talk (e.g. on the phone) and looking for opportunities with trusted organisations.
- There have been a number of differences in their work as a consequence of Covid-19. The intensity of phone chats increased, there were a lack of activities, and they had to find ways of meeting face to face safely e.g "FenceTime". Face to face meetings have involved finding Covid secure venues, running risk assessments and asking participants what they would like to do. For one group that was not able to meet face to face, adaptations such a weekly group telephone service was developed.
- The future of their work will involve a hybrid approach, blending meeting up in person and doing the things which are known to work well e.g. telephone calls.



Lynne Humphries
Engagement and
Volunteer Manager

To view a recording of this presentation, please [click here](#).

Speaker perspectives: Bharti Mistry

- Bharti is one of a team of 5 Community Connectors, each working in an individual political ward in Leicester. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, a community garden and wellness classes (e.g. Yoga) were used to engage older people. When lockdown began, these activities were adapted and expanded upon digitally.
- WhatsApp groups were used successfully to engage older people. A daily challenge was sent every weekday morning, with challenges which involved encouraging self-care, everyday creativity, physical activity, and promoting social connection.
- Online Zoom groups were established which revolved around themes such as happiness, diabetes, chit chat and yoga. When trying to engage people on Zoom, they faced challenges such as:
 - People believing Covid-19 would soon go away so not wanting to engage
 - Group leads who were initially reluctant to start Zoom sessions
 - People were saying 'I'm too old to learn'; 'Can't remember what to do'; 'What if I do something wrong.'
 - People who did not have smartphones or tablets, or were unable to afford them
- As the sessions continued, more people joined due to regular reminders via WhatsApp and word of mouth among members about the quality of the groups. There are around 200 people who engage with the Zoom groups, some more than once a week.
- Moving forward, work will involve: continuing to support group leads so they can run Zoom sessions independently and supporting people to understand the basic functionality of Zoom. In the medium-term, there is a challenge when lockdown lifts to ensure places (e.g. community centres) are equipped to run hybrid Zoom and face-to-face sessions.
- The issue of finance will again come up as lockdown loosens and sustainability is an important consideration. What models will be financially sustainable to keep work going?
- People are benefitting mentally, physically and emotionally. Many participants say they feel much more alive, involved and connected compared to pre-lockdown. The challenge now is to make the work sustainable to meet the needs of the people.



Leicester
Ageing
Together

Bharti Mistry
Community
Connector

To view a recording of this presentation, please [click here](#).

Speaker perspectives: Christine Durrant

- Christine is a community builder who works as part of the Ageing Well Torbay programme. She is part of a team of around 15 community builders, each of whom has a patch of Torbay in which they work. Torbay is a diverse area, with some deprived areas and others that are not, so it is essential that the community builders suit the patches they are working within, so they can connect with people.
- During the pandemic, particularly in the summer, specific activity and meet up slots were arranged for shielding individuals at local parks and landmarks, however people still feared coming out. Covid-secure coffee mornings were held, and people who were isolated and afraid of coming out were specifically invited. Moving forward, Ageing Well Torbay envisage using telephone conferencing to support isolated individuals.
- Coffee groups have been an essential part of Ageing Well Torbay's work. They have found that activity groups sometimes do not mix after their activities whereas encouraging people to organise coffee groups can more readily lead to people arranging coffees with each other separately to the group setting. The team have noticed that people in their coffee groups have been providing each other with practical support and regular check-ins and chat throughout the pandemic.
- As a connector, Christine remarked that it is not her job to lead groups but rather to help establish the groups and connect people to them and then to empower them to be independent. She said her role is to work herself out of the job! She helps groups get established, encourages leadership, and then removes herself from the picture allowing groups to move forward independently.
- Christine's key learning over this period has been that if you make connections between people first of all, everything else will follow. If you put in the work to build strong friendships, these get people through hard times. To achieve this you need strong knowledge of your patch and the people you are connecting, and to involve people in support rather than just offering it e.g. asking people who ask for a befriender if they would like to become one



Christine Durrant
Community Builder

To view a recording of this presentation, please [click here](#).

Speaker perspectives: reflections

After hearing from our speakers, we had a chance for reflection and questions. We asked participants **“Reflect on what the speakers said. What particularly resonated with you and your experience?”**

Here is a selection of the reflections from participants:

A number of participants reacted positively to the use of Whatsapp and Zoom in creative ways e.g. daily challenges

- “The daily challenge idea looks great - can provide a talking point for individuals and groups”
- “Use of WhatsApp and Zoom were adapted by my choir which has been a source of joy in lockdown!”
- “CA have used WhatsApp; Facebook; Twitter; Instagram as well as telephone. In addition we have issued a magazine and now we are starting to supply sim card tablets to start activities via zoom. The pilot scheme starts in March.”

However, participants also noted it is important to remember that not everyone will have access to tech, nor may they want to do online activities.

- “Remember many can't get online. I do not have a smart phone and can't join WhatsApp groups!”

Additional reflections revolved around Social Prescribing:

- “Connections have 'dropped off' during Covid, interested in thinking about how to connect with Social Prescribers/other referral organisations”
- “Really interested in the pre and post Covid experience of social prescribing and how the role has flexed”

A key theme of reflections from participants was around the sustainability of services:

- “Long term sustainability is something we need to be looking at now. Both community groups and formal commissioners of services (Local Authority and CCG's) need to be working together to drive this.”
- “I'm really interested to understand what thinking has been emerging about the longer term direction of activity. Everyone's responded really quickly to change over the last 12 months and the examples here are fantastic - but are there emerging thoughts from these groups about how this will be sustainable and how services need to change into the future? (Bearing in mind sadly COVID will be with us long term now.)”
- “Interested in reflections on how 'normalised' online connections have become - as with previous questions, this can inform future planning. How much of the community support will continue once more face to face activity re-starts?”

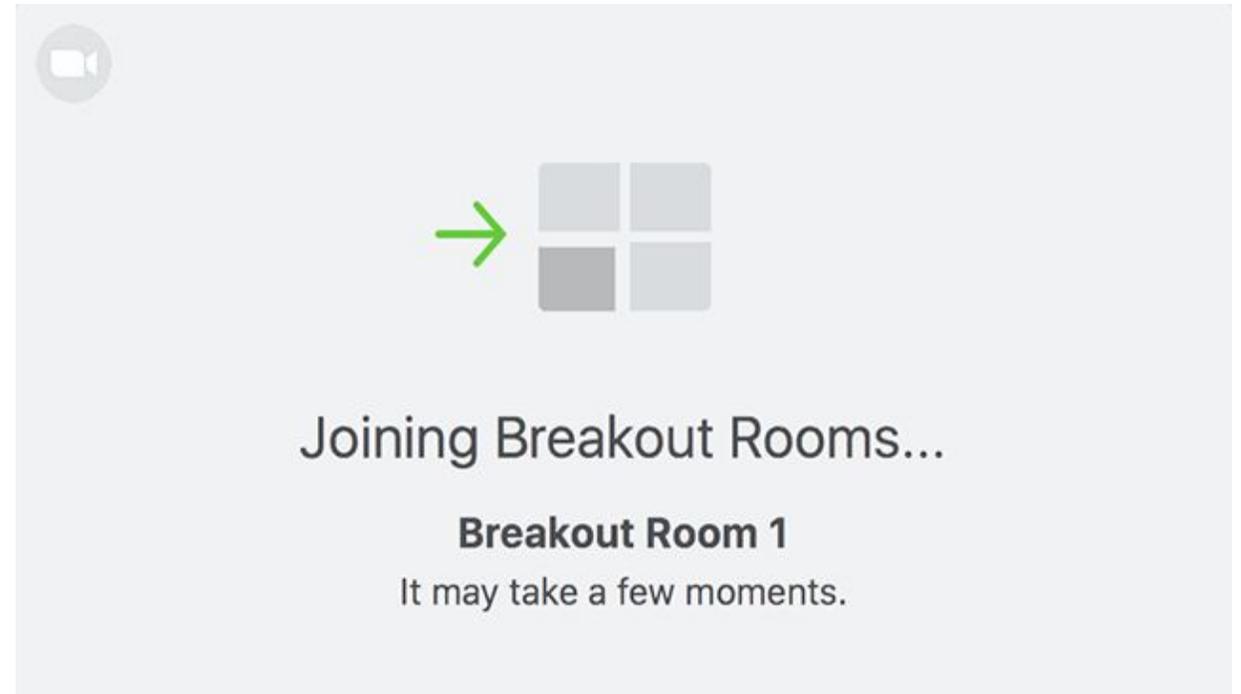
Breakout rooms

Breakout room 1

Next, we divided participants into virtual breakout rooms to discuss their experiences. We asked the following question:

“Think about what the speakers covered and your own experiences. What resonated with you? What key roles have you seen connectors playing, and why is this role important? Could be something local you’ve seen or something you’re aware of.”

The discussions within the breakout rooms are summarised on the following slides.



What is the role of connectors? (1/2)

There is a sense of fear, a lack of confidence and a lack of hope amongst older people

- People are nervous about the future and going out again, having got used to being in the house and being home alone.
- Some people are very accepting of the situation and are resigned to not going out. Hence many more people are now more isolated than before.
- The prospect of vaccinations may not alleviate fears or increase hope and confidence. Some older people do not have families so they feel being vaccinated will not make a huge difference as they have no hope for the future.

Engagement and motivation is lower than it has been before

- What link workers did the first time round often is not working this time round
- People are exhausted and it's harder to find topics that are relevant to talk about. Topics that have been issues don't seem to have any solutions at the moment e.g. digital isolation. It has all meant motivation has gone down.

Through choice or lack of access, digital is not always an option

- Older people are often not interested in digital engagement, and prefer analogue methods, so some organisations' digital service offers have not been taken up
- Digital inequalities are also an issue, which has meant organisations have had to use more analogue methods of engagement e.g. telephone befriending
- However, due to a stretch on services, there is often a long wait for services such as befriending and buying tablets and tech for people is not always an option due to funding

Many organisations are now exploring the use of hybrid models of support

- This model allows people to choose how they connect and how they are communicated with, and allows a wider range of people to be reached
- Communication and building relationships needs to be done in a flexible and locally-appropriate manner using a variety of tools e.g. telephone, magazines, WhatsApp, Zoom etc
- It is important to recognise the interface between digital communication and face-to-face communication and think about how one could support the other. For example, digital tools have been central to the work of mutual aid groups
- Activities need to be engaging and high quality to keep people interested, there is a real opportunity to get creative
- Issues such as screen fatigue should also be considered

What is the role of connectors? (2/2)

Connectors are crucial for identifying who needs support, initiating and maintaining engagement, and building trust

- Local teams, such as Neighbourhood Connectors, have been instrumental in referring older people to beneficial services such as Independent Age
- People often do not know what support is available, especially if they are not online. Connectors help people get to know what is out there.
- Local connectors have also been essential for helping organisations find volunteers to support work
- Connectors point people towards community groups which helps communities thrive
- Connectors have been instrumental in keeping people motivated and keeping them engaged with activities e.g. using daily exercise challenges
- The empowerment and listening provided by connectors builds trust between people and organisations

Connectors make people feel valued

- Through keeping people connected, connectors make people feel valued, worthy and not forgotten
- The simple activities which make people feel valued are often the most beneficial

Ecosystems of support are built around connectors

- It is important to have a range of ways for people to build relationships
- There are a lot of informal networks, which have made it easy to connect with other people and organisations
- Connecting older people to a range of people, rather than one person, is key for sustainability
- It may be better to let organisations do what they do well and use their collective expertise and larger bodies (e.g. TNLCF) just communicate more effectively about ways of tackling loneliness/isolation to all of these initiatives.

Sustainability is an important consideration for the future

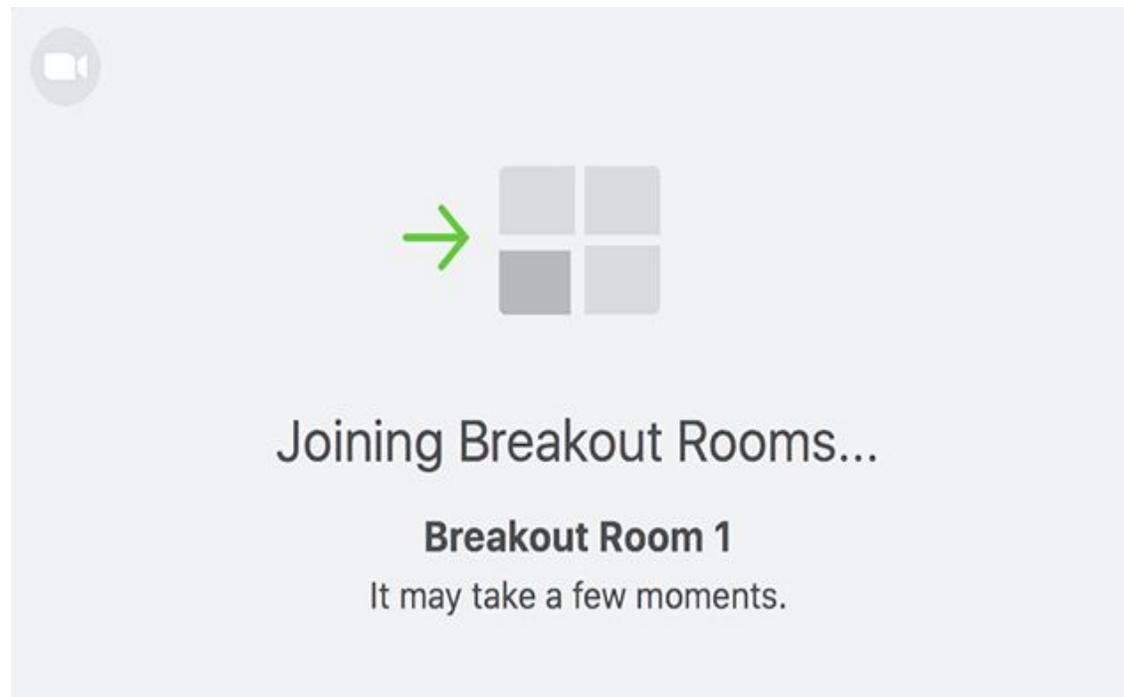
- It is possible for groups to be self-governing after an initial period of support and setup
- Connections across organisations and teams are key for long-term sustainability
- Independent creative initiatives which overlap geographically exist. Should we try to connect them more and create a centralised management of these schemes to ensure we maximise the support for people who are lonely/isolated? Would this create more visibility of lonely/isolated people across an area? How do you make that connection/how do you get that in?

Breakout room 2

Next, we divided participants into virtual breakout rooms to discuss their experiences. We asked the following question:

“Think about what the speakers covered and your own experiences. How have connector services been working in your area during Covid? What good practice could we share with other schemes and/or should we take forward beyond the pandemic?”

The discussions within the breakout rooms are summarised on the following slides.



What good practices should we take forward?

Going forward, there is a need to rebuild confidence among older people

- People have become institutionalised, and are hesitant about coming out again
- One organisation has been providing “virtual tours” of community venues so people can see what they should expect when they return and what safety measures have been taken

It is crucial to listen to what people want, but also engage them with creative methods

- It is important to find out what your participants want and not just prescribe what you think
- We have to find ways to encourage people to try things they would not usually try and engage them creatively. For example, at one organisation, older people said that digital was not suitable. However, 3 groups of telephone conferences were linked together, and participants have enjoyed speaking to people across the country.

Future support models are likely to be a hybrid of digital and face to face

- There is an appetite among older people for face-to-face friendship groups
- Hybrid groups and support models allow a greater range of people to be reached, supported and engaged. This is particularly beneficial for those who were housebound pre-Covid and will be so post-Covid and lockdown.
- A hybrid approach also allows organisers to offer more to older people. For example, a guest speaker can be invited more easily to a group without having to travel.
- Digital inclusion is a key part of this hybrid approach. Organisations may need to for people to have tech and internet, and there is the cost of providing training.
- This is a test and learn approach, it is beneficial to connect with those who are ahead of you and share learning.

New ways of recruiting volunteers and participants are needed

- Recruiting new people during this time has been difficult. For some organisations, referrals mostly come from a single source e.g. GPs, but since the Covid-19 pandemic began, these have dried up as no one is going to GP.
- Some organisations have used pop-ups (stands in parks) during the pandemic and this has enabled large numbers to be recruited
- Connectors are crucial for referring people on to relevant services and organisations
- It can be beneficial to match older people with local volunteers, with whom they may build long term friendships, particularly as they are in the local area

What good practices should we take forward?

The language used to talk about older people needs to be more human and inclusive

- Older people are often referred to using 'jargon' such as the term service users.
- They could rather be framed as a "giver", which is more positive. Some organisations use 'beneficiaries' when it should be 'participants'. Both volunteers and 'beneficiaries' are benefiting.

It is crucial that organisations and people continue to support each other

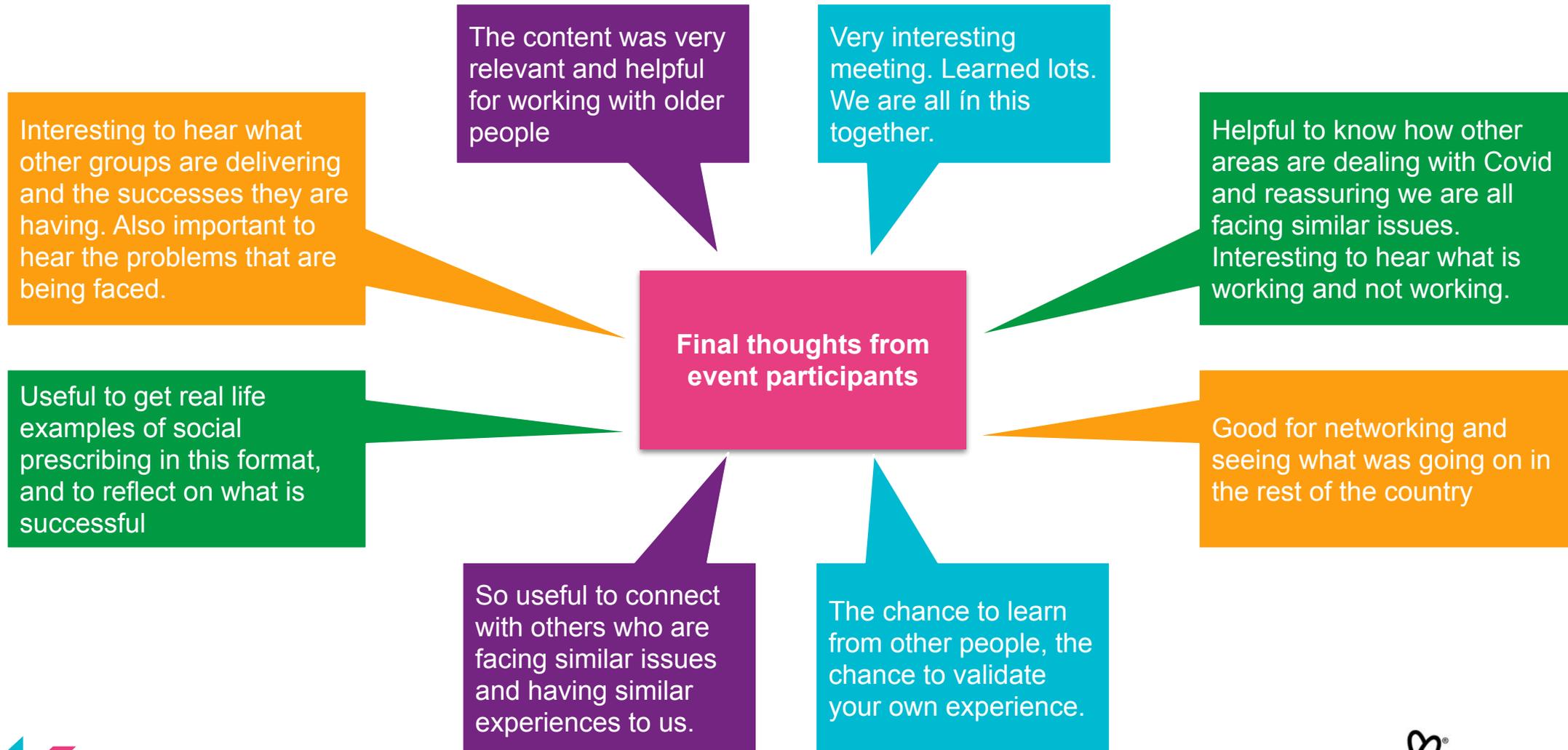
- A key achievement and highlight of the past year has been how people have come together to support each other and older people, rather than competing for territory
- Alliances have been formed with organisations and statutory bodies, which encourage more genuine engagement and co-production and participation
- Local organisations working together and sharing resources and information results in collective strength
- Some organisations have also been sharing volunteers between them which enables capacity to be spread out
- Partnership is key to avoid duplication of services and to ensure you can provide to people in a wide range of circumstances
- There are lots of social prescribers employed by the NHS, it is important these connectors are connected to the voluntary sector
- Faith and interfaith groups are doing great work in terms of acting as intermediaries between those who want to give and those who are in need.
- Faith groups are also reaching people who are often hard to reach, such as BAME groups, disabled people, blind and deaf people, who are particularly isolated in the pandemic. These groups are a sustainable network of community actors who should be actively included and involved.

Financial and bureaucratic sustainability is a key

- Buying and supplying devices, as well as providing support and training costs time and money
- As people are not attending (thus not making a donation to the activities they were taking part in), the financial sustainability of many activities is uncertain as it is not known where the funding will come from in the future
- Some organisations have partnered with corporate organisations to supply technology, but this is not likely to be sustainable long term
- We need to consider the significant mental health impacts of the pandemic, we will need additional funding to deal with these impacts
- As long as safety is ensured, we need to continue to minimise the red tape that has been removed during covid
- Enabling people who are seeking support to also provide support can enable sustainability. The role is therefore changed into being not just a 'receiver' but a proactive 'contributor'.

Closing reflections and resources

Final reflections



Evaluation

96

% of participants would recommend an event like this to a colleague

Average Score:

4.5

96

% of participants found the event relevant and useful

General reflections on the event

- Good range of speakers, good to connect with others in the sector around a common theme
- Good mix of listening and interaction offered, informed by experiences and delivery
- It was very well organised and you managed to fit a lot into an hour and a half.
- Really useful insights and tips from colleagues.
- Sharp, pacey and informative

Aspects of the event that could be improved (and which we will rectify for next time):

- Not enough representation by older people
- Having captions available
- I noticed at one point that the Zoom was being recorded, but we were not warned about this beforehand or during, as far as I'm aware.
- Not really the opportunity to 'connect'/ network as not enough time with this number of participants.

Resources - The National Lottery Community Fund

- **Role of Connectors during Covid-19:** The situation with Covid-19 is constantly changing and evolving. In this paper we explore how the connector role continues to evolve against this backdrop of uncertainty. We also share and highlight key insight and learning from early Ageing Better delivery about the importance of this connector role as well as discussing what can still be achieved via that role despite the current challenges and uncertainty which people and organisations face. **[Read the briefing](#)** --- **[Learning snapshot - key messages](#)**
- **Social Prescribing Health Referrals:** In this report we share learning and insight from across the programme about Social Prescribing where a health referral was involved. **[Read the report](#)** --- **[Learning snapshot - key messages](#)**
- **Learning around Community Connectors – Time Limited interventions:** In August 2018 a group of Ageing Better programmes came together to share their learning around Community Connectors – Time Limited Interventions. **[Read the report](#)** --- **[Learning snapshot - key messages](#)**

Resources - Ageing Better Partnerships

- **Ageing Well Torbay** - [Social Prescribing Ecosystems](#)
- [Community Building - connecting people and place to build community & reduce social isolation](#)
- **Ageless Thanet** - [Social Prescribing pilot](#)
- **Age Better Middlesbrough** - [Social Prescribing support during the Covid-19 crisis](#)
- **Connect Hackney** - [Community Connectors](#)
- **Brightlife (Cheshire)** – [Social Prescribing](#)
- **Leicester Ageing Together** – [Community Connectors](#)
- **Bristol Ageing Better** – [Community Navigators](#)
- **Social Prescribing [Insight Report](#)**

Thank you

Thank you for such constructive input to the session - we really appreciate it.

For more information, please see [The National Lottery Community Fund Ageing Better webpage.](#)