

Language

– 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+.

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 paper focuses on our learning around the use of language and terminology within the programme and provides some top tips based on what partnerships themselves have found does and doesn’t work. It is based on the learning and insights from all our Ageing Better areas and their communication leads.

References to Age

Many people don’t see themselves as ‘old’ or want to be defined by their age and are likely to be put off joining a group if it is advertised as for ‘older’ people or about reducing loneliness.

Within the Programme there has been mixed feedback around the use of words such as “ageing” and “older people”. This links to the ultimate ideal of not categorising people by their age at all, but it is something we have had to explore as we are a programme specifically targeting people aged over 50. “People over X” has worked better as it is a factual statement and doesn’t carry the loaded language that other terms may have.

We also want to help change perceptions of ageing and so challenge the concept that there are old people and then everyone else. We are all ageing!

As a result, remembering to say “we” and “our” or “as we age” in material and in conversation is particularly important when talking to people under 50, decision makers as well as stakeholders etc.

What doesn’t work

- Don’t say elderly
- Don’t tell over 50s they are ‘old’ (very few people self-identify as ‘old’ and will not relate to this)

- Referring to older people as ‘other’. We are all ageing, so when talking about older people, we should not be saying “they” and “them”

What does work

- Where relevant, actually state the age group being referred to e.g. over 50’s or 60’s
- Making age implicit within the brand through careful messaging and imagery
- Trying to say “we” and “our” or “as we age”. Remember that we are all ageing!

Engaging people who may be socially isolated or lonely

Ageing Better aims to learn more about how to reduce social isolation and loneliness in people aged over 50. We learnt very quickly that listing “social isolation” and/or “loneliness” in marketing materials etc., didn’t attract people! What is important is making careful use of language and using positive (strength based) conversations. This also means focusing on what people can do and what matters to that person.

Using positive language helps to attract people as well as promoting the benefits of an activity, such as making new friends and learning new things. Many people don’t see themselves as ‘old’ and may be reluctant to admit they are isolated. Many areas have learnt to try and avoid jargon and words that suggest groups or activity are for people who may be struggling.

Greater Manchester, for example on one project, rather than asking ‘are you socially isolated?’ on flyers asked “do you want to get involved in local activities?, Get out more? Meet new people?” as people may not want to ‘admit’ to being socially isolated or lonely but do want to take part in activities.

Ageless Thanet found that using a phrase such as “If you or someone you know” worked very well as an approach to reach their target audience, as phrases such as “Are you lonely/isolated?” just didn’t resonate with people. As Thanet commented “Many have said that they don’t realise how lonely they felt until they joined in”.

Ageing Better Birmingham have also found it helpful to focus on an encouraging active citizenship theme through messages such as “Bring your community together” and “Be part of your community”.

What doesn’t work

- Use of gloomy language or images that convey sadness and isolation (these are more suited to fundraising campaigns)
- Using jargon
- Telling socially isolated people they are lonely (this has negative implications that they are sad, desperate or vulnerable). In general, try to limit or reduce the use of ‘isolated’ and ‘lonely’ as most people do not perceive themselves as or want to admit that they are lonely or isolated. These are conversations to have with people once you have built a relationship with them
- Using words that suggest your activity is for people who may be struggling

such as ‘beneficiary’

What does work

- Using positive language to attract people. Promote the benefits of your activity, such as making new friends and learning new things
- Asking “do you want to get involved in local activities?, Get out more? Meet new people?”
- Targeting people based on their shared interests, not their age
- Focusing on the positive and the joy to be had through being connected and feeling valued
- Showing how your group or activity is fun
- Trying to use aspirational language
- Using inclusive words/phrases such as “everyone” and “all abilities welcome” to encourage people to get involved. It can also take some of the fear/anxiety out of joining in

Images and photography

Although the theme of this report is use of language, there is also often a cross-over and link into the use of images. We have learnt that people don’t engage or relate to imagery of people hunched over walking sticks, wearing glasses and hearing aids etc., which stereotype people over 50 as frail, and vulnerable and so perpetuates ageism.

Be clear about who your audience is and avoid using fundraising images (that pull on heartstrings) to promote your activities to service users. Whilst these have a role to play in securing support when targeting funders and stakeholders, your service users may not respond well or be able to relate to images of lonely, sad older people.

Many Ageing Better areas have employed a professional photographer at points in the Programme. Doing so, especially at the start can save time, money and effort in the longer term because you have a unique, accessible and readily available library of images to use for the duration of your project. Doing so will also help to establish and enhance your brand identity by ensuring that your images reflect the tone and messaging of your project.

Do check that you have all necessary permissions from everyone featured on your promotional materials and ensure you have signed permission forms at every photo shoot.

What doesn’t work

- Using stereotypical images of older people which perpetuate ageism such as photographs of disembodied wrinkly hands or
“Whacky and With-it” images - whilst some people do jump out of aeroplanes, roller skate and do gymnastics in later life, these images may not be representative of the service you are providing

“Depressed and lonely” images - these are not appealing or aspirational
“Old and dear” - representing people as physically or mentally vulnerable or frail

What does work

- Showing real people taking part in real activities or if this isn't possible, try to show people who *could* be in your groups
- Images of connection, friendship and fun
- Having access to good quality, professional photographs

Targeting activity at particular groups

Think about the activity and who you are hoping will attend. For some activities you may be specifically targeting a particular group of people and it is important to be clear about that. But for other activities you may be aiming for a broad range of people to attend. Within the Programme, for example, we have found that it has been harder to attract older men to some activities. Our learning is that it's important to consider whether including the word “men” in the title of the group will work well or not - it can attract some men but also put others off. Ensure that where appropriate the event is marketed in both a gender-neutral and age-neutral way, so that individuals are not put off by it appearing too “feminine” or too “masculine”.

Areas have also learnt that promoting activities for men through reaching out to those connected to them, for example their partners or children can be very helpful. Some projects have found that partners may seek out information on behalf of older men and encourage them to engage. Look at how your marketing materials are likely to be received by men, even if they are not the ones making the initial contact.

A key challenge is often actually getting people through the door. This is especially the case for activities that are clearly about addressing a person's financial situation. There is a stigma around social isolation which is multiplied when also trying to discuss people's personal finances - areas told us that marketing activities aimed at improving people's personal finances should try not to mention money.

Some groups are aimed at people who may be seen as having a specific “role” such as being a “carer”. However, people do not always recognise themselves as carers or want to be seen as a “carer” which for some can be seen as a label having connotations with work or the statutory sector. We found organisations using creative ways of communicating what caring is, but without using the word carer helped people connect to the organisation e.g. “do you help look after a friend, neighbour or relative” etc.,

What doesn't work

- Don't mention money when marketing activities aimed at improving people's personal finances

What does work

- Trying to market your activity in a gender-neutral way - unless it is specifically aimed at men or women
- Trying to target people in a particular “role” in a more creative way such as “do you help look after?”
- Thinking about how you could harness friends and family to encourage people they know to your activity “If you or someone you know...”

Volunteering

We have also learnt that when trying to encourage people to get involved, words like ‘volunteer’ may be off-putting for some, as this suggests a regular commitment or hard work, when what is needed might be more informal and enjoyable. Other terms like “membership” or being a “helper” were more helpful in encouraging people to connect and take part as it indicated flexibility and allowing people to dip in and out of activities.

In other instances, people have been happy with the term “volunteer”. Ageless Thanet volunteers were originally called “Champions” but they found that this didn’t work well as some volunteers felt that the term carried connotations of grandeur and made them feel uncomfortable. It’s important to remember that some individuals have a real sense of pride in being a volunteer and there is evidence that this is increasing as a result of the Covid-19 experience.

A practical solution is to ask your members or group participants how they would like to be referred to e.g. as volunteers or not. Ageing Better in Birmingham’s Experts by Experience decided that they wanted to be known as members of the (self-named) Age of Experience group. This highlights the real importance within the Programme of co-production and involving members throughout.

We also found terms like “mutual support” worked better than “giving back”. People often have difficult and complex lives, and so the notion of needing to “give back” risks alienating people. This was also linked to insights shared by areas about not advertising around the need to fill specific roles but instead speaking directly to people about what they love, what they care about and what they have to contribute and then fitting any role or tasks around them.

What does work

- Thinking about whether using the word “volunteering” works for your project or activity and the people involved
- Speaking directly to people about what they love, what they care about and what they have to contribute
- Using words like “membership” or becoming a “helper”
- Asking people how they want to be referred to in terms of any role or title

Translation

Effective translation involves more than just translating a word or phrase and we have learnt that some concepts just don’t translate culturally. Different languages can’t be assumed to have words which mean the same thing and cultural views of a range of issues can shape language in ways a non-native speaker wouldn’t understand. For example, the term “hearing loss” in Cantonese is “sat cung” which

some Cantonese speakers also understand to mean “learning disability”¹ which could cause some people to avoid identifying themselves as having hearing loss.

Linking into our wider Ageing Better learning around the importance of co-production and co-research, rather than just have documents translated it’s better to take the time to talk to a community first and see if there’s a conceptual match with what you want to promote or communicate.

Effective and practical translation is also more than the “written word”. Videos of a person who speaks a particular community language explaining or introducing a concept or activity can be really useful and could be produced via a mobile phone camera. Ageing Better in Birmingham shared videos with information around COVID-19 locally to help inform about Government guidelines recently.

What does work

- Thinking about the concept behind the word or phrase you are translating for the groups you want to communicate with
- Thinking about producing translated material in other formats such as videos

Making information accessible – Easy to read guides

Easy Read information is a good way to make information accessible. Although there are different formats and ways that information can be made easy to read, the Mental Health Foundation² identifies that there is consensus on the following components:

- Text should be broken down into short sentences
- Images should be selected to represent each sentence of text where possible
- Language should be simplified wherever possible, and any necessary complicated words or terms should be explained
- Text should be in a large font size, minimum 14pt
- Text should be presented on A4 pages where possible, as A5 or smaller are not as accessible
- Text should always be aligned on the right hand side of the page and images should be aligned on the left hand side of the page
- Avoid fancy fonts and italics
- Design elements should be kept to a minimum to stop them detracting from the information

Easy Read information is of use to a broad range of people including those with dementia, sight loss, hearing loss, those with English as a second language as well as those with learning disabilities.

¹ <https://lgbt.foundation/downloads/AFAWaiYinaccessible>

² <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/learning-disabilities/a-to-z/e/easy-read>

Bee Together is a Time to Shine (Leeds) project working with older people with learning disabilities. One of the findings from their project was that people needed accessible information in order to more easily join in local groups and integrate into their community and to help make them feel less isolated and lonely.

Further information

- Greater Manchester (Ambition for Ageing) - Older People's Network published this report on Age Proud Exploring Positive Ageing. [Age Proud Exploring Positive Ageing](#)
- East Lindsey (TED) - [Communication leads to connection](#)
- Bee Together (Time to Shine Leeds project) has written a booklet featuring examples of ways to create Easy to Read guides. It also includes details of websites and groups who create easy read accessible information.
[Bee Together - Easy To Read Guide](#)
- Ageing Better Birmingham's campaign "Ageing with Pride" celebrated over 50s LGBT people's lives, raising awareness of the causes and risks of social isolation amongst this community. The campaign was built around 3 key messages
[Ageing with Pride evaluation](#)
- Cheshire - Marketing Top Tips [Capturing Impact](#)

More detail on our wider insights from across the Programme to date together with an overview summary of our learning to date are available at [Ageing Better](#)