

# Working and engaging with older men

## – learning from Ageing Better

### Introduction

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme. It is collecting information and insights from across 14 partnerships to identify learning that will be useful for other programmes and organisations delivering activities aimed at reducing social isolation in people aged 50+.

We have grouped our national learning from Ageing Better into three themes:

- **CONTEXT** - We know from Ageing Better that the reasons for social isolation are many and varied and happen for a myriad of reasons including macro issues such as inequalities and deprivation as well as personal circumstances. These often occur in combination meaning people's situations are complex.
- **CONNECTIONS** - The people who are most socially isolated (where isolation is entrenched and embedded) will need some level of one-to-one support to help address their isolation
- **ECOSYSTEM** - The Ecosystem is fundamental to addressing social isolation as it is the space where individuals connect with the community. It works preventatively to keep people socially connected and steps in when social isolation occurs. It includes interventions that people 'need'; activities and groups people 'want' to engage with; opportunities and provision for people to set up their own groups; and community development which includes age friendly activity

This paper's topic of working with men features in each of the three themes. It starts by exploring the insights from Ageing Better around how older men are at greater risk than women for social isolation and loneliness. It considers some learning around the connections that can best support older men and provides examples from across Ageing Better around the ecosystem Ageing Better areas have developed to do so.

This paper focuses on our learning from Ageing Better on working and engaging with [tnlcommunityfund.org.uk](http://tnlcommunityfund.org.uk)

older men and brings together and summarises the learning produced by a number of partnerships. Ageing Better has attracted proportionally more women (69%<sup>1</sup> of participants were women) than would be expected based on the national population of people aged 50+, 52% of whom are women based on the last census. Areas have been very conscious of this and have been both reflecting on the reasons for this and developing ways to engage older men.

Please also see our Ageing Better - summary of key learning graphic which gives context as to how our learning around engaging with older men fits within our national learning overall. At the end of this report we provide links to specific learning reports from Ageing Better areas on this topic.

## Context

### Men are at greater risk of social isolation

Older men are more likely to be socially isolated than women. The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness<sup>2</sup> estimated that eight million men (of all ages) in the UK feel lonely at least once a week, with nearly three million reporting that it is a daily occurrence. The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) from 2012/2013 found that over 1.2 million older men reported a moderate to high degree of social isolation and over 700,000 older men reported feeling a high degree of loneliness. A review of this data<sup>3</sup> indicates that a higher proportion of older men (14%) experienced moderate to high social isolation compared to 11% of women.

More men<sup>4</sup> had less than monthly contact with their children or other family members than women, and this contact decreased for men over time as they aged, while it increased for women. Men<sup>5</sup> also had less frequent contact with their friends. Older men<sup>6</sup> without partners are lonelier than women without partners - three-quarters (76%) said they were lonely compared to 71% of single women<sup>4</sup>.

There is a considerable amount of national and international research that suggests some of the reasons for this:

- Men tend to build social relationships differently to women and this can make them vulnerable to social isolation as they age
- Men's social interaction can often be centred around the workplace, increasing the risk of isolation on retirement.
- Older men often rely on their partner to maintain friendship groups and social networks. As a result, men who are bereaved or divorced are at risk of becoming isolated.

We also found this within Ageing Better. In Camden they undertook research that showed men may be more dependent on their partners for social contact and to arrange social engagements and activities with friends, family or others. They also found that married men rely on their wives or partners to organise their social

---

<sup>1</sup> CMF data as at August 2019

<sup>2</sup> Jopling, K (2017) Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time A call to action. Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness

<sup>3</sup> Beach, B and Bamford, SM (2014) Isolation: the emerging crisis for older men – A report exploring experiences of social isolation and loneliness among older men in England Independent Age/International Longevity Centre UK: 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

activities.

“I don’t need any of this, I’ve got a wife”.

This “dependency” however may lead to a loss of social contact and increased levels of loneliness when men lose their partners.

Torbay highlighted the situation of men reporting or being reported as needing to reconnect when they become widowers after having been long term carers. This can of course be the case for women as well as men but there was a plea for more awareness raising for men who are carers, so that they might be better prepared pre and immediately after the death of their spouse.

Middlesbrough found that men could often be trapped into gender stereotypes, with identities and self-esteem wrapped up with things like work or marriage. They are less likely to articulate issues early, men tended to arrive at Ageing Better at a point of loss; be it retirement, redundancy or bereavement.

“The pain of not having ‘other’ things to do could be coupled with frustration at not being able to pass on knowledge and skills, something they had valued and was now lost to them. Their pride in local industry, particularly steel-making, could itself seem redundant with every closure that was announced.”

**Key Message:** Men are particularly at risk of social isolation and loneliness. They have specific risk factors associated with the way relationships develop, the role of the work place and the role of partners. Programmes need to specifically consider these risk factors and how they can be mitigated or addressed.

## What may be stopping men getting involved?

There are of course many factors which influence whether an individual will want to engage with any activity. We also need to be wary of treating older men as one single homogenous group when they are of course a diverse group of individuals. There do, however, seem to be some broad messages that can be drawn.

The make up or diversity of staff and volunteers involved in a project may affect who engages and who does not engage. Bristol projects who had older male volunteers found that it worked well when these volunteers interacted with older male participants, as it had similarities of spending time with a peer. Likewise, Bristol projects commented that the nature of the third sector being predominantly female had an impact - if men can’t see themselves represented, they may be less likely to engage.

A further issue is that the activities themselves may be perceived by men as being ‘for women’. If groups are attended predominantly by women this can be daunting for some men and in turn can limit opportunities to discuss personal circumstances with people with similar experiences.

Ageing Better areas noted that they had found that men generally are less likely to take part in activities and projects designed to address loneliness and social isolation in later life. Men can be reluctant to seek help, feeling that they should be self-reliant, independent and not be a ‘burden’.

Some older men are also concerned about feeling ‘left out’ in groups full of couples or may be worried about joining a group built around socialising.

Echoing earlier Ageing Better learning it is really important that activities link into

people's previous lives and interests through having a range of options available.

*“Now, I don't want to seem rude but sitting around drinking tea and coffee is just not for me. This [Platform 50 Men's Gym Takeover] is perfect really, just the job. It has to be things [activities] that people want to do and it has to come from the people. I used to do a lot of running'. (Frank, Service User)”*

**Key Message:** Consider how activities are marketed and how people hear messages about what they should do. Insight from Behaviour Science<sup>7</sup> identifies *‘ideally good messengers have three attributes: they can be trusted, they are experts; and they are like you’*.

## **Build on an activity rather than stressing the social element**

Older men may be more likely to participate in doing an activity, rather than attending something which is purely social. Those who are more isolated may feel particularly anxious about talking to others directly without a shared activity to focus on.

Many Ageing Better projects highlight that men tend to want to share their skills by showing others how to do something that they themselves are knowledgeable about, such as woodwork or car maintenance. This was particularly the case among men in their 50s.

Similarly, once older men have attended a group or activity, they may be more likely to continue engaging if they feel a sense of ownership and sense of responsibility within the group, guiding the direction it goes in rather than being a more passive attendee.

A number of Bristol projects noted that it worked well to engage older men when there was no pressure to do all of a set activity; they could instead participate at their own pace, which included having the option of sitting and watching others. This might involve having a drop-in format, with no minimum commitment each week. But it was also important to provide the flexibility of the opportunity to take on more responsibility for those that wished to, as this also worked well too.

A good facilitator can be key to creating this comfortable and flexible environment, and therefore the likelihood that participants will continue to engage. This is true for men and women.

Older men may take a longer time to ‘open up’ within a new group, particularly if it is out of their usual comfort zone. For activities that only last a few weeks, with a set end date, it may mean that the activity finishes just at the point when the individual is feeling comfortable. In these scenarios, it is worth the project considering possible ways the individual could still be involved afterwards, for example as a volunteer or ambassador.

In the Isle of Wight they developed a wide range of “Sheds” that had a different focus and a range of themes from aviation to engineering to music, alongside the more traditional “Men in Shed” activity. They found that this variety was appealing to different groups of men across the Island. Delivery partners in research undertaken by Camden reflected that projects such as “Men's shed's” appear to attract men because they offer a facility where men can use their skills in a social

---

<sup>7</sup> Happiness by Design – Paul Dolan

environment rather than be expected to actively participate in a structured group activity. Using and improving skills is the central theme, rather than active socialising.

*“Our conversations with men have suggested that men are less likely to socialise for the sake of socialising and would rather have another reason for going out and meeting other people.”*

In January 2019, the Camden Outreach Team carried out a small research project with men to explore why their experience in Camden echoed research showing that older men are more socially isolated than older women and so less likely to engage in social activities

They found that informal drop-in type sessions are more attractive than scheduled formal activities. Men want to retain autonomy over their participation - to be able to come and go within sessions as they currently do during activities such as going to the gym, visiting pubs, walks etc. Men wanted opportunities to socialise that do not require a commitment, or regular attendance. The majority (60%) indicated not wanting a regular commitment but instead wanting to take part “whenever I feel like it”. Men would like to be able to attend when they feel like it, and for the experience to feel natural “like meeting with friends”. Drop-in type sessions may allow men to socialise in this way. This was supported by the housing scheme manager who reported that the men actively resist “being organised.”

Insight from East Lindsey was that they had found the use of a gym takeover session helped engage men and in turn provided a wider range of mental, physical and social outcomes.

|   |
|---|
| <p><b>Key Message:</b> Activities are helpful if they focus on a shared activity or an opportunity to use skills. Men may find structured groups less appealing and may want the flexibility to dip in and out as and when they want to engage.</p> |
|---|

## **Ageing Better Tips for getting more older men to attend**

Not everyone will want the same kind of group, activity or service. It is important that there are a diverse range of options available to suit a diverse range of needs and wants.

Similarly, not everyone is able or wants to join a group and may prefer one-to-one situations either in the community or in their own homes. This might particularly be the case for those who have not socialised in a long time, or who have anxiety or mobility difficulties. This is a consistent message from our Ageing Better learning.

Many projects had found it easier to engage men aged 70+ and believed that this was because most activities, groups and services ran during weekday daytimes. Men in their 50s and 60s are more likely to be at work during these times and therefore unable to attend or engage with the project’s activities. When planning an activity or meeting, remember that the time of day it is scheduled will affect the diversity of the people who can attend.

Other considerations for when you are engaging men are to:

- **Think about the focus of the activity** - speak to men and don’t make assumptions about what men want. Our experience is that older men can be put off by groups which they perceive as being a ‘talking shop’ or an excuse for chatting. Instead, they are more likely to be attracted to groups built around a particular shared interest, such as a hobby, or a common experience, like supporting a team or former job role. There is also the value of having an

ongoing programme of activity or a flow of project opportunities to keep men engaged over a longer period of time. We also found that mixed generation activities can help older people feel valued and enhance younger people's attitudes towards ageing. Think about how your group could attract people of different age groups.

- **Create opportunities to give something back** - build in opportunities for older men to help run groups. Avoid describing this as “volunteering” and keep it flexible and informal. Look for opportunities for people to share expertise and knowledge and opportunities to help the wider community. All help create a sense of purpose and self-esteem.
- **Provide a supportive environment** - we found that it worked well to reach older men through social prescribing projects. These projects could provide the additional support which might be necessary to enable people to attend activities or groups. Social prescribing was often a route by which many had engaged with older men, who they may not otherwise have been able to reach. Make sure your group offers a relaxed, casual, friendly and non-competitive environment and consider if there is a need for a men-only group or activity. Consider organising one off events to ‘hook’ new members. This might be a trip, a special guest or a taster session. This also avoids people feeling they have to make an on-going commitment which can be off putting.
- **Promote your group to men** - Promote in places that men go to. This could include pubs, working men's clubs and sports venues. Also consider churches, temples and mosques. Talk to schools, colleges and youth groups about making your activity inter-generational. Word of mouth is often very effective. Ask your members to spread the word. This could be talking to friends, relatives, neighbours and colleagues. It could also mean encouraging men to act as champions or ambassadors in the wider community or encouraging men to bring others along who may be in a similar position.
- **Think about the language you use** - Think about the activity and who you are hoping will attend and then consider whether including the word “men” in the name 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 a gender-neutral and age-neutral way, so that individuals are not put off by it appearing too “feminine” or too “masculine”. Promoting activities for men through reaching out to those connected to them, for example their partners or children. Some projects have found that partners, in particular, 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.

### Further information

- Ageing Better in Birmingham - [Getting older men involved in activities](#)
- Ageing Better in Camden - [Working with older men](#)
- Time to Shine in Leeds - Tackling the growing crisis of lonely men [Tackling the growing crisis of lonely men](#)

- Bristol Ageing Better - [What has worked well when reaching and engaging older men](#)
- Talk, Eat, Drink (East Lindsey) - [Chaps Platform 50, Men's Gym Takeover Sessions](#)  
[Engaging older men](#)
- Ageing Better Middlesbrough - [Men in Sheds project reports](#)

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