

# Tenets of Ageing Better

## Introduction

Ageing Better, a 7 year test and learn programme has been 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+.

Ageing Better national learning can be segmented into three clearly defined areas: **context**, **connections** and **ecosystem**. These three interconnected segments build a picture of the macro and micro factors, services and support systems, that help us to better understand loneliness and social isolation in people aged over 50.

However, we also know that to tackle social isolation in communities it is not just about “what” you do but also “how you do it”. Ageing Better has been collecting and sharing learning about working with socially isolated people aged 50+ for over six years. We have produced a range of learning reports on a variety of themes from delivery to date. Reflecting on this learning we have identified a series of common principles that recur and run throughout the Programme. The learning from Ageing Better suggests it is these principles that underpin successful approaches to tackling social isolation in people aged 50+.

Much of our learning allows people who are designing individual projects to adopt and build on best practice. But for commissioners, funders and policy makers it is also important to recognise the interconnected nature of interventions in tackling social isolation and loneliness. There is much more needed than “just” creating groups for people to attend. There needs to be an understanding of the elements of the “wrap around” support required e.g. creating a Warm Welcome. Equally there is much nuance and skill in working with people who are socially isolated or lonely and in understanding how individual and varied the impact of this can be.

## Context

There are a range of risk factors that can occur, often in combination which lead to people finding themselves becoming socially isolated. These include mental health issues, lack of confidence or self-esteem, as well as life’s transition points (e.g. retirement, illness, bereavement) together with environmental and physical factors that act as a barrier to someone being able to connect with their community and support systems.

## Work in partnership

No one organisation or agency can “solve” social isolation, so it is vital for

organisations to not work alone or to try and replicate what others are already doing well. Funding should encourage collaboration not competition and develop networks and partnerships. We have also learnt the impact that long term funding can have. Organisations looking to tackle social isolation should have as broad a network with as wide a range of organisations as possible who either have specialist skills (money advice, language skills, digital or mental health support) or a track record of working with particular client groups. This network will help identify the people who need support as well as maximising the numbers and types of activities and groups that individuals want to join (or by creating new ones themselves) in order to make social connections and friendships.

Funders and commissioners should look at how their funding promotes and encourages the networks and collaborations that are key to tackling social isolation in communities.

## **Connections**

Understanding someone's unique situation is key to engaging with them as individuals and identifying the barriers they face in making 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. This support is person centred and holistic and involves taking the time to develop a relationship with the individual and at their pace to build trust.

### **Recognise that people with entrenched isolation will need specific help and support**

There are a group of people for whom social isolation has become entrenched. The reasons why people become or find themselves socially isolated are complex and multi-faceted, often building over time. Changing this will take time, skilled professionals and often the involvement of multiple different agencies to help address an individual's requirements. Part of the initial work here is in triage diagnosis and one-to-one support - identifying any emergency situations such as mental health issues, financial issues, housing etc., which "need" to be sorted before being able to go on and look at improving an individual's social connections. Specific "connector" roles are often needed to do this.

### **Value the role of the connector**

The role of a connector in facilitating this one-to-one relationship and support can be vital. A connector helps make connections - within Ageing Better it is an approach to help identify, reach and connect with socially isolated people and through a person-centred approach, connect them to activities and support that is right for them in their local area. It is important to allow a relationship of trust not dependency to build which even at the start is looking and planning an exit route. This is often managed by offering either a time limited intervention or a fixed number of sessions of support. There will need to be a substantial amount of flexibility around the length and method of contact.

This takes time and resource. Social prescribers and link workers can often fulfil this role but the capacity of these roles must be carefully managed.

### **Work in a person centred way**

Working with people who need support either because social isolation is entrenched or they are experiencing a difficult life event is most effective when it is person

centred and holistic. Support focuses on the individual, taking the time to establish what they want to do or achieve rather than making any assumptions. The aim is to identify an individual's personal barriers and then work towards achieving a personalised set of goals. Building a relationship of trust in order to achieve this takes time. Meeting the person in a place that feels "safe" for them is crucial.

Every person's outcome will be different, with the journey out of social isolation and loneliness being different for everyone. For some, support will result in greater wellbeing but for others either their situation will not change fundamentally or their physical decline will continue. Valuing and respecting these different end points is hugely important and a continuing element of working in a person centred way.

One size does not fit all. We have learning around working with particular groups of people e.g. older men, carers, LGBT+ and BAME etc. containing important insights. It always has to be remembered however, that any "categorisation" covers a huge diversity of people. Always remember that people are individuals.

Funders and commissioners need to be aware of this and not set unrealistic outcomes, particularly for those where social isolation has become entrenched. Some outcomes may be "small" but are enormously valuable to the individual.

### **Importance of a skilled facilitator**

We have learnt the importance of facilitating or creating the environment where friendships can develop naturally. There is a need to create, facilitate and maintain a "warm welcome" for groups and events. Food plays an important role in building and developing connections and friendships so ensure that there are social opportunities at any event - providing a cup of tea or cake and a chance to chat and network.

A skilled facilitator is key to running effective sessions (either group or one-to-one). In order to be successful or appear "natural" a large number of elements have to be in place and facilitated. Facilitators set the tone for the engagement, for how the session will look and feel and can help make everyone feel welcome, listened to and valued. They can help prevent cliques, adapt the environment to meet people's specific needs and provide ongoing contact if someone misses a session. This facilitator function is also thinking about the next step for an individual or the group - there is a progress or development.

For those people who have risk factors for social isolation, such as declining physical health or caring responsibilities it is important to offer regular opportunities/activities/groups that take place at the same time and location. This allows people to have a structure around which to plan transport, respite care and medical appointments. It is also important to allow people the flexibility to dip in and out especially if they have fluctuating health conditions.

Our learning indicates skilled facilitators can be volunteers, staff or enthusiastic participants. Funders and commissioners should promote and encourage the adoption of tools like "warm welcome". They should also promote and encourage projects and activities that support the development of participants. This includes allowing funding for training and development and creating small pots of resource that can be used by volunteers to cover group costs for a short period.

### **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’ as well as the 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 Ecosystem will vary from place to place and recognises the importance of people working together as no one organisation can “fix” social isolation and loneliness. It also recognises that as important as specific interventions are, they need to be part of something wider.

## **Understand the importance of natural friendships - create the conditions for these to develop**

A community that has a wide range of activities that people want to do creates an environment where people can feel connected. The activities themselves can be the “hook” for people wanting to get engaged and involved, which then builds confidence allowing people to make those natural friendships which are so powerful. You cannot engineer friendships - you can “befriend” someone and create the situations where people come together in an environment where “natural” friendships have the opportunity to develop. These connections and groups act in both a preventative way to reduce social isolation, and as an exit route for those people with entrenched social isolation.

Through Ageing Better delivery, we have learnt and identified the specific elements and resources involved in managing and facilitating the environment within which these important social connections and friendships can mature. In organising groups and activities, it is important to think about the wider elements beyond the actual activity itself. This includes transport to, as well as the physical accessibility of the venue together with considerations as to how inclusive the venue or activity is in terms of culture and for participants with any sight or hearing impairment.

The language and terms used to promote activities can be crucial - avoiding terms like “old” and “lonely” and emphasising the actual activities themselves as well as enjoyment e.g., talking about cooking rather than healthy eating. We have also learnt the importance of having activities and groups that can be accessed in a range of ways both face-to-face, telephone and online in order to meet differing and changing requirements.

Funders and commissioners need to recognise these elements of best practice and look for them when projects are applying for funding or when commissioning activity.

## **Recognise and build on the strengths and assets that exist already**

People often want to provide mutual support and contribute. Creating opportunities for reciprocity in small and large ways engages people more deeply in those activities and builds on the individual strengths we have. Organisations working with groups should build in opportunities for people to be able to muck in and contribute. This does not mean, however, that all activities should be run by volunteers. Some sessions, particularly those for carers, people with long term health conditions (including dementia) and those with mental health issues (including bereavement) need professional support.

Within Ageing Better, we have seen the impact of adopting community development principles (encouraging people to come together and take action on the things that matter to them). Working with community assets means being people focused, building on positives and strengths and finding ways for the community to work

together including the use of micro-funding. It is also frequently place based, allowing people to come together within a recognised geographical area although the size and context of that place will vary.

Organisations, funders, and commissioners need to think about the assets present in a community in its broadest possible sense - the skills, knowledge and interests of individuals but also the wider community assets present within the voluntary and community sector as well local businesses. Funders and commissioners should look at how they promote and encourage the use of local assets and how they incorporate asking for this information in their funding approaches.

Coproduction and codesign have been at the heart of much Ageing Better activity. There is an increasing recognition across the sector about the value of this way of working but there needs to be commitment to true coproduction and time needs to be taken to develop the relationships and processes to do this meaningfully. Coproduction is also central to any person centred working and applies as much to one-to-one work as it does to designing projects, programmes or groups. Funders and commissioners need to allow this time to be built into projects and proposals.

### **Further information**

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