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"A THREAD OF CONTINUITY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES"

THE IMPACT OF THE
OLDER PEOPLE'S
ADVISORY GROUP

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KEEPING CONNECTED IN LOCKDOWN

I've been attending OPAG for five years, taking my turn chairing and planning content. Since the lockdown, when I've been able to see so few people, OPAG has become even more important. Surprisingly, I know members even better, despite not seeing them in person.

March 2020 brought such frustration as the media implied that past 70 I was just 'too vulnerable' to be of use! Undaunted, myself and other OPAG members regularly checked in with all of the members; spirits and resilience were generally high and I felt uplifted by making the calls.

A weekly newsletter followed, full of interesting information and ideas about how we could fill our time whilst staying at home, diligently researched and put together by Harriett from her 'office' in her living room.

An introduction written by a different OPAG member each time gave us great insights into personal thoughts,

feelings, philosophies on life and the creativity that was blossoming to fill the days. A window was opened onto the lives of us older Camden residents and really made me feel connected.

OPAG meetings continued monthly, virtually, and two telephone conferencing calls to members who are not online - the same agenda, the same speakers.

Arranging meetings, research, writing newsletters, mailing them out, setting up Zoom and teleconferencing calls, keeping good records - all of this takes time, carried out mainly by the ABC staff. This continuity of connectedness amongst OPAG members has become very important to me and much valued by all of us.

Sue Heizer

**Chair of ABC Strategic
Board & OPAG member**



INTRODUCTION

The Ageing Better in Camden Older People's Advisory Group (OPAG) meets monthly to help shape the Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) partnership and give their views on issues affecting older people. It is an open group for anyone living in Camden who is over 60.

OPAG has been facilitated by ABC since 2015, when the programme began working to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people across Camden. This report looks at the value of OPAG during the year from March 2020, when the UK entered its first lockdown, to March 2021. It follows on from the first OPAG impact report, which was published in 2018.

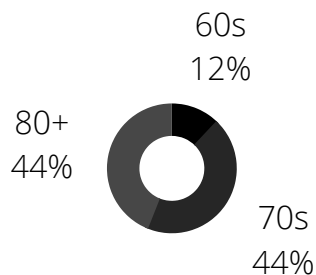
Since the outbreak of Covid-19, OPAG has continued to meet monthly, both online and via two telephone conferencing groups.

On average, 29 people joined the monthly meeting and various organisations attended to consult with the group.

OPAG members receive a newsletter every two weeks. It contains a personal introduction written by a different member each time, as well as information on Covid-19, activities to do during lockdown, advice and other relevant information.



84 members



Majority over 70



79% women, 21% men



“OPAG is the most valuable things to happen during lockdown, I needed it so much for my mental health wellbeing. We have been able to get information as our access has been cut off and we get to find out about Age UK Camden services. This has been important for me to pass on to other older people as some have needed help.”

During the Covid-19 period, there were 29 people attending OPAG meetings; 59% attended meetings online and 41% by phone. Seven new members became regular attendees during the pandemic. Members who attended meetings were mostly in their 70s (44%) or over 80 (39%), and 17% were in their 60s. 86% of people attending meetings were female and 14% male were male.

In March 2021 we sent out a survey to all OPAG members with options to respond either digitally or by post, depending on their preference. The survey asked why members attend the meetings and about the value of the meetings for them.

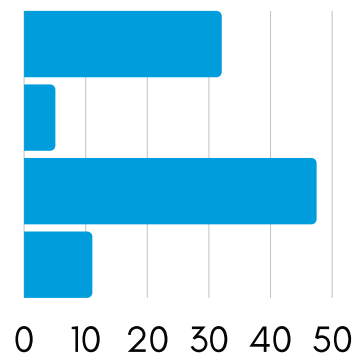
We received 31 responses to our survey. Of these, 19 (63%) attended meetings, 11 online, 7 by phone and one by both means. Eleven people who responded to the survey (37%) did not attend meetings. This means 66% of all members who attend meetings and 20% of members who do not attend meetings responded to our survey.

Like the overall membership, the majority of those who responded to the survey were in their 70s (48%) or over 80 (44%), and 7% were in their 60s. 83% of people who responded to the survey were female and 17% were male.

OUR SURVEY SAID

OPAG members were asked to select one main reason for joining the meetings. In our 2018 survey 19% said the reason they joined meetings was 'to spend time with others and be sociable'. This rose to 47% in our 2021 survey.

to have a say on issues affecting my local area
to find out what's going on in Camden for older people
to spend time with others and be sociable
to access important information during the pandemic



When asked **how important OPAG meetings have been to them during the Covid-19 pandemic**, 50% said OPAG was more important than before, 44% said it was of the same importance and 6% said it was less important. It is significant that in spite of changes in light of the pandemic, OPAG remained very important, if not more so, to its members.

"A thread of continuity in uncertain times."



"The speakers were very informative, it was really interesting to read the intro from members I've not met before. Talking to people improves my mental health."

Members were asked if their connection to OPAG had changed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Of those who attended meetings, the majority reported more connection to OPAG (53%), with a third saying there was no change (32%) and only 16% reporting less connection.

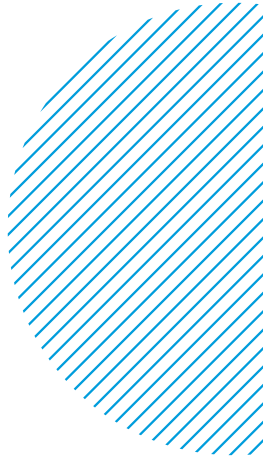
Of those who did not attend meetings, over half said their connection was more (18%) or the same as before (36%), with 46% reporting less connection with the group.

100% of members who attended meetings **found the newsletter** very (50%) or somewhat (50%) **important** (of 18 responses).

Members who did not attend meetings said the newsletter was very (3 people) or somewhat (6 people) important to them, with only 2 respondents saying it was not at all important.

People who did and did not attend meetings said the newsletter was important to them. This shows that members feel able to participate in the way that best suits them.

"During the pandemic we have got very close via the phone groups. We have spoken about all matters of things that I would not have known about otherwise."



"We as a group were so resilient."

100% of members who attended meetings and responded to the survey said that OPAG always (53%) or sometimes (47%) **informed them on issues that affect older people in Camden** (of 19 total responses).

94% of these members also said that OPAG always (47%) or sometimes (47%) **gives them the opportunity to inform organisations on policies that affect older people**, and 5% said it never did (of 19 responses).

100% of members found meetings extremely (83%) or mostly (16%) **welcoming and friendly** (of 18 responses).

100% of members who attended meetings **would recommend OPAG to older friends and neighbours** (of 19 responses). 90% of those not attending meetings would recommend it (of 10 responses). This highlights that the group is valuable to members whether or not they attend meetings.

"I am grateful to staff and volunteers who enabled me to go online. Learning and support have been invaluable. I would have felt distressed without it!"



WHAT OUR SPEAKERS TOLD US

Ten speakers responded to our survey. They came to the group to discuss and consult on a wide range of issues including:

- reaching older people isolated during the pandemic
- developing a campaign to support over 60s to become more active
- experiences of outpatient appointments at hospital
- encouraging involvement in a campaign around the suspension of concessionary travel by TfL
- making Camden Council consultations more accessible
- finding out how best to consult with older people regarding the Euston redevelopment
- providing an update on the HS2 construction programme, its impact and mitigation measures in support of the community
- to present an overview of Adult Social Care's Strengths Based approach
- to share findings from a Healthwatch Covid-19 survey
- to engage with residents on plans for recommissioning Community Equipment service.



"Feedback from the group informed our discussion on digital divide and access needs."

“OPAG are friendly, welcoming and a valuable source of insight and lived experience around engaging with older people. As such they have helped to shape and develop the service. ”



All ten speakers (100%) said they were entirely or mostly able to **achieve their objectives** in attending the group.



80% said that **feedback and comments from OPAG had informed their work**. One speaker said they weren't sure because they were no longer involved in the work. One said the work had been put on hold due to the pandemic.



100% said they **would attend an OPAG meeting in the future**.

Speakers from every organisation that attended OPAG found value in seeking their views.

In their responses, speakers expressed that OPAG were "forthcoming in the insight and suggestions they provided" and "extremely helpful". Speakers described the meetings as "engaged" and "well attended".

All ten speakers said they would attend the group again, with one speaker wanting to "maintain dialogue" in order for the "Older People's Advisory Group to be able to influence and shape the outcomes for the area."

“The group was very quick to engage positively in the discussion and gave exactly the sort of input and personal reflections that I was hoping to get from the session.”

WHAT NEXT?

Feedback from OPAG members makes clear that the Older People's Advisory Group in Camden is essential for finding out about issues affecting older people, gathering together, and having their voices heard.

Many respondents to our survey expressed their **hope that the group will continue:**

"I hope it keeps going, without it you would not know about so much that is going on."

"I hope that it continues to exist for many years to come."

Some members noted that the **group needed to remain focussed on making positive social change for older people**, rather than becoming another information session:

"I would keep it serious. Campaigning. Looking after our rights."

"I would suggest Camden Council should have one member from OPAG to convey suggestion, complaints, comments and discuss certain matters which council is not aware of."

"I feel that OPAG can be helpful in raising awareness of Local Government to our needs and problems, experienced as a result of ageing so that finances can be used to that advantage."

One member specifically noted the importance of OPAG, and other groups like it, in the **post-pandemic recovery effort:**

"We'll be more than just a social group. We'll have to understand the roadmap, Covid passports, booster jabs, the local arrangements for getting our jabs, quite apart from all the usual OPAG topics - health care, social care, transport and so on. We will be scrutinising measures taken during the past year."

Funding for the ABC programme will come to an end in March 2022. **The administration of OPAG will be taken over by Age UK Camden. With a clear vision for retaining their activism and voice, OPAG will continue to be a vital resource for the older people and local organisations of the borough.**

Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) is a partnership of older people and Camden organisations, working together to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people, as part of **The National Lottery Community Fund's Ageing Better programme**. ABC draws on existing skills and resources in the local community. It is part of **Age UK Camden**.

www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk

