

Spotlight on: Social Isolation and Supported Living

Ageing Better Middlesbrough – February 2020

Ageing Better Middlesbrough has been working with a number of housing providers over the last 18 months to find out what works to reduce social isolation among residents of supported living schemes.

What do we mean by supported living?

Supported living is an umbrella term, for a range of services and community living arrangements designed to allow older people to continue to live independently while having access to some personal care and support if they need it.

Typically, residents have their own private apartment within a housing complex. There is usually a communal lounge where activities may take place and services such as hairdressers and chiropodists may come in regularly. The terms 'independent living', 'retirement housing', 'extra care schemes' and 'sheltered housing' are all used by housing scheme providers to describe similar living environments.

There are currently 77 supported living options in Middlesbrough according to housingcare.org.



Supported living can reduce loneliness and isolation, but not always

An opportunity to take part in activities is a potential source of social capital, i.e. a way to build positive social networks and relationships (Gray, 2017; Netton et al, 2011). However, those with the highest support needs remain at an increased risk of social isolation. Residents do not automatically feel a sense of community and bonding with scheme neighbours (HNIL Network, 2012).

Some of the risk factors of social isolation for people moving into supported living schemes include:

- Sensory loss
- Dementia
- Bereavement
- Separation from former friends and neighbours
- Fewer social choices due to mobility or other health issues



Our approach

Our Community Development team are using asset based community development approaches which empower people to get involved and where possible take ownership of activities rather than remaining passive recipients.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a bottom-up way of strengthening communities through recognising, identifying and harnessing existing 'assets'. Things like skills, knowledge, capacity, resources, experience or enthusiasm that individuals and communities have which can help to strengthen and improve things. Instead of looking at what a community needs or lacks, the approach focuses on utilising the 'assets' that are already there (Croydon Council, 2019).

As well as working with residents to identify and develop their skills and talents, we are supporting other local volunteers from outside the schemes to get involved and collaborate on activities with residents and our staff.

“My customers have lifted spirits and are bubbling with enthusiasm to get activities going in the scheme...to live independently and seek out more in the community, instead of being shut away in their flats.”

Team Leader, Supported Living Scheme



Co-design and co-delivery are also key components of our work in supported living schemes.

Co-design for this project means coming together with residents to define the problem and design solutions.

Co-delivery for this project means residents and other volunteers leading on or being involved in the delivery of the solution.

For an in-depth discussion of co-production see:

[Understanding the Approach to Coproduction - Age Better in Sheffield](#)



“Ageing Better put the people first.... they ask residents what they want. The staff are really flexible, they won't just say no that's not possible, but they will go away and look into things, then get back with an idea of how an activity might work.”

Scheme Resident

Breaking down barriers and developing activity

Co-designing activities with residents was an important first step to understanding isolation in supported living schemes and collaboratively coming up with solutions. We held informal Coffee, Cake and Conversation sessions with groups of interested residents, as well as meeting with scheme managers.

What residents and scheme managers told us	Our approach to developing activity
<p>The staffing costs of facilitating activity was sometimes a barrier. Scheme managers acknowledged that finding the time to plan and coordinate activities, alongside their other responsibilities, was a challenge.</p>	<p>Residents are encouraged to help with activities (co-delivery). Building the confidence of helpers to get involved is an important step towards activity becoming sustainable in the long-term. This initial investment in people is more resource intensive to begin with, but it may reduce the amount of staff time and resource that are needed to support activities longer term.</p> <p>Activities are generally open to local people and Ageing Better Middlesbrough members, making the most of underutilised communal space. Developing bridging capital (Skills and Care, 2019) between residents and the wider community creates opportunities to meet new people and to develop friendships.</p> <p><i>“There are new faces to meet, new conversations to have, and a reason to leave the flat.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Scheme Resident</p> <p>Encouraging people from outside the schemes to come along and help, increases the pool of younger older people (50-65) who may be better placed to lead activities. Older residents with more complex needs can then join in. It also increases the number of intergenerational contacts which can be significant in reducing age related isolation (Gray, 2017).</p> <p><i>“It’s nice to see other people coming here from outside.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Scheme Resident</p> <p>Where activities need new equipment or resources, we support residents and scheme managers to apply for funding. Making residents aware of potential funding sources and developing the confidence to complete the application is another important step towards sustainability.</p>
<p>Residents reported that activities had been tried but petered out because of residents moving on or becoming bored with the same activities.</p>	<p>We co-design scheme specific activities with residents, focusing on their needs and aspirations. Activities are developed that appeal to both men and women and people of different ages.</p> <p>When residents feel activities are no longer engaging, they are encouraged to co-design new ones.</p>

Some residents felt that shared spaces and existing activities were not welcoming and could be cliquey.

Co-designing activities takes time but is a good way to include and build relationships with all residents who want to be involved. Everybody who wants to, gets an opportunity to share their ideas and contribute to the process.

Some residents are unsure about inviting new people into their home (communal space). It is important to be clear with residents when other people are coming into the scheme, so they are not taken by surprise. Our staff also talk to residents about the benefits of inviting people in.

“Some people have come along to the activities and met up with friends they haven’t seen for years.”

Housing Support Coordinator

Some residents had low levels of confidence and were anxious about getting involved.

There is a focus on creating a flexible and supportive environment. Residents don’t need to book on to activities. They can come along and watch with no pressure to join in. Family members are welcome too.

“We aren't all artists. We have members who are beginners and others who have been painting for a while. It's about having fun in a friendly and supportive environment.”

Craft Group Member

Scheduling six, weekly sessions in a row around a particular theme (health, social activity, or crafts) helped our staff build relationships with some residents who were initially reluctant to get involved. Greater contact and familiarity helps break down barriers.

Some residents needed one to one support from an Ageing Better Middlesbrough outreach worker to build their confidence to engage with activity. This involves building a trusting relationship with the individuals, taking small steps, and providing person-centered support within a community activity setting. Some individuals are also supported to get involved with activities outside of schemes if they want to.

Not all residents want to get involved in activity, so our outreach workers support those people to feel better within themselves and improve their self-esteem.

Building the confidence and skills of residents to take ownership and lead activities doesn't happen overnight. It takes time.

It is resource intensive and an ongoing process. So far, we have been working with supported living schemes for 18 months and although we have made a significant impact, there is still more to do.

Additionally, as time passes, residents move on from schemes. This means it is important to revisit the needs and aspirations of new residents so activities continue to engage people and use their skills and assets effectively.



Every supported living scheme is different and potentially needs different solutions

Whether it's differences in the type of accommodation, support offered, or the needs and aspirations of residents, no one supported living scheme we worked with is the same. Rather than a one size fits all roll-out of activities we work with residents to co-design specific activities on a scheme by scheme basis.



Existing activities and groups benefit from community development support.

In a climate of increasing resourcing pressures on scheme managers and staff, Gray (2017) highlights the importance of community development work with resident groups so they have the confidence and resources to run more varied social activities independently.

Support we have provided so far includes:

- Forming resident committees, becoming constituted, and opening bank accounts
- Identifying potential funders and applying for funds
- Sourcing and purchasing equipment
- Planning and implementing new ideas
- Promotion and attracting new people to activities
- Training around the different roles within community groups and completing risk assessments for activities
- Linking residents up with opportunities for first aid and food hygiene training

"We tried to open a bank account before, but it was so complicated... a staff member from Ageing Better took us right through it step by step."

Resident Committee Member

The future: what's next for ABM and supported living schemes

There is a clear need for asset based community development work across supported living schemes. Over the last 18 months we have built good relationships with scheme managers who now feel supported to encourage new activities. Other schemes in Middlesbrough are requesting our help meaning demand for this type of support is high. Ageing Better Middlesbrough will continue to provide this support where we can until our funding ends in March 2021.

In a climate of austerity and decreasing resources (Gray, 2017), it's crucial to raise awareness about the importance of asset based community development to reducing social isolation in supported living schemes. We aim to leave scheme managers with an evidence base of what works well. However, we strongly believe an asset based approach is most effective when delivered by experienced community development staff who understand the approach and have the time and resource to invest in people.



"[Community activity] prevents social isolation.... It gives residents a reason to get out of the apartment..... There's a gentleman who comes along to the game's night every week. He has lots of issues with his health and he says that he doesn't know what he'd do without it."

Housing Support Coordinator

References

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Ageing Better Middlesbrough

We are a Big Lottery funded programme that has £6 million to spend over six years to find out what works to reduce loneliness and social isolation for people who are over 50 and live in Middlesbrough.

We are part of a national Ageing Better Programme – a £78 million investment of National Lottery funding from the Big Lottery Fund to support people in later life.

There are 14 programmes including ourselves across England; in Birmingham, Bristol, Camden, Cheshire, East Lindsey, Hackney, Isle of Wight, Leicester, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Sheffield, Leeds, Thanet and Torbay.

We work closely with the other programmes, sharing insights and information to help innovate the work that we all do and find new and creative solutions to reducing loneliness and isolation.

The Hope Foundation

Hope Foundation staff deliver the Community Development part of Ageing Better Middlesbrough. The organisation has 22 years' experience of engaging the Middlesbrough community, having an impact on people's lives and sustaining initiatives.

The Community Development Team focuses on empowering local older people to take action to reduce isolation and loneliness in their communities and supporting individuals and groups to ensure activity is sustainable. Development work is driven by the needs of older people in communities and local people are involved in decision making.

Get in touch

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Other Ageing Better Middlesbrough learning is available at:
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