Maintaining social connections with older people remotely

Socialising and feeling you're a part of a community is important for mental and physical wellbeing. But for many older people it can be difficult to maintain an active social life due to reduced mobility, health issues or living far from family and friends.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated social distancing measures have exacerbated these challenges with people not able to meet friends face-to-face or attend their usual activities.

However, avoiding close contact with other people does not mean that you should feel more isolated. Community networks supported by Ageing Better in Birmingham have come up with different ways to build and maintain social connections, even while staying at home. In this briefing we share some insights and learning to help you keep social activity going remotely. We include real life examples, tips and suggestions and identify the best social networks and platforms to use for different purposes.

Why build remote networks?

While using technology to keep in touch remotely is crucial in addressing isolation at a time when people are being asked to stay at home, it can play an important role in less unusual circumstances too. Creating an online group for your activity can help promote what you are doing and reach a much wider audience than you could hope to do just through face-to-face meetings. It can bring people together and let people get to know others they may never have the opportunity to meet. Virtual networks and online groups can help people stay in touch and continue conversations between meetings.

Moseley Asian Music Makers

Moseley Asian Music Makers used to meet twice a week to listen to and create music together. Each session comprised a programme of live music by professional performers followed by an opportunity for community members to come on stage to perform in a supportive environment. The events also included an opportunity to socialise and share a community dinner.

"Most of the people here, they're older. They start going a little bit into dementia or depression or stuff like that. The thing that keeps you going are your happy memories. A lot of the happy memories are associated with music and family and good times"

As a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, the group has had to change the way it operates, and now mainly uses WhatsApp and Facebook to keep the activity going. The group already had a WhatsApp group, which was used to promote sessions. Now, around 75 people use it to communicate daily by sharing and receiving message. As well as offering a way

to discuss music, the group is now used to provide general support, such as sending one another 'good morning' posts. When a member of the community died, WhatsApp was used to post messages of condolence and prayers for the family. It is also used as a source of information about coronavirus and to debunk misinformation. For this Asian community WhatsApp has been a useful way to communicate as many members were already familiar with it and used it to keep in contact with families overseas.

The group uses Facebook to share live concerts and videos. This group has grown in recent months and now has around 275 members from across the globe. This creates a much larger opportunity to connect with people than the restrictions of a physical meeting space.

Top Tip: Group moderators have ensured that the WhatsApp group and Facebook pages are welcoming places for Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to come together and share their love of music. They aim to create a platform that 'behaves like a supportive family'. There are strict rules in the group to ensure politics, religion and any negative talk is kept outside so it remains a 'stress-free zone' for people.

Tips for building social connections remotely

- Now more than ever it is important that if you are planning a new activity you think about how you will meet the needs of people who are isolated or unable to leave their home, for whatever reason. Consulting and co-producing activities with older and isolated people is key.

- Start by identifying what people are interested and how best to communicate with them. Some technologies may be more suited to your audience and purpose than others (see out guide overleaf). You may need to maintain a variety of different ways for people to connect.

- Create opportunities for people to contribute if they wish. It is worth asking group members how they can help as well as what they may require assistance with. This will help to establish stronger connections and give people a sense of purpose.

- Not everyone is interested socialising for its own sake. Bringing people together for a purpose will be attractive to many older people, particularly men. Identify ideas for a project and then create a group to make it happen.

- If your usual activity cannot be delivered remotely, think about ways to maintain interest and contacts between members in other ways. This could be through suggesting tasks that can be done at home, and then encouraging participants to share the results.

Staying in touch using the phone

Where possible, use technology that people can access easily and are familiar with. This is one of the benefits of telephone-based support. Telephone befriending services, in which an older person receives a one-to-one call at a scheduled time, have been widely used for many years. This is a great way to keep in touch because most people have a phone and are comfortable using it.

Creating a regular connection this way helps to create a sense of feeling cared about for the person receiving the call. It has also been
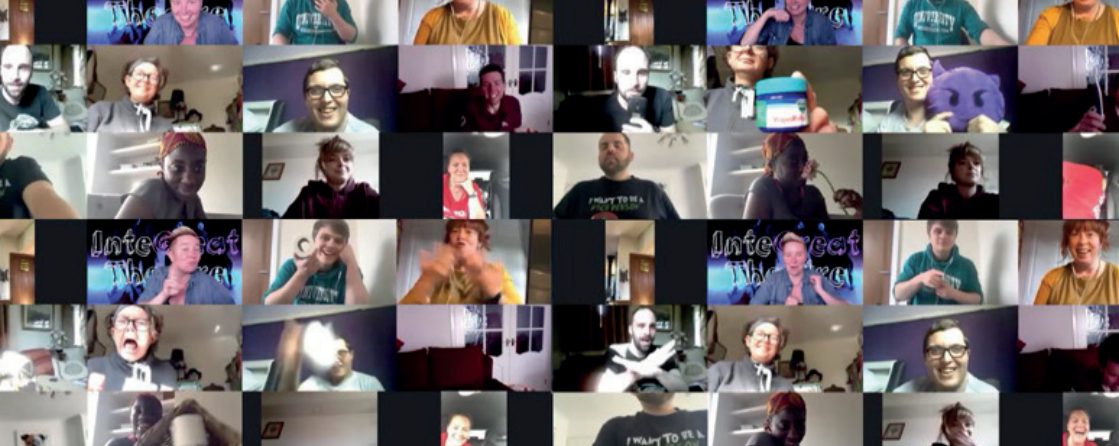
shown to increase confidence to become more physically and socially active. Acting as a befriender benefits volunteers too, who are often also older people, increasing their social and emotional wellbeing.

Telephone befriending typically takes place on a weekly basis with a relatively long call. During lockdown or when people are self-isolating you may wish to be flexible about how the process works; more frequent but shorter calls may be more appropriate in some circumstances.

If you are considering offering some form of telephone befriending service it is worth ensuring that volunteers have access to details of other services that they can signpost people to if required, for example local health services, telephone helplines and counselling and other community services that can offer practical help such as shopping or collecting prescriptions.

Telebuddies

Compass Support is providing the Ageing Better Befriending Service, which connects people by telephone. It is free and matches volunteers to older people that are self-isolating with similar interests.

Volunteers make weekly calls to someone in their local area. The calls are regular, occurring at the same time each week. As well as building friendships the service checks in on the wellbeing of isolated people. The service is secure, so while the befriender will have the older person's telephone number and name, no other personal details are requested. People who want to sign up for the service are matched with a volunteer within a week.

Top Tip: Telephone befriending works best when the volunteer is well matched to the person they are befriending. Having things in common helps to establish and maintain rapport over time.

Using the internet to stay in touch

Using online technology can be a helpful way to keep in touch and keep activities going remotely. Creating online communities that people can access through smart phones, computers and tablets can be a great way for people to feel connected.

- Some projects and activities are particularly suitable for pursuing online, for example, researching local history, creating a blog together and sharing photographs. The internet provides access to a huge array of material that can provide a focus for sharing and discussion, such as film, music, theatre and virtual visits to museums and art galleries, as well as interviews with authors,

film-makers and artists from around the world. See, for example, Chatterpack[1] for a helpful list of online resources.

- Virtual lunch and dinner clubs have proven very popular with older communities and can be a great way to ensure people are staying well and looking after themselves. Consider sharing new recipes and then enjoying the results together online.

- There are also guided exercise routines that can be followed online. 10 Today is a programme of daily 10-minute exercise routines designed to keep older people active, healthy and independent. As well as short online videos, the routines are broadcast live on BBC Radio 5 Live Sports Extra.[2]

- It is important that any online social group has one or more moderators to make sure the group is a safe and inclusive space. The moderator plays an important role in engaging members of the group to keep them coming back. This may be by giving encouragement and responding when people post a message or proactively sending members a message to ask how they are if they have not been active in the group for a while.

[1] https://chatterpack.net/blogs/blog/list-of-online-resources-for-anyone-who-is-isolated-at-home

[2] https://10today.co.uk/

Sar Ramz Cooking Group

Sar Ramz Cooking Group was funded by Ageing Better in Birmingham to offer weekly cooking classes. However, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 this could no longer go ahead as planned. The group leader has kept the group going through WhatsApp and Facebook, providing practical support, group tasks and telephone chats.

"The cooking sessions are doing so well that this is going to really make us now be very determined to do a lot more cooking."

The cooking group uses the wider community WhatsApp group. This provides a place to chat to one another as well as a hub for activities. Shared cooking activities are being scheduled, such as making an Easter Cake, with ingredient packs provided by Ageing Better in Birmingham. The group lead maintains contact with members while keeping the hours she commits to the project manageable by going online while she is cooking dinner so that members can chat to her or cook along at the same time. The group leader also holds popular weekly quizzes, either general knowledge or cooking-related. Other activities include prayer nights, where people are welcomed to light candles and share pictures of them.

The group have come up with the idea of creating a cookery book, which they are hoping to publish with the support of Ageing Better Birmingham. The book, titled 'Sar Ramz Quarantine Fun Cooking' will include recipes the group have followed, together with photographs of the dishes they have made and group members.

If anybody in the What's App group begins to feel isolated or depressed and wants to speak privately outside the main chat, they are able to call the leader.

"There are a few ladies that haven't [got the technology], so what I do with them, I just phone them and ask them if they're alright because they don't use computers or the phone. I just ring them and make sure they're alright, or they'll ring me and say they're okay and am I okay, they'll ask me as well if I'm okay. So, we've got that little happy family bond."

Top Tip: Identifying and understanding the needs of group members at the outset is important. Being flexible in how you deliver your activity helps ensure that as many people as possible are able to get involved.

Encouraging older people to go online

Some older people may be more reluctant to go online and make connections remotely. Here are some tips on how to overcome this reluctance:

- Focus on the positive opportunities that the internet can offer. This could include keeping in touch with friends and family, making new acquaintances, being able to pay bills online, accessing entertainment, keep up-to-date with the news from a wide range of sources and finding reviews for products they are thinking of buying. Having access to information and people can help to build up a sense of feeling connected to the world.

- Where possible, offer training for older people to learn how to confidently use technologies. If you need to do this remotely, consider providing instructions or even a video, on how to use different online media such

as Facebook or YouTube. This could be posted on a platform that your members are already familiar with, such as WhatsApp.

- Provide ongoing support and encouragement so that people continue to build confidence. Provide activities to help people put what they have learned into practice.

Which social networks and platforms to use

The two most popular forms of social media for older people are Facebook and YouTube.

Almost sixty per cent of older people have used YouTube and people over 50 are the fastest growing user group on Facebook. However, these are by no means the only platforms that you should consider. There is also a variety of communication platforms that allow one-to-one and group chats.

Ways to communicate using your smartphone

WhatsApp If you and your group have smart phones and access to the internet then WhatsApp could be ideal. It allows free communication to anyone in

your phone contacts, even internationally, so is a great option for people stuck far from each other as travel bans come into effect. It is good for one-to-one video calls, although up to four people can talk with each other at once. It is also possible to access WhatsApp through a computer. https://www.whatsapp.com/

FaceTime is only available on iPhones, but it can be good for the technology-shy, who might find downloading additional apps difficult. FaceTime is already built into iPhones and up to 32 people can chat at once, although it is better for much smaller groups. It is also possible to access FaceTime through a computer https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4fKtBl3R6U

Houseparty is good for spending time virtually with smaller groups of up to eight. This "face to face social network" is an app that allows you to connect with friends from your phone contacts list who also have the app. A great way for people to be able to connect with whoever is around at the time for a chat. https://houseparty.com/

Ways to communicate using your computer

Zoom is a popular and free online video conferencing facility accessible from your computer. This allows you to speak with and see up to 100 people at once for up to 40 minutes. It is a great way to host discussions, demonstrations or just to chat together. To use it the host will need to create a Zoom account and from there you can schedule a meeting by sending a link to join via email or text message. https://zoom.us/

Google Hangouts is good for bringing up to 150 people together (or up to 25 on the video conferencing service. Participants do require a Gmail email account, which can also be used for emails but does not require an app to be downloaded. https://hangouts.google.com/

Sources of further information, advice and help

We have collated sources of information that may be helpful for you when thinking about how to maintain connections with your group remotely.

General sources

- BVSC supports the voluntary and community sector of Birmingham. The BVSC website provides information on a range of local support services as well as helpful information and resources in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. https://www.bvsc.org/C19SupportBrum

- Many national voluntary organisations are acting as intermediaries, encouraging and supporting older people in their use of communications technology. Support and resources to help combat loneliness and isolation are often available. See for example Age UK https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/loneliness/ or contact their Advice Line on 0800 678 1602

- Older people may feel anxious about staying safe online. Age UK has produced a helpful workbook all about staying safe online https://www.ageukmobility.co.uk/mobility-news/article/social-media-tips-for-older-adults

Developing digital skills

- Digital Unite provides digital skills training aimed at the over-50s, and designed for new and nervous users. It has produced a range of COVID-19 resources including using online health services and staying in touch with friends and families. https://www.digitalunite.com/

- The Learn My Way website offers over 30 free courses designed to help beginners get started with the online basics - using a mouse, keyboard, setting up email accounts and using internet search engines - while also offering plenty to help people develop their digital skills further.

https://www .goodthings foundation.org/learn-my-way

- Online Centres Network was set up to provide public access to computers and help bridge the digital divide. Its mission is to connect people to digital skills and opportunities, using technology to improve lives and life chances. The Network offers a range of resources for lockdown support. https://www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/resources/coronavirus-support-for-your-learners

- There are also online training resources available for those who may have some experience using the internet already, such as Barclay Bank's Digital Eagles and Tea and Teach schemes: https://www.youtube.com/

- The BBC has produced a step-by-step guide to making video phone calls: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-5196812

About this leaflet

This leaflet was produced as part of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. The content is based on learning from the programme. The examples are of activities supported by the programme and the quotes are from people running and taking part in activities.

Ageing Better in Birmingham is part of Ageing Better, the six-year (2015-2021) £78million programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better partnerships are based in 14 locations across England, from Torbay to Middlesbrough and the Isle of Wight to East Lindsey. Working with local people, charities, businesses, public sector services and voluntary groups the Ageing Better partnerships are exploring creative ways for older people to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. Ageing Better is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.