



Tackling loneliness and social isolation in older people: the role of local organisations

Introduction

Ageing Better in Birmingham has been successful in supporting a wide range of community activities that have engaged ethnically and age diverse participants. After taking part in Ageing Better in Birmingham activities, there is a notable reduction in those who say they are most lonely.

The programme vision was to create a new movement in community action on ageing and isolation. It aimed to harness active citizenship and take an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach. Achievements of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme have been accomplished by active citizens in communities, who have in many

cases been supported within a fabric of existing community assets. Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations form part of this fabric and are an important asset in supporting the development of active citizens and community-led groups and activities. Other types of organisation (such as private sector care homes and educational



establishments) can also play an important role. A successful ABCD approach should make use of all types of community assets.

Connecting the dots to build community capacity

In this leaflet we will set out a variety of ways in which active citizens and established community groups can work

together for mutual benefit and for the benefit of the wider community. The VCS in particular has an important role to play in helping to nurture and support community members to realise ways to harness local talents to address social isolation. We have seen lots of examples of people with passion and ideas, but without the support and expertise of other organisations, it is unlikely the same impact would have been achieved.



Glebe Farm Lunch and Social Club

A member of the local community noticed that she did not see many older people out and about in the area since the community centre had closed down and wanted to do something to help. After a chance meeting, she agreed to collaborate with a local Community Interest Company (CIC) to make her ideas a reality.

The CIC used their knowledge and experience to successfully apply for funding. The active citizen with the passion to start the group brings older people into the group and spends time with them during the club sessions. The group have also engaged a range of other volunteers to help with ordering the food, cooking and just socialising.

You do need a variety of people with a variety of skills, really. Say, running the luncheon club, you need people who are good listeners. A people person. Then, you need someone who actually does the hotpots and things like that. [The volunteer] who does most of the cooking for us, she will say, and she's an older person herself, 'This is what older people like more.'

This group demonstrates the value of community members and organisations using the different assets and interests they have to achieve something together that alone would be much harder.

My organisation will put funding in to do boxing and football, but we'll use Glebe Farm Football Club and the local boxing people. You use local people [...and] if another organisation will say to me, you know, 'Can you help us out with this or that?' I will do. It's about sharing knowledge.

Benefits for active citizens and grassroots groups

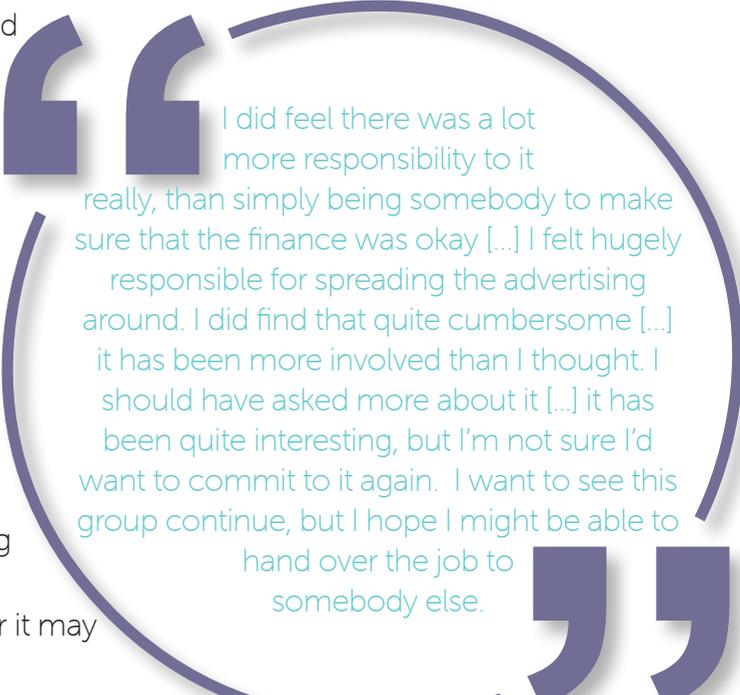
There are lots of individuals quietly giving their time, energy, kindness and passion to help bring people together and lead activities within communities. But they can benefit from the support, expertise and resources of organisations to be able to bring their ideas to life. Community organisations can help in a number of ways.

Administrative support:

Community organisations can provide the sort of 'back office' support that some small grassroots groups and active citizens may be less interested in or able to provide. This might include help with managing finances, writing funding applications, keeping participant records and meeting the requirement of funders, such as collecting monitoring information and evaluating impact. Or it may

be simply to 'hold' money, such as weekly donations/ subs from group members, in their office safe or a secure cashbox. Such support can be extremely valuable as for many active citizens, particularly older people, these types of tasks can feel burdensome. For example, this participant who took over running a group she attended found it involved more than she expected.

Community venues: It can be difficult for individuals or small groups to find an affordable and accessible venue for their activity. Community organisations may



I did feel there was a lot more responsibility to it really, than simply being somebody to make sure that the finance was okay [...] I felt hugely responsible for spreading the advertising around. I did find that quite cumbersome [...] it has been more involved than I thought. I should have asked more about it [...] it has been quite interesting, but I'm not sure I'd want to commit to it again. I want to see this group continue, but I hope I might be able to hand over the job to somebody else.

often be in a position to provide room hire at more reasonable rates, or even free, in a setting that is often already familiar to individuals. This helps keep overall costs low for many new groups and removes a significant barrier for people.

As long as it's not against any of our religious principles, we don't have any issues, go ahead and do it [...] The volunteers themselves, within the seniors' group, organise it and run it themselves, we just provide the facilities for them and if they need anything, they give us a shout and we try and facilitate.



Fox Hollies Community Association, Birmingham

Fox Hollies is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) that runs a variety of community development programmes and activities in the Acocks Green area of the city.

A group of three local men approached the community association to ask if they could use their outbuildings as a workshop for a Men's Sheds group.

When planning to set up a Shed it is often a major challenge finding accommodation that is available for free or within budget. We were therefore very fortunate to be offered space at the community association.

Fox Hollies had links with Ageing Better through their community development work and were able to introduce the group to programme staff and to support them in putting together an application for funding. This was successful and paid for the tools needed to start the project.

The Men's Sheds group is being set up as a sub-committee under the umbrella of Fox Hollies, which provides them with charitable status for future funding applications, necessary insurance cover, risk assessments and any administrative support they may need. The association also helps with advertising the group within the local community. As well as telling older residents about it directly, they can make sure that younger relatives, dropping off children to the nursery or coming to fitness classes, know about it and pass on the information to parents, grandparents and neighbours.

Organisational infrastructure: By becoming a sub-group of a larger organisation, small groups can benefit from charitable status (if applicable), organisational policies and insurance cover. Some active citizens leading groups have found being able to rely on this infrastructure reassuring, and it has encouraged them to set up an activity.

Promotion and visibility: Community organisations will often have access to communication channels, such as newsletters, websites and social media that smaller and informal groups are unlikely to have. Being able to use these resources can help to boost the promotion of small groups. Established organisations' position within the community

means that they are well respected and often already a focus for a range of activities that people are coming along to enjoy. They are therefore well placed to help advertise new groups and reach out to potential new members.

Networks and contacts: Community organisations will often have networks of contacts or be members of sector bodies that provide information, expertise, training and funding. Enabling grassroots groups to access these wider networks can make all the difference. In the example below the housing scheme connected its residents to the Ageing Better programme and supported them in making an application.

Happy Berries chair-based exercise class at The Oaks Retirement Housing Scheme (Anchor Hanover)

Residents expressed interest in setting up a gentle, chair-based exercise class, after hearing about this type of activity. The retirement housing scheme found out through their networks that funding may be available through Ageing Better in Birmingham.

Residents, with the support of the housing scheme and their local Ageing Better in Birmingham Enabler, wrote a successful application and funding was provided for an exercise leader to come once a week and some accessible chairs.

The class is held in the residents' lounge and has enhanced their socialisation and their mobility. Apart from the initial support to find funding and provision of the room by the housing scheme, the group is run by one of the residents.

Benefits for community organisations

It's not just a one-way street. There are also substantial benefits to community organisations supporting grassroots groups. This is reflected in the high level of their involvement across the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme.

Help to achieve core aims: Where community organisations are supporting small or grassroots activity this is often because it also helps them to achieve their core aims. A new offer can enhance other services and help to further raise the profile of the organisation within the local area.

Increased use of facilities: Ensuring community facilities are well used is important to the organisations than run them.

Income from venue hire, even at reduced rates, provides a revenue source and may be part of ensuring the facility is sustainable. It is therefore in the interest of community organisations to ensure not only that their facility is well used but that activities are able to continue as long as possible for their client base. For example, sheltered housing schemes often have a residents' lounge or similar that is not always used as often as they would like.

New members and volunteers:

Hosting or supporting new groups can also help to expand the membership of community organisations or encourage new volunteers to get involved. Opportunities to engage with different sections of the community are valued as this has the potential to expand the reach of the organisation within the community.

Credibility: It is increasingly important that community organisations reflect and represent the community served and that people who benefit from activities are involved in designing and delivering them.



Supporting active citizens and grassroots groups to realise their ideas helps to ensure community organisations are in touch with local people and their needs. Small grassroots organisations will often have credibility, reach and an in-depth understanding of a particular community that a larger organisation may not.

Benefits for older people and the community

The results of active citizens and community organisations working together provide older people with a voice to co-produce activities, rather than having things done 'to' or 'for' them, which has happened in the past. Ultimately, this more

inclusive model will result in better and more sustainable activities for the community.

Familiar places: Local community venues can sometimes be more accessible to older people – they are on the doorstep and may already be a familiar space. Attending a new group for the first time, particularly on your own, can be a big step. Activities held in familiar places could help reduce worries about trying something new.

More sustainable activities: The continuity of activity is an important feature of successful activities to address loneliness and isolation. Social contacts and friendships can take time to

nurture. The support provided by established organisations to new groups and activities should help them to be more sustainable over the longer term.

Exposure to new opportunities: Community organisations often offer a range of activities for different age groups and target audiences. Activities that are hosted by a community organisation increase the chances that participants come into contact with a wide range of other community members and other potentially interesting groups and activities that they may wish to get involved in, either as participants or volunteers.



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) £78 million 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.

Further information and useful contacts

Ageing Better in Birmingham www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk

Tackling loneliness and social isolation in older people: Overcoming barriers to joining in. Ageing Better in Birmingham Leaflet: <https://www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk/media/attachments/2019/10/02/overcoming-barriers-to-joining-in-activities-briefing-three.pdf>

Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) www.bvsc.org

Centre for Ageing Better: www.ageing-better.org.uk

Charitable Associations: model constitution: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/806434/GD3.pdf

CFE Research evaluated the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme and produced this leaflet. September 2019