

The National Lottery Community Fund: Ageing Better

How to create a Warm Welcome
14 October 2021

Insights Pack

On the day

On 14 October 2021, we convened an event on how groups could create a Warm Welcome. Our objectives for the day were to:

1. Explore partnerships' **insights and practical learning** on taking a warm welcome approach
2. Help **connect organisations** with each other, allowing them to **compare and contrast their learning**, challenges and successes in creating a warm welcome approach

Flow of the session

- Welcome and housekeeping
- Opening perspectives from practitioners
- Group discussions on challenges facing us as well as successful methods
- Sharing back
- Closing reflections and next steps

Opening perspectives

Our speakers on the day

At this event, three speakers shared their experiences of creating a Warm Welcome:



Ruth Bamford

Funding & Relationship Manager, Strategic Programmes (Ageing Better)
The National Lottery Community Fund



Lydia Shellien-Walker

Communications and Influencing Officer
Ageing Better in Camden

Kate Harwood

A participant of one of the groups supported by **Ageing Better in Camden**



Hillary Wadsworth

Programme Manager
Leeds Older People's Forum



Ruth Bamford - The National Lottery Community Fund

Ageing Better is 7 year programme which aims to learn how to reduce loneliness and social isolation in people aged over 50. The Programme is delivered through 14 partnerships throughout England. Over the course of the programme partnerships have worked with over 134,000 people and over 19.5K volunteers contributed almost 630,000 hours of their time.

Three key messages have emerged from the programme:

- The reasons for social isolation are many and varied. Understanding a person's **context** (the macro and micro issues impacting on them) is key to supporting them well.
- Where social isolation is entrenched and embedded, people need some level of one-to-one support; we call this **connections**.
- The ecosystem is the space where individuals connect with the **community**. It's the services, routes, responses, people and touchpoints that help prevent social isolation.

A warm welcome is important because:

- Groups offer active participation in a shared social experience. The evidence suggests that this can reduce social isolation and loneliness and "buffer" against some of the associated risk factors such as bereavement and ill health.
- Group activities can deliver regular social connection, purpose and structure.
- Groups are an important exit route from loneliness and connector into other things, particularly for people being supported to manage their own social isolation and loneliness.
- However unless groups are welcoming they are not going to be effective in engaging people



Ruth Bamford
Funding & Relationship Manager

Ruth's slides can be found [here](#), and a recording of her talk can be found [here](#).

Lydia Shellien-Walker - Ageing Better in Camden

Ageing Better in Camden is a **partnership of older people and over 30 local organisations** working together to tackle social isolation and loneliness. Making sure that groups offer a warm welcome is essential when encouraging older people to take part in activities and to enable them to remain connected.

To understand why a warm welcome is important, we heard from Kate, a member of the Older People's Advisory Group in Camden who provided a powerful description of the **experience of attending a group for the first time and the importance of receiving a warm welcome**. You can view Kate's talk from 1 minute and 26 seconds into the video [here](#).

A warm welcome requires **time, thought, funding, skill and expertise** from the person running the group. Hence **wraparound costs** must be included in the budget and funders must be willing to cover these costs e.g for refreshments, follow up calls and staff support, to ensure groups are inclusive..

Ageing Better in Camden have developed a "Warm Welcome toolkit" which contains **ideas from older people along with resources and tips from delivery partners** who've been running Ageing Better in Camden activities for the past seven years. The toolkit contains lots of practical advice, including case studies and top tips, and covers everything you need to know in 10 clear and accessible chapters. **You can access the toolkit and 2-page summary [here](#)**. A short video outlining the 10 steps involved in creating a warm welcome, which can be viewed [here](#).



Lydia Shellien-Walker
Communications and Influencing
Officer

Lydia's slides can be found [here](#), and a recording of her talk can be found [here](#).

Participant reflections

During Lydia's talk, participants shared their reflections and what resonated with them and their experiences:

"Thank you Kate, lovely explanation of what so many people feel."

"Good tips on including the extra time and emphasis in funding applications"

"Helps to remind the volunteers on a regular basis to be conscious of how we welcome others"

"Need to be aware of 'cliques' that can exist in established groups and how new people can feel excluded."

"Interesting mention of budget for funders needs to consider additional resources required to make the Welcome a success"

"I think people forget that as you age, confidence and self-esteem can lower, also for women the peri/menopause can affect us so much that you are feeling so out there that 'being ignored' means you will leave. Peers - I see someone who is the same as me is so important to feel you belong."

"Transport is a real issue often for people attending, as freedom passes now don't start until retirement age in the UK apart from London and lots of groups are now struggling to cover costs of providing community transport due to increasing costs."

"Need to consider also how we are able to evidence the impact of our interventions - what difference are we making to tackle social isolation and loneliness?"

"The 2 page print out that you can keep out somewhere to keep it at the front of mind is great" [A crib sheet of [key things for group facilitators do to ensure everyone feels welcome](#)]

Hillary Wadsworth - Leeds Older People's Forum

In Leeds, a lot of work went into trying to get people to **access organisations and activities that already existed**. Leeds has a vibrant voluntary sector so there were lots of opportunities for people to be supported into groups and activities. However the vital **warm welcome was not always there and it was not always easy for people to access new groups**. Making groups accessible was vital as groups can encourage people to do things they did not know they could do; provide an opportunity to try something different; and to make friendships.

The team in Leeds worked with people who have a **high level of support needs, low confidence, and physical and mental health barriers**. They produced two toolkits to support groups in making people welcome as a result: **one for working with individuals with anxiety** and **one toolkit about running a supportive and welcoming group**. They also created a **warmup and checklist** aimed to help very small groups in offering a warm welcome - this includes role outlines for volunteers and practical tools - such as arrows that can be used to indicate where the toilets are in the venue itself.

Hillary shared tips from Leeds' experience of ensuring a warm welcome is provided and continues as groups form:

- A warm welcome has to be a **conscious thing for staff and volunteer leaders**. It's a piece of work that needs to be focused on.
- **Work needs to be continuous**, maintaining awareness of how people are in a group and reflecting on that.
- Finally, it's also important to **continuously reflect** on whether the group is open and to challenge volunteers and group members to ensure they're part of the solution.



Hillary Wadsworth
Programme Manager

Hillary's slides can be found [here](#), and a recording of her talk can be found [here](#).

Participant reflections

During Hillary's talk, participants shared their reflections and what resonated with them and their experiences:

"Both of these resources work really well together - thank you!"

"The Checklist is a great idea! Thanks for sharing."

"I agree the conscious thing is vital. And it's all staff including centre managers, receptionist, volunteers everyone."

"Some places are moving away from displaying or printing leaflets and assume people will find out things online. Is this an issue for other parts of the UK, as lots of especially older people don't access information in this way?"

"Love the idea of a checklist! I can really see how this will help to embed the warm welcome principles at every level."

"Yes the 'conscious thing' is very important. It may be obvious but this approach needs systematic embedding, monitoring and support."

"I have only just started doing this kind of thing, and I have so far made every mistake in different way, so it's been revelatory."

"Love those final 3 thoughts Hillary - especially that we need to continuously do this work, not just do it once and then stop"

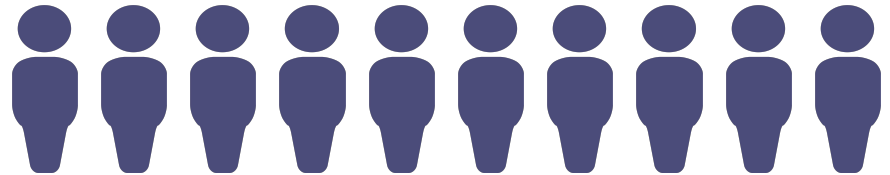
Breakout discussion

Joining your breakout group

In the next part of the event, participants went into smaller breakout groups of 10-12 people and discussed: **What questions or challenges do you have about implementing a warm welcome approach in your context?**

Discussions are summarised on the following slides.

 30m



Breakout: Implementing a warm welcome approach

Challenges in implementing a warm welcome approach (1/2):

- **Covid barriers.** The pandemic has caused difficulties as participants are physically unable to welcome people, and people are wary of socialising and getting too close at face to face events.
- **Covid has impacted spaces.** The amount of work connectors were able to do directly has been limited as community spaces are shut. Where centres are closed, connectors are struggling to meet people. It is now taking work to resurrect some of the relationships.
- **Digital and hybrid warm welcomes.** Some people may want to keep Zoom meetings post-Covid. How can we translate the warm welcome approach to a digital context? How do we translate the warm welcome approach to hybrid settings?
- **Digital is not for everyone.** Digital methods are only effective in certain communities and geographic areas. In some areas the infrastructure for wifi does not exist and these are structural issues that prevent an easy transition to online settings.

- **Cliques.** Perceptions of existing groups can be a barrier as newcomers may perceive them to be cliques, especially if the same people always turn up, and it can take a bit of work to manage that perception.
- **Lack of volunteers.** Participants said they were struggling to recruit and retain volunteers, leaving staff very stretched. It is difficult when volunteers leave after time and training in volunteers, and groups struggle with not having the same familiar faces.
- **Managing disruptive participants.** What is the best way to manage and include people who may disrupt the sessions? There aren't many groups for people with mental health issues or special needs, but they can be disruptive..
- **Expansion.** How do you expand a group without disrupting the flow, warmth and energy of the group?

Breakout: Implementing a warm welcome approach

Challenges in implementing a warm welcome approach (2/2):

- **Warm welcome through third parties.** It can be challenging to ensure there is a warm welcome when groups are run by third parties - need to ensure people feel welcome to the space and the class.
- **Active listening.** How do we ensure those who are really chatty are aware of this and are able to meet people where they are at and actively listen? How do we include people who say they just want to listen and don't want to contribute?
- **Accessibility and inclusion.** How do you welcome people with different accessibility support requirements? How do you support someone who is non-verbal? Some people are reluctant to ask for people, perhaps due to feeling defeated or anxious. Some groups have people in their 80s and 90s who have a range of challenges e.g. mobility issues, sensory loss etc. It's hard to find activities that work for everyone and that can enable people to feel included.

- **Warm welcomes in challenging spaces.** How do we adapt the warm welcome approach to different spaces that might hinder it? For example, running a session in the back of a large building that isn't set up to be inclusive and accessible.
- **Getting staff onboard.** To establish a warm welcome approach you must first get staff (who are often very busy) on board with the need for a warm welcome. How do we get people on board?
- **Costs.** Wrap around costs are not always considered enough and some expect staff members will pick up some costs which is not a viable or sustainable solution.

Breakout: Implementing a warm welcome approach

Suggestions to support implementing a warm welcome approach (1/2):

- **Stay connected.** Often the most isolated people could only be supported by phone. Although a poor substitute for face to face, it provides connection. It is useful to match people with a consistent befriender so they can look forward to meeting that person.

- **Transport.** Older people may not have the confidence to use public transport, the money for the taxi, or other resources needed to get to the event. A sustainable system must be implemented e.g. in Lincolnshire, a call to collect service goes around to people to collect them if they need.

- **Funding.** It is important to fund the resource e.g. there being more than one person in a team facilitating an event; or other wrap around costs.

- **Include the human voice.** One participant suggested getting staff on board, it has been very powerful to hear directly from older people about why a warm welcome is important.

- **Create space for different personalities.** Some people are reserved and can feel overwhelmed if groups are too loud.

- **Language is important.** Use language that makes people feel comfortable. Language can be a signifier that something 'is not for me'.

- **Familiar faces.** To support older people and manage their event anxiety, some groups had started volunteer or staff buddy schemes to help people find the venue, and get support before and after the event. Having a friendly and familiar face people can recognise when they're there is a simple but powerful way to include people and manage anxiety.

- **A warm welcome through the whole process.** It is important to consider and create a warm welcome from the point at which people become aware of the group, through to the reception of the venue for the group, to after event support and calls, and through to calling people to let them know they've been missed when they have not attended.

- **Give people roles.** One way to break down cliques can be to give one of the people in the clique a role in welcoming others. This can help to shift behaviours. Staff often need to support volunteers in taking on new roles as they build confidence.

- **Be aware of changing needs.** It is important to meet people where they are at, but also be aware that their needs and wants might change over time and you must try to avoid putting them into boxes.

Breakout: Implementing a warm welcome approach

Suggestions to support implementing a warm welcome approach (2/2):

- **Content of sessions.** Have something to focus on that is not just talking, as it allows people to relax and not have to think of things the whole time e.g. an icebreaker activity or provide food.

- **Consider volunteers on an individual basis.** When it comes to supporting people to volunteer, think about where people's strengths lie, and where they may be best placed in the overall process and flow of the welcome.

- **Language barriers.** You hit a barrier when you can't communicate. Community connectors who are bilingual or multilingual are beneficial to have in the group. Sometimes you can have people in the community to interpret, or ask people to bring younger family members who have English as their first language to help with translation. It is important to also print leaflets and information in multiple languages.

Simple guidance for volunteers. It's important to give simple guidance to volunteers as they can lack confidence and feel overwhelmed with so many things to remember and do. It's important to make the information digestible and easy to put into practice.

- **Training.** Accessing training can be helpful e.g. Positive People's facilitation training, to support volunteers with the skills and confidence to facilitate groups and support the creation of a warm welcome.

- **Co-produced groups.** Having a co-produced method of delivering groups rather than the typical recipient and delivery dynamic can be beneficial. Coming out of Covid, there is an opportunity to build a shared empathy between groups and give group members shared responsibility, and ownership over their groups. Asking people what they want and need is a simple and powerful way to make people feel included and improve the overall experience. Following the passion of the group will help prevent cliques as everyone shares the excitement of co-leading and/or curating the exercises of the groups.

- **Diversity of groups.** Seeing people who look like you in a group can be very important and people can feel off put and left out if they feel they don't belong.

- **Concerns about group safety.** To manage anxiety related to Covid and meeting in groups, emphasise the groups are a safe place and that you've thought about safety. It is important to be upfront about safety measures in place to encourage people to come back to and join groups.

Key questions and challenges

After breakouts and a group discussion, we asked participants: “**What is one key question or challenge you took from your breakout group and would like to pose to our speakers here today?**”. To summarise:

- **Transport.** This causes issues as people may be stressed before they even arrive to receive their welcome or may not be able to afford the transport to get to the group in the first place.
- **Digital groups.** Digital pathways are here to stay and a vital part of connecting. Participants were keen to receive tips, training and advice. It can be challenging for older people to use tech, and one participant suggested they have a Tech & Talk group that meets weekly to support people with Tech issues to help. In addition, in Zoom / online contexts, it's tempting to ask people to turn their cameras on for connection. But for some people they take a while to warm up to this, and too much cajoling can make them feel uncomfortable. So important to meet people where they are at.
- **Covid.** This has eroded the confidence of older people, so time needs to be invested to give people the confidence to return or join groups again. Some people are missing their old groups/activities which have shut down due to Covid, and they are hoping and waiting for their old group to come back, so you may need to go a little further to welcome them into a new group / activity.
- **Funding.** Build more money into funding bids for a support person in a group /service activity to create a warm welcome.

- **A warm welcome through the whole process.** Creating a warm welcome is a challenge. Hence you have to be proactive, sincere, intentional, deliberate and think about it in a whole experience sense from the beginning when people become aware of the group (even before attending) to after the group meetings as well. Do not underestimate the skill required to provide a warm welcome. Letting people know they've been missed (e.g. making calls to those who haven't returned) is a powerful way of making people feel welcomed. Setting up a Whatsapp group is another example which enables groups to continue connectivity. Those little human touches make all the difference.
- **Encouraging volunteers to lead.** How can you encourage people to take on the role of volunteers as often they want to take part in the group and 'retire' - not be a lead volunteer or take on a responsibility role? Quite often volunteers want to do something completely different to what they have done professionally
- **Accessibility.** It's important to think about how to make the groups fully accessible e.g. different formats for those with disabilities for posters, flyers etc for instance easy read format.

Key questions and challenges

Finally, we asked participants: **“What is one action, however small, that you’ll take away from this meeting?”**.

Key responses included:

“Share the tool kit with my colleagues”

“Share the toolkit with our facilitators. It's fabulous.”

“Being involved with AB on what we're learning about hybrid approaches”

“Work with groups to ensure they have toolkit and offer warm welcomes”

“Ask open questions with group leaders to find out how they welcome new people to encourage reflection.”

“Feedback positively to those in the team who deliver group activities. Share toolkit resources & look to produce our own resources going forward.”

“I will now ensure that the venues (3rd parties) we partner with are inclusive, friendly and they themselves provide a warm welcome.”

“We are doing some Community centre mapping and offering some support to help reconnecting with the local communities so I will share the toolkit with those community centres”

“Look at recruiting volunteers to buddy up with new people that are wanting to join our groups.”

“Reflect on the toolkit and maybe make a bit of a warm welcome team to think where we can be more welcoming”

Closing reflections

Evaluation

100

% of participants would recommend an event like this to a colleague

Average Score (/5):

4.8

80

% of participants found the event relevant and useful

General reflections on the event

- Practical advice and tools to make things better!
- good realistic information
- Excellent speakers, really well facilitated and designed session.
- I always come away smiling from the conversations had with a few more gems in my pocket :)
- It was full of practical advice for going forward as well as reflective discussion of issues
- Abundant amount of help and resources available as well as good discussions and first hand experiences shared
- Great event. Good content and delivery. It's always great to share our learning.

Aspects of the event that could be improved (and which we will rectify for next time):

- Better captions in future events

Thank you

Thank you for such constructive input to the session - we really appreciate it.

For more information, please see [The National Lottery Community Fund Ageing Better webpage](#).

Information and resources

About Ageing Better

Ageing Better is a 7-year test and learn programme. We are 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+. To date our partnerships have worked with over 134,000 people. **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.**

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 transition points (e.g. retirement, illness, bereavement) and environmental and physical factors that act as a barrier to someone being able to connect with their community and support systems.

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.

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.

Ageing Better National Learning Reports

Learning reports

You can find an index of all of our ageing Better national learning reports [here](#). Some key reports include:

[Groups](#) --- [Learning snapshot – key messages](#)

[Role of food in building connections and relationships](#) ---

[Learning snapshot - key messages](#)

[Telephone Befriending – Learning from Ageing Better](#) ---

[Learning snapshot - Key messages](#)

The majority of delivery within Ageing Better to date has been via face-to-face activity but once the Covid-19 crisis happened, areas quickly reconfigured services so as to be able to deliver as much as possible via telephone.

Our learning from Ageing Better is that active participation in some form of shared social experience has a wide range of positive benefits to people's levels of social isolation, loneliness and overall well being. People who are part of a group(s) can be "buffered" against some of the risk factors for social isolation. Additionally, groups are an important exit route and "connection" into other things for people. We have also heard that being a member of and feeling part of a group provides people with some resilience when they experience one or more further risk factors for social isolation such as bereavement, ill health etc.

Further information

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

Ageing Better - Partnership Resources

Partnership Resources

- [Creating a warm welcome in the context of Covid-19 \(Camden\)](#)
- [Staying connecting – Guidance for groups adapting to Covid \(Birmingham\)](#)
- [Older people and physical activity - \(Bristol\)](#)
- [Engaging people with sight loss, hearing loss or dual sensory loss or experience substance misuse - \(Bristol\)](#)
- [Overcoming barriers to joining in \(Birmingham\)](#)
- [Shared Reading Groups - \(Bristol\)](#)
- [Social Eating Guide \(Greater Manchester\)](#)
- [How to set up walking groups to foster social connections - \(Camden\)](#)