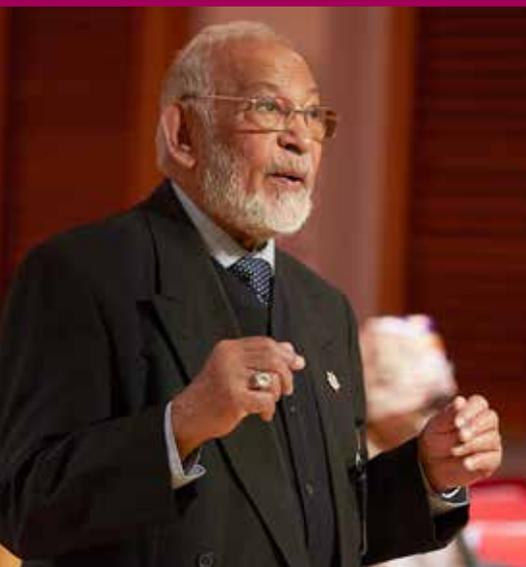




Building Older People's Influence in Hackney

Understanding influence, recognising
leadership and sharing best practice



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Age UK East London has been working with older people in the London Borough of Hackney (Hackney) for over 30 years. An enduring feature of our work throughout this time has been the administration and facilitation of the City and Hackney Older People's Reference Group or 'OPRG'. The OPRG is a long-standing forum of over 1,000 local residents aged 50 plus. They plan five open meetings each year where local Health and Social Care agencies are able to present and consult on any changes to services available specifically for older people. These meetings are sociable, and members' views are represented on a varied range of Advisory Groups, Safeguarding Boards and User Engagement Groups. They've led on campaigns such as the Older People's Dignity Code, which is now embedded across Hackney in all health and social commissions.

As a high-profile group of interested and active older people who have strong links to local commissioners and other local decision makers, City & Hackney OPRG were an obvious partner for commissioning by Connect Hackney, which launched in 2015¹. It is one of 14 'Ageing Better' partnerships funded by The National Lottery Community Fund. We were asked to co-produce, test and learn from different approaches to two of the programme's key outcomes – firstly, to embed a more positive view towards ageing and older people, where the latter are more actively engaged in the community and valued for the contributions they make; and, secondly, to increase direct involvement of older people in shaping policy and holding key stakeholders to account, leading to stronger partnerships and more effective, better co-ordinated delivery, which reduces social isolation.

It is important that we consider the context for this work. Over the past 15 years, the demographic of Hackney has very visibly shifted towards a predominantly young, professional and affluent profile. Yet Hackney is the second poorest borough in the UK for older people² and has many areas identified as having 'High' or 'Very High' risk of loneliness.³ With both poverty and loneliness being drivers of morbidity, older people in Hackney are more likely to experience health inequalities and barriers to being more actively engaged in their community or involved directly in shaping policy.

Throughout this four-year 'Test and Learn' project, we have come to challenge many of the assumptions we started out with, as well as our understanding of older people's 'influence' and 'leadership'. Initially, we believed that we needed to provide opportunities for older people to be more active in their communities. However, as we began to talk to individuals and groups across Hackney, we discovered a vibrantly active older community already engaged in a much broader concept of influence, leading their own agendas and happy to share their experiences and learning with each other. There were examples of individuals who had set up groups and were happy to identify as leaders. There were also those who simply

enjoyed ‘getting out of the house’ but who were no less involved in identifying the issues and contributing to solutions. All of these groups were already active in their communities and were already ‘Testing and Learning’ approaches to influencing, but they told us they felt invisible, undervalued and isolated.

Another assumption we had started with was that, in order to grow the OPRG, we needed to attract more members to attend meetings. This initially seemed like the perfect solution to the isolation and lack of value that the other groups were reporting. However, we noted that the agendas of these groups were micro-local and, aside from the OPRG, there were no items around policy and borough-level service design. We also needed to consider the common barriers to being influential – which are not necessarily restricted to older people, but which are amplified through the lens of ageing, poverty and loneliness, and which particularly impact older people in Hackney.

As we fed back our observations to the members of the OPRG and facilitated a co-production process with older people from across all groups, what we ended up with was an entirely different understanding of what it means to ‘grow’ the OPRG. Yes, more members, more voices and more diversity were indeed needed. But the way to build this was to extend the reach of the OPRG into the community, rather than to attract the community into the OPRG meetings. By connecting groups to the OPRG, older people can feed into the central agenda, share information and learn from each other. This approach not only ensures that the OPRG is more representative of older people from across Hackney, it also enables more individuals to participate in a central forum in a way which removes many of the barriers to access that are a challenge to so many.

With support and facilitation, the older people of Hackney have listened to each other and have worked to establish a peer-led network which reflects the concerns and issues that matter to them most. In doing this they have caused a change in the structure of the traditional framework for older voice, disrupting the top-down status quo, taking more ownership of the agenda and moving towards a more authentic voice.

Larissa Howells
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¹ Connect Hackney is a six year programme which runs until March 2021: (www.connecthackney.org.uk)

² Income Deprivation Affecting Older People Index

³ Age UK Loneliness Heat Map (<http://data.ageuk.org.uk/loneliness-maps/england-2016/hackney/>)

Executive summary

Age UK was commissioned by Connect Hackney in 2015 to lead on reviewing local mechanisms and functions for older people's influence in policy making. Connect Hackney is part of the National Lottery Community Fund 'Ageing Better' programme. It aims to improve the wellbeing of older people (aged 50 plus) by reducing and preventing social isolation and loneliness.

What follows are five key learning areas we have taken from the project which are mutually dependent and not listed in order of importance.



- **Recognise, value and support.** In Hackney, influence and leadership for older people mostly occurs at a grass-roots level. It is informal, older-person-led and focuses on the day-to-day things that matter most to them. There is a strong sense of community spirit, with people being strongly motivated to help their neighbours, to get involved in their local area or simply to socialise. However, these groups are fragile and vulnerable to sudden and abrupt discontinuation due to lack of funds and the other challenges that come with ageing. In order to ensure that older people remain active in their communities, and for them to be recognised for the contributions they make, this micro-local leadership needs to be supported via sustained channels to more formal forums such as the OPRG in order to raise the profile of their concerns and suggestions.
- **Diversify and connect.** A stand-alone, centralised ‘hub’ model for older voice has limitations in terms of accessibility and authenticity – a quarterly meeting held in the same location and conducted in English can never truly represent all older people in Hackney. To see an increase in the direct involvement of older people in shaping policy and holding key stakeholders to account, any central hub of older voice must have strong and sustained connections to community groups, including those from under-represented groups. It must be open to allowing those connections to inform its agenda. This will lead to stronger partnerships that ultimately reduce social isolation.
- **Co-produce vehicles for authentic voice.** Culturally defined groups of older people who may not speak English, or who have historic, negative experience of authority, are often unable or unwilling to engage in formal consultation structures, and they are particularly impacted by tokenism and ‘research fatigue’. As a result, their concerns and opinions are at high risk of not being represented within any central older people’s voice in Hackney, and open invitations to English-speaking forums with agendas featuring senior representatives of authority and researchers are not sufficient. In order to see an increase in the direct involvement of all older people in Hackney in shaping policy and holding key stakeholders to account, an investment in building genuine relationships and fostering trust with those who are not currently heard is needed. Once trust is established, we can move towards co-producing links between these groups and the wider network.

- **Understand the challenges and intersections.** There are many challenges to asserting influence at any level and at any age. These include dealing with bureaucracy, the use of impenetrable and complex language, and approaches to consultation which dismantle the collective voice. However, older people in Hackney experience layers of additional barriers to participation which are directly related to their age, poverty, and loneliness and isolation. These include issues with mobility, travel and transport, health and disability. Added to this is their digital exclusion – older people who live in Hackney are less likely to possess the hardware or the skills to access a growing digital world within which the mechanisms of information sharing, policy making and consultation increasingly reside. Older people from under-represented groups experience further challenges of language, a fear of interfacing with authority and wide dispersal with greater isolation. We would welcome a collaborative review of the decision-making and information-sharing frameworks used in Hackney across all stakeholders and the co-production of a more accessible model.
- **Resource for sustainability.** Influencing change is a lengthy process. We noted that the most well-attended and effective groups generally have drivers other than ‘influencing’. Specifically, in Hackney, where loneliness is a big issue, social contact was seen to be the biggest driver, and where this was lacking, we typically saw these groups or projects collapse. Recognising this, any future investment in building older people’s influence in Hackney should take as its starting point the wide network of older people’s social groups in Hackney and support their continuation. Additionally, while we have observed much leadership in action, it is also fair to say that willing leaders are few and that the majority of the older people we have worked with do not identify themselves as leaders. This can be due to a lack of confidence or ‘burn out’ from previous campaigns. There is also a high prevalence of reluctance to take on too much responsibility for fear of ‘letting everyone down’ due to deteriorating health or caring responsibilities. People need support and inspiration to take on leadership, stay connected and remain motivated. This part of the work will not self-sustain and there is a need for the role and responsibility to be taken on and appropriately resourced for driving the collective agenda, maintaining the network, holding the knowledge and unpicking the complexities of local mechanisms of influence.

“I want to make sure that older people’s voices are heard and listened to, especially when it comes to decisions that affect them.”

P, aged 73



Learning from the older people of Hackney

Co-production remained a key underlying principal throughout the four-year lifespan of the project. What we mean by co-production is engagement with older people from project design through to delivery and evaluation. It means that older people were involved in defining the themes of the work. They were instrumental in decisions about project design. They delivered the work of the project – initially supported by our outreach workers (the majority of whom were aged 60+) and, as the project work evolved, increasingly independently. They decided on the questions we would ask in various evaluations that we undertook, and they decided what was to be done in response to the feedback given.

The core objectives decided on by the older people at the start were:

- A. **Growing and diversifying the OPRG:** especially reaching out to under-represented groups.
- B. **Developing leadership:** supporting older people to be more active in their community and to become more involved in shaping policy and services.
- C. **Connecting:** building a peer network of older people's groups with the aims of sharing successes, best practice and information.

Being a 'Test and Learn' project, the focus and approaches to all three objectives have evolved significantly over time as we have continually reviewed our learning and built this into the delivery model. What follows is an outline of that learning and the development of the work in response to it.

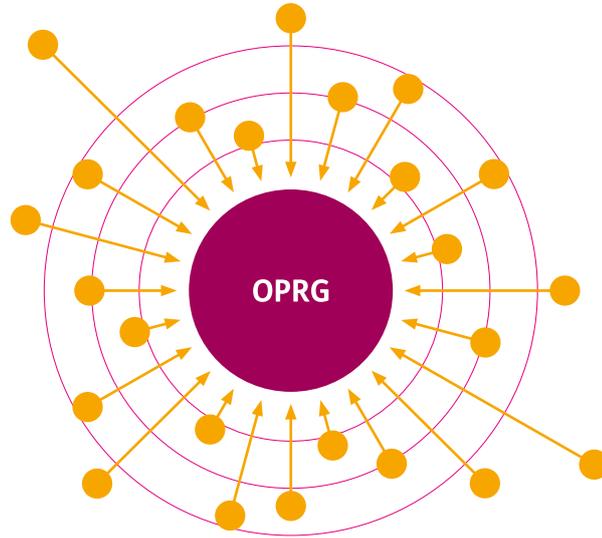
A. Growing and diversifying the Older Persons' Reference Group

(i) An authentic voice

Our initial approach was founded on the belief that the OPRG was where older people needed to come in order to influence the local community at any level. As such, our focus was on attracting more members to the open meetings (see Fig A). We were particularly keen to attract individuals from under-represented groups. However, as the other strands of the project developed, the learning from them began to influence this assumption quite significantly. We were noticing that there was a lot of interest and activity around influencing by older people across Hackney. We observed that this was mostly 'hyper-local', informal and around the things that

Fig. A
Original assumption for growing
and diversifying the OPRG

Key:
● →
Individuals



affected their day-to-day lives, such as housing repairs, seating in the local park and access to venues for social gatherings. Identified leaders were few and borough-level health and care agendas were notably absent.

At the same time, the OPRG Advisory Group, a committee of members who oversee the direction and scheduling of the OPRG, decided to conduct a survey to see how older people felt about the effectiveness of the OPRG and the opportunities that they felt they had to participate. There were many positives recognised across the membership, including feeling part of a collective voice, having the opportunity to meet high-level decision makers and the social opportunity the meetings provide. There were also some areas for improvement identified, which included:

- Infrequent meetings – not enough opportunity to attend.
- Large attendance at meetings, which diminishes opportunities for participation within the allotted time frames.
- Agenda is dominated by health and social care issues – jargonistic and complex to the uninitiated – and does not reflect the much broader range of concerns among members.
- Feedback from visitors and speakers to the group was rarely given, and there was no indication of whether or not they had been heard.

“Whatever we put
on should be in
response to what
people have said
they actually want.”

V, aged 71

The Advisory Group reflected on both the results of the survey and the feedback from our outreach workers on their observations in the community and decided to test a number of new approaches. This began with a restructure of an open meeting, which moved away from the usual ‘top table’ approach and set up discussion tables, which allowed individuals to focus on issues most relevant to them. The themes were based on the concerns that were coming from the informal community groups we had observed – housing, anti-social behaviour, transport. This meeting was extremely successful,

“It’s really important that we’re given a say and the [decision makers] should really listen to us.”

P, aged 80

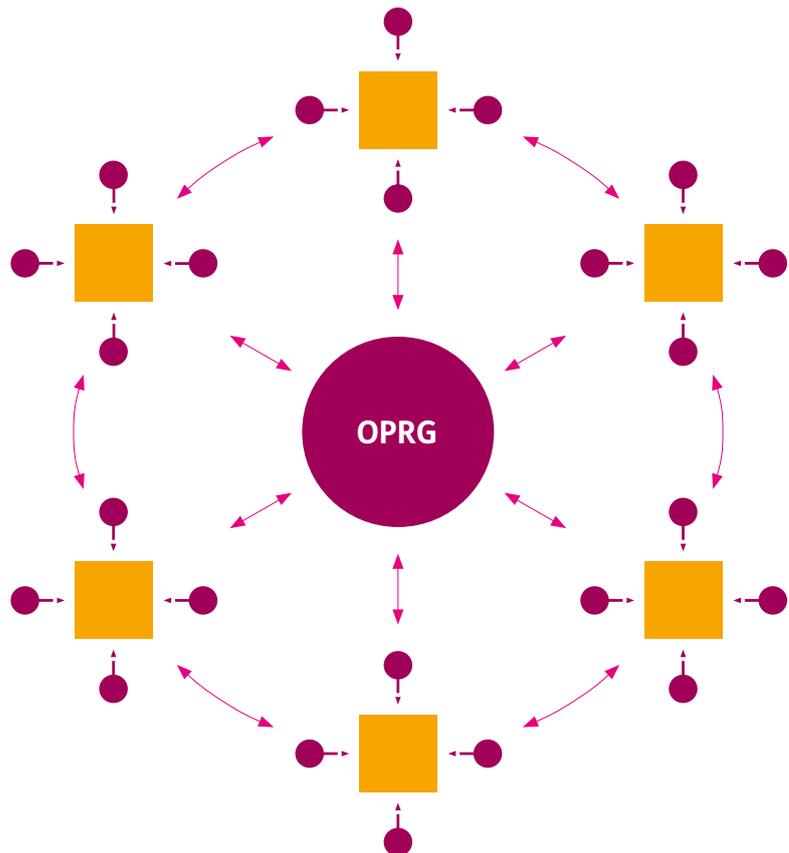
with many members giving very positive feedback on the approach. On this basis, the members decided to trial a series of smaller, themed meetings based in community settings, which provide more older people with more opportunities to discuss the issues that matter most to them.

The challenges. In addition to the areas for improvement identified by the members in their surveys, a challenge to the continued development of the OPRG will be the resources available. The OPRG has enjoyed sustained and committed funding from City & Hackney Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) for many years, and this does not look as though it is at any immediate risk. However, there is a clear health agenda being directed from the top and, while the funder has been kept informed and is very proactively supportive of the developments we describe here, suddenly increasing the number of meetings being held by the OPRG and striking the right balance across all priorities presents an obvious challenge.

Key learning. What has become very evident is that rather than an increase in the number of individual members, the notion of ‘growth’ of the OPRG is more of an expansion out into the community (see Figure B), which allows for the agenda to be led as much from the bottom up as from the usual ‘top down’. In order to increase direct involvement of older people in shaping policy, what is needed is the establishment of strong links between the OPRG and other groups and agendas. This would allow flow of information, best practice and inspiration across a peer-led network of older people.

Fig. B
New model for growing and diversifying the OPRG
= Building OPs influence

Key:
● → Individuals
■ Older Persons Group



(ii) Representation

A core objective of our work was to genuinely engage in dialogue with older people who we did not see represented at the OPRG. We decided to approach a number of culturally defined groups to try to better understand the issues older people in their communities faced and the barriers to participation in wider community events that they experienced. Beyond that, the aim was to then identify and act on any opportunities for collaboration, sharing best practice and strengthening communication.

It was telling that it took us several months to make any substantial contact with many of these groups. The team discovered that the contact details and other information, such as opening times, held at borough-level were, in many cases, out of date. In other cases, it was simply the lack of any formally resourced lead contact, which made it very difficult to know who we should be trying to reach. For some of the groups, our only recourse was to knock on doors repeatedly until they were opened. However, we did eventually make contact with ten groups: The Community African Network; Hackney Chinese Community Services; Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia Centre (now Centre 151); The Hackney Migrant Centre; Hackney Chinese Community Services; Hackney Refugee Forum; House of AMAU Afro-Caribbean Creative Writing Group & Book Club; Vietnamese Mental Health Services; Derman (representing the Turkish and Kurdish community); and London Gypsy and Traveller Group.

“We want the older person’s voice to be heard but not as a token gesture.”

B, aged 69

Even having made contact, there was still some initial resistance to talking to us from some of these groups. They reported being routinely approached by research projects, but were rarely informed of the results or outcomes. It took time and many visits and conversations for our outreach workers to reassure them that we were not ‘just another researcher’ and that we were genuinely interested in building connections that would benefit them. We did this by not only letting these older people lead the conversation, but also through demonstrating that we had listened. For example, on learning about the scale of the language issue, we initiated discussions between these groups with various agencies, including Bangla Housing, the Homerton Bilingual Health Advocacy and Translation Service and an interpreter from Southwark.

This helped to understand how translation services are being used elsewhere and how these approaches could be used to help older people from these communities in Hackney. We also shared our findings with the OPRG, which has since committed to ensuring that the particular issues for older people from under-represented groups are kept on the agenda at the new Hackney Involvement Alliance, which brings together user voice from across all demographics in Hackney, and to look at how programmes can be developed to include voices of the seldom heard and marginalised.



“I want to make sure that our voices are heard and listened to, especially when it comes to decisions that affect us.”

C, aged 82

Our dialogue has also highlighted some opportunities for sharing of best practice. In spite of the significant challenges, there are organisations which represent minority groups very successfully, securing resources and ensuring representation at a high level. There are also great examples of organisations who have responded to some of the challenges by diversifying and integrating – either with other communities or intergenerationally. For example, Centre 151 is a cohesive organisation with strong links in the community, and they have successfully broadened their range of services to benefit an increasing number of local people. This has attracted a younger generation who can translate and advocate for the elders on a voluntary basis.

“It shouldn’t just be six white people on a committee sitting in a room somewhere and saying what should happen to the rest of us, because that’s not the right way.”

Z, aged 67

The challenges. Through our discussions with these groups, we discovered that they experience the same multiple challenges to participating in policy making as other older people across Hackney – bureaucracy, mobility, health, accessibility and digital exclusion. However, when it comes to culturally defined groups of older people, there are some notable and specific barriers, with language and lack of resources for translators being by far the biggest. The language barrier experienced by many older people from culturally defined groups not only prevents them from being heard, but also blocks access to health and social care, further exposing them to the risk of health inequalities. This is particularly compounded by a lack of trust in authority. For many of these individuals, some of whom originally arrived in Hackney with nothing, and as a result of deeply traumatic events in their homeland, engaging with authority has led to a loss of control and agency over their lives. As such there is a deeply ingrained lack of trust concerning anyone perceived as having power.

Another challenge for many of these groups is dispersal of their communities. For example, the Gypsy and Traveller community has become dispersed across Hackney, with many individuals now isolated in social housing as they have been increasingly forced off designated sites. Individuals are often connected through a network of personal mobile phones that are subject to change, which makes sharing information about meetings or services extremely precarious.

Key learning. The right approach to ensuring genuine representation at OPRG level is not to invite individuals from under-represented groups to the open meetings – given the particular challenges with language they face, that would serve no purpose. Rather, it is to continue to build on the dialogue and trust we have initiated and establish sustained channels through which information, concerns and opinions can be exchanged. Culturally defined groups need to remain defined and feel safe within their own communities, but should be included as equal partners in the peer network we have illustrated above in Figure B. However, a more focused resource which prioritises the challenges of language and dispersal will be necessary if their engagement is to be sustained.

“It is our responsibility to find the ones who don’t or can’t come and speak to them and it’s got to be on their terms.”

C, aged 68

B. Developing leadership

With co-production at the core of all our work, this was a key focus, as the work needed to be genuinely older-person led if it was to be effective and sustainable beyond our intervention. We were aiming to identify and support structures and frameworks that would require as little intervention as possible to continue to function productively.

We began by creating a peer research project which recruited, trained and supported older people to conduct interviews with their peers about which services were effective at reducing loneliness and isolation. The approach had some success in terms of older people being actively engaged in their communities, enabling the exchange of authentic views and opinions and gaining rich insight into how older people feel about the services and activities provided for them. However, feedback we gathered at a milestone evaluation indicated that the older researchers did not feel that the approach enabled any genuine leadership from them.

In response, we adapted our approach to providing support, training and opportunities to older volunteers for campaigning and influencing in their local areas. However, despite extensive promotion across Hackney, we found it very difficult to attract any older volunteers to this project. On reflection, we felt there were a number of reasons for this, starting with a lack of clarity about what we were asking people to commit to and the lack of any reward or enjoyment built into the proposed activities that would have incentivised people to engage.

And so, we came back as a team to review our approach again. The observations of our outreach workers provided useful insight into what the opportunities and challenges were to older people becoming more visible advocates for their communities. They reported on a wide range of micro-local, mostly informal and very active older people's groups who were leveraging change in their local areas. We recognised the key opportunity that the many well-established, well-organised groups of older people in Hackney provided for potential leadership, and realised that we didn't need to 'train' older people or 'provide opportunities' for them to develop their leadership – they were already doing it and there was a lot we could learn from them.

We refocused with the objective of meeting older people in the heart of their communities, working alongside people who had already identified an agenda, and harnessing the skills, experience and leadership already there, rather than trying to recreate it.

“I wanted recognition for LGBT people, that we exist, that we have needs.”

K, aged 74

“I’ve done all those committees and now I’m looking for ‘me’ time.”

A, aged 71

The challenges. Most individuals we came across did not identify as leaders. They don’t have the confidence, and many worry about the impact of declining health and mobility on any commitments. In short, they don’t want to let anyone down. Those who do step up often end up taking on too much and suffering stress and ‘burn out’ – which not only impacts them and their families but the whole community relying on them. There are rivalries, too – the political tensions and personal ambitions of group members can lead to conflict and splits in local groupings. Some groups can be dominated by small cliques, which can deter people from getting involved. And, while we have observed some instances of self-sustaining organisation and action, many of these informal groupings could very easily break down and discontinue.

Key learning. ‘Influence’ and ‘leadership’ in this context are interchangeable and should be viewed very broadly. At the most basic level, they encompass the act of causing something to happen or change. It can mean speaking to decision makers and causing them to change their decisions and plans. It can also mean making space for something to happen, such as finding a venue for a social club or encouraging a neighbour to attend a social group.

Older people get active in their community for many reasons. Some want social contact. Some get asked to help. There are people who are involved in multiple initiatives, and others who dip in and out according to their other commitments. What seemed important to most was accessibility – meeting, mostly informally, in social groups in community centres and club houses. There they discuss the issues, conceive solutions – quite often through the course of conversation rather than any formalised structure – and work together to make improvements to the places where they spend most of their time. In this space, there is opportunity for everyone to have voice and direct purpose. Leadership occurs informally, and the results are more tangible and relevant to the individuals involved.

“Some people... need the confidence to get more involvedand, that only comes through face-to-face contact and someone supporting them.”

J, aged 67

C. Connecting: The community projects

Identifying and reaching out to the plethora of small, formal and informal older peoples' groups across Hackney has always been a core theme. It was recognised that, in order to ensure older people were recognised for the contributions they made, as well as increasing their direct involvement in policy shaping, these groups needed to be connected to enable them to become more visible, and to share information about activities and services more effectively.

We began by getting to know these groups and mapping them with the intention of creating a live directory which would support a growing peer network. At the same time, through their developing relationships with these groups, our outreach workers were observing a huge amount of community work and networking already happening within and between these groups. We quickly realised that here was an opportunity to learn from the influencing work already being undertaken by older people in their communities.

We identified three older peoples' groups from across Hackney who were already discussing and acting on issues they wanted to address with varying levels of success, and asked if we could observe their approaches to influencing and/or support them in any way with their efforts.

“I wanted to be involved in changes to the estate.”

M, aged 74

(i) Hackney Wick: Influencing development planning

Through their connections in the area, our outreach workers detected a common theme. Older residents from this estate were informally voicing their growing concerns with local development plans that lacked adequate provision for older people. The problem was that they were in very small groups – generally no more than two or three – and felt powerless and frustrated on their own. They welcomed our offer to bring them all together and support them to access the information and plans which were online, break down some of the language being used and plan a cohesive approach which would have maximum impact.

The consultation is scheduled to continue until October 2019, and the older people of Hackney Wick do not yet have any response to their submissions. But, they remain motivated and cohesive – a notable achievement of the work has been the formation of social connections between older people across the estate. And they are now well connected to other groups such as the Senior Bees, a local group of older people interested in local architecture and with established links to the developer, and, Friends of Woodberry Down, a well-established and successful group of older influencers who are happy to share tactics with residents in Hackney Wick.

“I wanted to
make friends.”

S, aged 66

The challenges. By far the biggest issue here is the extended time frame involved in statutory consultation processes. Inevitably, people become disillusioned and drop off from the campaign, as progress is slow and there is a perception of a lack of accountability. In the case of Hackney Wick, for the period immediately leading up to submission, we found people willing and eager to attend targeted meetings to discuss and contribute to the submission. However, in the period between submission and waiting for a response from the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) it was difficult to hold the group together specifically for this purpose. When it looked as though the LLDC was going to miss its own response deadline, it was very difficult to re-engage individuals to discuss an action plan to address this. Our outreach worker had to attend multiple older people’s groups across the estate in order to reconnect and, although this was successful, the approach was resource heavy and risky in terms of finding and re-engaging the participants.

Key learning. Older people are not generally motivated to engage long-term in ‘influencing’ or social action alone. They are more likely to continue to contribute and participate in these conversations within the context of their existing social groups. Where there is an agenda to engage with a wider issue which affects a larger geographic footprint, a more secure approach is to consult on a micro-local level, rather than creating additional meetings which require time and travel. This approach has the added benefit of enabling more input from individuals, as people generally feel more able to express their opinions while among friends, and there is usually more space for people to contribute.



“You can’t just sit back and do nothing at all.”

K, aged 76

(ii) Kingsmead Estate: Resolving intergenerational tensions

A group of older residents of Kingsmead Estate asked us to support their approach to the local youth centre to initiate discussions with young people because they were frightened by the reported escalation in youth crime and violence. They wanted to try to identify something they could work on together to build better understanding between them. We recognised the project as an opportunity to embed a more positive view towards ageing and older people, and for them to be valued more for the contributions they make. We facilitated a number of conversations with all potential stakeholders, and the result was ideas for two intergenerational projects – a gardening project with 8–13 year olds and a multimedia project with 13–18 year olds.



“I really thought ‘yes I want to do that’ because it’s my local community.”

A, aged 67

The gardening project got off to a good start and ran for several months, but struggled to continue through the winter months. We also ran into difficulty re-engaging the young people in the media project following the lapse of several months since the initial exchange of ideas. With little prospect of being able to reboot the project in the time we had left, we focused on gathering feedback from participants, and reflecting on the challenges and learning we could take away from the project.

The challenges. We were acutely aware of the potential for this work to exacerbate more than it would resolve, and that relationships needed to be managed and monitored closely. Combined with safeguarding risks, this meant that the project required more drive from the team than in the other projects. We were heavily reliant on the capacity of the youth centre to support the engagement of the young people, and there was no dedicated funding for the activities we were attempting to instigate.

Additionally, this was the least cohesive group of older people we were working with, as the older participants came from across the estate and they didn’t have any other point of contact outside of this project. And there were no obvious leaders to take the project forward in any sustainable way once the Connect Hackney funded work came to an end.

Key learning. Build time in for planning, allow for genuine co-production and understand the associated risks. Building relationships and understanding between people takes time, and requires ownership by all participants if it is to be authentic and therefore effective. If a group identifies another stakeholder they wish to work with, this will necessarily extend the process. Plan for leadership – there needs to be a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities where a common aim is identified. Without this, it is very easy for everyone to assume that certain tasks are in hand and it is often too late by the time everyone realises that they aren’t.

“They asked me to get involved because they recognised me as somebody who gets things done.”

J, aged 73

“We really feel our work has helped bring the community together more, and has had a good impact on some of the most socially isolated older people in the area.”

J, aged 72

“Being on the committee is a good way to stay involved in the local community and life on the estate.”

M, aged 77

(iii) Friends of Woodberry Down: Gold star community action

The Friends of Woodberry Down is an active group that has members who have been involved with the local community for decades. They are self-directed, well-led and collectively have a range of skills and experience which they very consciously deploy – fundraising is one example. The large membership, ethnic mix and stable leadership of the group mean that they can adapt quickly and exert influence in their local area very effectively.

They have secured a number of notable ‘wins’, including: getting air vents in communal areas closed because they were making the buildings a lot colder and increasing heating costs for tenants; contesting service charges for window cleaning of communal areas and securing a substantial refund for all; arranging for more benches in Woodberry Wetlands; and establishing firm links with local police to discuss their concerns about anti-social behaviour.

The challenges. Although they enjoy some success, it would be fair to say that this tends to be on the smaller issues. However, there are many, long-standing issues which have remained unresolved and campaign fatigue or burn out is an issue here – probably for some of the same reasons the members of this group are so successful. Decades of being involved with organising meetings and community events and helping people sort out their housing problems will eventually take a toll on people as they age. Some of the more active participants decided to drop much of their work because they felt they were being taken advantage of by people who were younger and healthier, but who could ‘not be bothered to sort out their own problems.’ Even the most active who enjoy their voluntary work and want to remain involved reach a point where they need to step back and let someone else take the lead.

The learning. What we have learned from this group has been largely observational. They are as exposed to the variety of barriers and challenges we have identified across all groups, but they have managed to overcome these, or at least be impacted less by them. This is largely because their activities and organisation embody many of the features we have come to recognise as essential to sustaining older people’s involvement and leadership in their communities:

1. Their influencing work is formed around a peer group, the main purpose of which is social.
2. Their learning and confidence are held within the group and do not overly rely on any individuals.
3. They approach influencing directly at a micro-local level.
4. They approach multiple issues as and when they arise across a broad agenda, which spreads risk to ongoing engagement and facilitates learning.



The Friends of Woodberry Down are willing to meet other groups to share their experiences of becoming an established community influencer, growing their groups and challenging local developments. Our role has been to provide some support with contacting high-level decision makers, but mostly in fostering links between the different projects who are all at different stages of their ‘influencing journey’ in order to share experiences and best practice.

“And then if we’ve had a problem and we’ve dealt with it, we can tell people ‘this is how we’ve dealt with it, this is what you need to do, and you pass it on.’”

S, aged 76

The future

Recommendations for an older persons' Hackney

As the project comes to an end and our outreach workers withdraw the support they have been providing, they leave the older people of Hackney better connected, more visible and in a much better position from which to hold key stakeholders to account. However, we are acutely aware of the fragility of this peer network and we know that it is as vulnerable to the challenges of growing older in Hackney as the individuals that it connects.



The building blocks of the model we have identified through this work are authenticity, representation and sustainability. It is these principles that underpin our Top 5 recommendations, which are aimed at grant givers, policy makers, local health and social care commissioners, service providers and the voluntary sector:

1. Invest in the continuation of the developing framework we have identified through this work to ensure:
 - i. the range of informal older people's groups across the Borough of Hackney are resourced to continue to act as vital forums for older people's voice.
 - ii. the groups are mapped and connected into a peer network which facilitates flow of voice and sharing of best practice and information.
2. Commit to continuing dialogue and co-producing ways for older people from culturally defined groups to participate and be represented more authentically.
3. Commit to working with older people to co-produce and deliver solutions to the challenges they face to participating in policy shaping and service design.
4. Extend the remit and purpose of the OPRG beyond its current health agenda, with more integrated funding from health, social and local commissioning.
5. Commit to a fully accountable 'feedback loop' and greater transparency across commissioning and service design leads. If you ask older people what they think, come back and tell them how their input has influenced your decision making.

Acknowledgements

Age UK East London would like to thank Hackney CVS for commissioning this work under the Connect Hackney programme. Thanks are also due to Dr Darren Sharpe from the Institute for Health and Human Development at the University of East London for his review of the contents of this report. Finally, none of this work would have been possible without the investment of significant funds from The National Lottery Community Fund.





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