



# What have we learnt about reducing the social isolation of people with learning disabilities?

## Connect Hackney Key Messages

The learning below comes from the evaluation of the Connect Hackney programme which has commissioned 50 projects for socially isolated older people in the borough.

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Connect Hackney is one of 14 programmes in England funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. In operation since 2015, Connect Hackney aims to reduce social isolation, improve the wellbeing of older Hackney residents and to share learning about what works.

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## Reducing the social isolation of people with learning disabilities

There are many reasons why people with learning disabilities are at high risk of isolation, yet there has been little research on how best to address this issue. Friendships and socialising play a crucial role in health and wellbeing, yet people with learning disabilities are often denied opportunities to build meaningful social connections outside their family. In 2018, Connect Hackney commissioned two projects for older people with learning disabilities explicitly aimed at reducing their social isolation both by providing opportunities to engage in an activity outside of home and by encouraging social connections between participants. Peter Bedford's 'Over 50s Project' delivered a range of activities which participants could choose from including craft sessions, digital inclusion classes, teamwork building and gardening. St Mary's Secret Garden ran a 'Garden Social' project which included creative activities and visiting garden centres. Participants were involved in the design and delivery of both projects. Findings from our formal evaluation of these projects are available here, while key recommendations are given below:

**Anticipate high levels of social isolation** – Cuts to public services have reduced both opportunities and access to community activities for people with learning disabilities. Projects found that the closure of day centres has meant that many participants do not socialise regularly with others. This can make coming to a group feel intimidating therefore, staff should be prepared to support people to engage at their own pace.

**Be pro-active in fostering social connections** – Given the lack of opportunities for people with learning disabilities to socialise, staff should provide support to help people form connections. Facilitators can act as a bridge between two individuals, or between an individual and the wider group, in order to help people get to know each other and provide an opportunity to develop friendships.

**Run collaborative activities** – Social connections can be established more easily if people engage in a shared activity. These shared experiences are especially important for people at high risk of isolation. By providing shared experiences projects maximise the chance of people getting to know each other and developing friendships.

**Allocate resources for travel assistance** - A lack of support staff and/or appropriate travel options can prevent people with learning disabilities from engaging in community activities. Social care plans should include resources to enable people to get out and about. Where necessary projects and funders must allocate resources to address this issue in order to engage and retain participants.

**Offer regular, but flexible, activities** – Given the complexities involved in planning caring arrangements, including travel support, it is helpful for activities to run regularly at the same time and day. It is also important to offer flexible, drop-in

activities in order to make it easier for people to attend alongside health and care appointments.

**Involve people in decision-making** – Involving participants in making decisions about the design and delivery of a project can increase their confidence and wellbeing and helps ensure that activities are interesting, enjoyable and accessible to participants. Involvement in decision making can be particularly important for people who may not be presented with many choices as to how they spend their time.

**Prioritise developing referral pathways** – Reaching older people with learning disabilities directly can be challenging and staff may not always be able to promote their projects directly to potential participants. Developing new relationships with service providers such as GPs, sheltered housing providers or local government agencies can be challenging and time consuming, but building these relationships is crucial for projects aiming to reach older people with learning disabilities.





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