

# Person centred delivery – learning from Ageing Better

## Introduction

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme. It is 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+.

In all of our learning, one of the core principles which has emerged throughout is the need to be person centred. This learning paper explores more about what it means to work in a person centred way and outlines the elements needed to deliver in this way. Our insight is that it combines practical actions together with an ethos and attitude.

For this learning paper we are exploring person centred delivery in terms of a “professional” relationship such as the one-to-one relationship developed between an individual and a connector role. We recognise that the person centred ethos and approach remains applicable to a group of peers but due to the importance of the one-to-one relationship element of working in a person centred way felt it was important to focus on this “professional” relationship.

## Why is being person centred important?

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

Because the reasons behind social isolation and loneliness are both complex and personal to each individual, the support and route out in turn needs to be individually focused.

Working with people who need support either because social isolation is entrenched or they are experiencing a life event is most effective when it is person centred and holistic. Here the support focuses on the individual, taking the time to establish what

they want to do or achieve rather than making any assumptions. The aim is to identify an individual's personal barriers and then work towards achieving a personalised set of goals. Meeting the person in a place that feels "safe" for them is crucial as is taking the time needed to build a relationship of trust.

In summary, taking a person centred approach acknowledges and allows social isolation and loneliness to be understood in the context of the individual and their circumstances - understanding the impact on them, identifying the barriers for them in making connections and then in exploring what they want to achieve and the steps needed to achieve a change.

### **Ethos of being person centred**

At the heart of person centred delivery is an ethos and approach. This reflects a way of working with people to help relationships flourish and progress to be made.

Key elements of this are:

- Taking time to build a relationship and getting to know the person - Working in a person centred way requires an investment of time and focus on the individual. It takes time to get to know someone and to build the trust necessary to help identify the range and complexity of barriers and issues for them. This process of building a relationship is critical and can't be rushed.
- Understanding the individual impact of social isolation and how linked it is to a lack of self-confidence - Throughout Ageing Better we have learned that people will often mask their real issues. The first issue they disclose may not be the main or only barrier. A good example of this is some people who will say 'I can't afford' to attend an activity when what they really mean is 'I lack confidence' to go.
- Understanding that every person's outcome will be different - The journey out of social isolation and loneliness will be different for everyone. For some, support will result in greater wellbeing but for others either their situation will not change fundamentally or their physical decline will continue. Valuing and respecting these different end points is hugely important and a continuing element of working in a person centred way. Some outcomes may appear "small" externally but are enormously valuable to the individual.
- Don't make assumptions - This includes assumptions about what may be "best" for the person being worked with or what they want to achieve. Ultimately, working in a person centred way means achieving something that is important for that person, not anyone else.
- Finding the "hook" for that individual - people are different and so in order to reach and engage as many people as possible it is important to have as wide a variety of options that can act as the specific hook or appeal to that individual. You cannot engineer friendships but it is possible to create the situations where people come together in an environment where "natural" friendships have the opportunity to develop. The activities themselves can be the "hook" for people wanting to get engaged and involved, which then builds confidence allowing people to make those natural friendships which are so powerful. These connections and groups act in both a preventative way to reduce social isolation, and as an exit route for those people with entrenched social isolation. A community that has a wide range of activities that people want to do creates an environment where people can feel connected.

- Working in a strengths based way - It is important to take the time to understand someone's skills and interests. What would they like to achieve or be involved in, what are their interests and what might they want to contribute.
- Be honest - Be open to the person, work at their pace and be honest about what you can achieve. There is a need to support someone to understand and manage expectations as to what is ultimately achievable. This can be done by setting small goals or by setting a framework, identifying where you may be able to help and importantly where you can't.
- Don't promise things you can't deliver - This includes being open and honest about any waiting times for services or what you know about a group or activity you are signposting them to. If you don't know the group, say or maybe research together.
- Review progress - Linked to the earlier point about not making assumptions, it is important to regularly review and check with the person that the goals and focus of the work originally identified are still relevant. People and their circumstances change and a chance to review can help refocus on their goals and outcomes, how they are feeling and acknowledge progress made as well as any issues - keeping the person at the centre.
- The art of the 'challenge' - This involves listening to and understanding what a person is sharing with you but also opening them up to the possibilities and options that may be available. This might mean "pushing" them outside of their comfort zone, so that they try new things. This comes when a relationship has been built and links into understanding what the individual wants to achieve and why - using this as a "hook" to support them to make a change. This could include trying new technology or trying new sessions. This is not always easy and as we discuss later, being part of a team can help navigate this.
- Having an eye on the "end" of the relationship - The start of a relationship is crucial but it is also important for these one-to-one professional relationships to have an end point. This means having clear review points after which a joint decision is made as to whether a new goal or objective should be set. Person centred delivery involves establishing what a person wants to achieve and jointly working towards that, thinking from the start about the end of the relationship and building skills (and often networks) to support that exit.

## **Professional etiquette – good practice standards**

Adopting a person centred approach can be hugely beneficial when working with people who are socially isolated by putting the focus on that individual. There can be huge job satisfaction for the "professional" working in this way, building a relationship and ideally seeing progression. But there are also issues that need to be well managed as the focus on a person can in turn lead to huge expectations on the "professional" involved.

It is important to remember that as professionals, you do have an important role to play but that it isn't all down to you - if it goes incredibly well it's not all because of your work and if it doesn't, neither is it all your fault. Delivery staff are facilitators and enablers of change but the situation is complex and an individual will have a

huge variety of different elements going on in their lives.

Below we identify some suggestions to consider and help staff feel supported in providing effective person centred delivery.

- Team work - In reality person centred delivery is much easier when there is a team of people involved. This allows the relationship between the participant and professional to be subject to a regular process of check and challenge. There is an art to person centred delivery. It requires relationships to be built but it also requires an understanding of end points and exits. This is much easier to manage if there is a group of people who can support and challenge, regularly talk about each relationship and share tips and ideas on the next step in the process.
- Personalities and having the right match - To work in a person centred way, a relationship needs to build. In reality, not everyone will get on with everyone else. A team approach allows for delivery staff to be switched between participants where a relationship is struggling to get going.
- Think about the place you meet - We have learnt how important the first meeting is and having that take place where the person feels “safe”. There are substantial advantages to a home visit as it can add an appreciation and understanding of the person’s current circumstances. But people may prefer to start the relationship building process over the phone, on a walk or in a neutral venue. Being open and flexible about how this first meeting happens can be hugely valuable.
- Flexibility - This means taking account of fluctuating health conditions and circumstances. A person may not be in a position to meet at a regular time or may need long breaks between sessions. Working in a person centred way accommodates this and allows a person to interact in a way that works for them.
- Keep communicating - We know there are often many different pressures on projects and programmes. There may be several reasons for a delay in the first meeting happening such as a waiting list, illness or waiting for the right ‘match’ to be possible. It is important during any waiting period or delay to maintain contact with the participant with short phone calls or emails so they know they haven’t been forgotten.
- Don’t just signpost - Think about the wider support someone may need to physically attend groups or appointments. We know for people who are socially isolated, having the confidence to take part in an activity is often a huge barrier to overcome in the first place. Explore the support needs a person has in order to engage or connect with any activity, perhaps going with them to the first or first few sessions.
- Effective referrals require investment - Organisations need to be clear on who and how they can support and who they can’t. It can take time to build up these referral connections and to get the “right” referrals arriving at the project. It will then take time to develop the relationships and to feedback to the referral partners. These relationships do not stand still and in many of the “referring” sectors there can be a high turnover of staff and reorganisation of roles and so throughout the project, time needs to be allowed to enable partners to be continuously communicated with and relationships refreshed.

- Access additional expertise - Social isolation is complex and most people will need a range of support from a number of partners to help reconnect. Other organisations will have important expertise to provide such as housing advice, mental health support etc., An important part of an individual's progression (and your role) is that they begin to feel comfortable enough to work with other people and organisations. But it is vital to ensure that any referrals include a handover and that the person is fully supported and communicated with.
- Build wide networks and partnerships - Working in a person centred way does not mean one agency solving all the issues a person has. It is important to have a wide range of networks and partnerships in place so you can access additional or specialist support that an individual may need.
- Allow people to re-join a service - We are clear about the importance of an end point for this type of one-to-one delivery. However, people will have fluctuating circumstances. Life can change and it is appropriate that a person is welcome to rejoin a service or gain additional support if this happens to them.
- Have strong staff support in place - The complexity of the people being worked with means it is hugely important to have the appropriate level of support in place for staff. There are key skills in managing a relationship to ensure it is a relationship of support rather than dependency. Training and support structures need to be in place to help e.g. to identify unhealthy relationships including what to do if you are worrying about someone out of work time.

## Further information

- Ageing Better national learning - [Telephone Befriending](#)  
[Groups](#)

More detail on our wider insights from across the Programme to date together with an overview summary of our learning to date are available at [Ageing Better](#)