



# What have we learned about street outreach with older people?

Operational strategies from the Ageing Better in Camden Outreach Team

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## About Ageing Better in Camden

We are a partnership of older people and Camden organisations, working together to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people. We draw on existing skills and resources in the local community to tackle social isolation and loneliness.



Ageing Better in Camden is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better aims to develop creative ways for people aged over 50 to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. It 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.



@abc\_camden



[www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk](http://www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk)

# Introduction

This report presents key process learning from the Ageing Better in Camden's (ABC) street outreach approach. The ABC Outreach Team was established in order to identify the 'people



no one knows', who are not on a 'radar', and are often not in touch with traditional services. The team aims to identify and signpost these older people into social activities in their communities.

To do this, they have specifically developed and refined a street outreach approach, and have been actively engaging with older people on the street since February 2018. From February 2018 – March 2019 the team engaged with 1,286 older people on the street, including 609 men and 677 women. Delivery partners have reported that a number of participants have joined activities as a result of contact through ABC street outreach<sup>1</sup>.

Street outreach does not appear to be common with older people. In developing this approach the Outreach Team learned through 'doing'

rather than through training or previous experience, and have refined their tactics according to what worked or not<sup>2</sup>. They recently reviewed their practice through an interactive workshop with outreach workers from other fields, confirming that, despite different client groups and needs, the programme they have developed intuitively reflects that of more established schemes<sup>3</sup>.

This report outlines what we have learned about street outreach with older people in Camden, and provides an overview of operational strategies that are specific to older people. Quotations in this report are from members of the ABC Outreach Team.

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<sup>1</sup> The Outreach Team promote any free local activities, not only those funded by ABC, so some individuals will not be recorded as part of the programme. We also know there can be a delay between people receiving information and acting upon it.

<sup>2</sup> Prior to launching street outreach, the team consulted with the ABC Older People's Advisory Group (OPAG) to gather views and insight about how older people may feel about being approached on the street and any things to do or avoid. This confirmed their planned approach.

<sup>3</sup> The learning summary report from the workshop, '*An ordinary conversation – what works in street outreach? Strategies and tips for good practice from those working in street outreach*' is available at [ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/what-we-are-learning](http://ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/what-we-are-learning)

# What surprised us about street outreach?



- Approaching older people on the street is easier than expected, with the majority of older people happy to chat and welcoming information about local activities, even where they prove not to be of interest
- Men are very willing to engage in conversation on the street, and often engage in much more lengthy conversations about a range of issues than women, although they are less likely to be interested in the activity offer<sup>4</sup>
- Even when people are not interested in the information themselves, they may take it for others. Responses on the street indicate people value our making information visible and available
- Some strategies and techniques work better than others – the following section outlines key operational learning from the team

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<sup>4</sup> For specific learning on outreach with older men please see *Key messages from outreach with older men – a research project by the Ageing Better in Camden Outreach Team*, available at [ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/what-we-are-learning](http://ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/what-we-are-learning)

# Top tips for street outreach with older people



## When and where

- Select outreach locations to target local people. Larger estates may be relatively quiet and areas of higher footfall may have fewer local people, so get to know an area and where local people go, e.g. shops which residents usually access, recycling bins on collection day, or a well-used local bus stop
- Outreach close to the date an activity will take place and in areas local to the venue
- Time outreach work for when individuals will be out and about. Older people will avoid times when school children are going to or from school, preferring lunchtimes, *“not too early, and not too late”*
- Plan outreach in phases, as it is physically demanding. It is *“better in short bursts, you can’t do it for hours at a time”*

## Appearance

- Dress casually and appear neutral i.e. avoid business attire or branded charity t-shirts. This makes you more approachable and less likely to be perceived as a fundraiser. This is especially important as some areas are hot spots for chuggers. *“Look quite harmless”, “Look middle ground”*
- Roam and keep moving rather than being static in one place to make the interaction less likely to be perceived by older people as fundraising activity. It also feels more natural and older people don’t feel *“pounced on.” “People don’t want to feel like they’ve been targeted”*
- Appear to work alone. *“Don’t walk down the street in twos”*. For safety the team work in pairs, but split areas into sections so each worker approaches older people alone. This leaves enough physical space for conversation and doesn’t make the older person feel *“hemmed in”*
- Use body language and eye contact to engage the older person and make the conversation person-focused, for example, by mirroring body language, sitting at the same level if possible e.g. on a bench

## Safety

- Don’t approach anyone crossing a road, on the phone or exiting a hospital
- Use risk assessment techniques *“If you don’t feel it’s right don’t do it.”* Depending on behaviour, the team will approach those who look vulnerable and know appropriate referral pathways<sup>5</sup>

## Design and use of materials

- Keep information simple, e.g. use a range of flyers promoting individual activities rather than a multiple offer
- Tailor this information to avoid putting people off, and to allow them to picture themselves fitting into activities and social interactions. Do this before approaching anyone - select which flyer to lead with before you start talking<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The street outreach event brought together practitioners who work within homelessness, substance use and mental health, to share learning and identify good practice techniques. The team now feel more aware of referral pathways for these groups.

<sup>6</sup> The team use two flyers: a general listing which may appeal more to men (no pictures of women in groups etc.); and one that should appeal to everyone. This is the approach both with general outreach and when promoting specific activities for partner agencies.

- Only list free activities. The Outreach Team do not include any activities with costs attached, and include the widest range of free local activities possible, even if they are delivered by organisations who are not our delivery partners
- Keep visible paperwork to a minimum. *“No clipboard or wads of paper”*. Workers carry only one or two pieces of paper in their hands, to increase focus on the most relevant information and give the impression that the conversation is not going to take long. The only thing the older person should see is the flyer of information
- Complete monitoring or data collection records out of sight, after the interaction. Write as little as possible in front of the older person and only if necessary (for instance when collecting contact details for further support). If possible ask the older person to write down their details when needed – to give them control and make it *“very chilled”*
- Reduce monitoring to the essentials. The ABC Outreach monitoring and contact details sheet is a single piece of paper for multiple entries

## Opening lines

- Be friendly, smile, introduce yourself, show ID and make clear that you are not fundraising or *“you will lose them immediately.”* A typical opening line is *“Hello, my name is x, I work for Age UK Camden, I’d like to tell you about some free things that are on locally”*
- Use the flyer as a tool for opening discussion e.g. *“We are just here to let local people know about x”* and provide additional information responsively
- Approach everyone even if you are not sure of their age; don’t prejudge, but accept that you may get it wrong. *“People don’t want to think we’ve stopped them because they are vulnerable.”* To reduce the chances of causing offence workers often ask *“Do you know anyone who is over 60?”* or just state they have information on what is available free locally<sup>7</sup>
- Don’t be a chugger. Camden possibly contains a lot of fundraisers and other outreach work compared to other areas; individuals may be approached many times on the street. Chuggers wear fundraising t-shirts, work in pairs, carry clipboards and piles of paper, use big smiles, big voices and open arms to catch someone’s attention. The Outreach Team aims for the opposite effect, using a *“natural approach”* – a slow unhurried walk, or *“amble”* which aims to give the impression they are not targeting individuals, just sharing information with everyone
- Use a *“chit chat approach.”* Every interaction is an opportunity – the team may end up supporting the individual in something unrelated to the activity offer
- *“Approach every conversation like it’s your first one.”* Be comfortable proactively approaching people and have a positive intent : *“Feel positive about what you are doing”*

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<sup>7</sup> Although Age UK identification implies the service is for older people.

## Language

- Be open, friendly and informal in approach and happy to chat
- But adapt what you say and the formality of the language according to the person, mirroring tone, language and level of formality e.g. the team will typically use more formal language when talking to an older person
- Establish quickly if someone needs an interpreter. As Bengali is the most commonly spoken language in Camden after English<sup>8</sup>, one of the Outreach Team is a Bengali speaker

## Making information accessible

- Be an “*interactive noticeboard*”, taking information to people who may not be proactively looking for it. Point out that people don’t often know what’s on or it is quite hard to find out –a non-judgemental approach reassures people. The Outreach Team report many older people can’t access information about what is on locally, possibly because older people tend not to access online listings, may find phone systems off-putting and free local newspapers are no longer available
- Be aware information is potentially relevant to all; sometimes younger people approach the outreach team asking for information for parents, some individuals take flyers to put up in their housing block, or pass to friends or family. People will often say to the team that they don’t need it themselves but value the information being there for others. Flyers always state ‘ If this is not for you please pass it on to someone else’
- Be aware of and have an understanding of other cultures and backgrounds

## The content of conversations

- Be clear what you can offer, including any parameters or eligibility criteria for activities or services. This is particularly important if referring onto other Age UK services
- Use the techniques of active listening to reflect back what the individual says, so they feel acknowledged and heard, and to help build trust and engagement
- Offer follow-up if an older person has questions, unaddressed interests, or needs further support or information. Having organisational support services, and a strong brand is helpful - Age UK for instance allows the team to have clear referral pathways “*It gives me confidence, no matter where the conversation goes I don’t have to worry*”

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<sup>8</sup> Thirteen percent of Camden’s population in 2011 spoke Bengali (London Borough of Camden (January 2019) Camden Profile).

- Allow older people time to talk. Part of the outreach role is to enable conversations even if these are not focused on the activity offer. Talking may lead to the identification of other areas of support, or address some of the assumptions or barriers people may think exist i.e. the team can provide reassurance that an activity is appropriate for the individual. Talking about activities may “chime” with someone, affirming that an activity could be a good thing to do, and the discussion may be enough to lead to change – “for some, it’s a process”
- Sometimes just having a conversation is valuable. The team (and other outreach workers<sup>9</sup>) believe even single conversations have an intrinsic value. “It’s about the quality of the conversation”. They provide a “human connection” where personal contact may be limited, and may have positive impact for the individual even if they do not take up an activity - “It’s like a party invitation even if you’re not going - you feel better knowing you’ve been asked and not excluded”

## Perseverance and resilience

- Realise that the nature of street outreach means many conversations won’t go anywhere; people may say no immediately or not be interested once the information is given. In this case “smile and move on”
- Keep the conversation going where possible - recognise that someone wants to talk if they are not moving off, and persevering for a few seconds longer allows you “to see if the ‘no no no’s stop” to overcome someone’s initial reluctance or uncertainty
- Know that you are meeting a need. The team receives positive feedback from older people about contact made via street outreach, and report that “every now and again you meet someone you know would have fallen through the net if we hadn’t met them”

## Working with volunteers

Outreach can be carried out alongside volunteers or staff from delivery agencies. Provided they have received appropriate training, this can add significant value to interactions by sharing volunteer/staff local knowledge of the activities and area, and allowing older people to meet an existing member of the agency or centre. Our tips for working with others include:

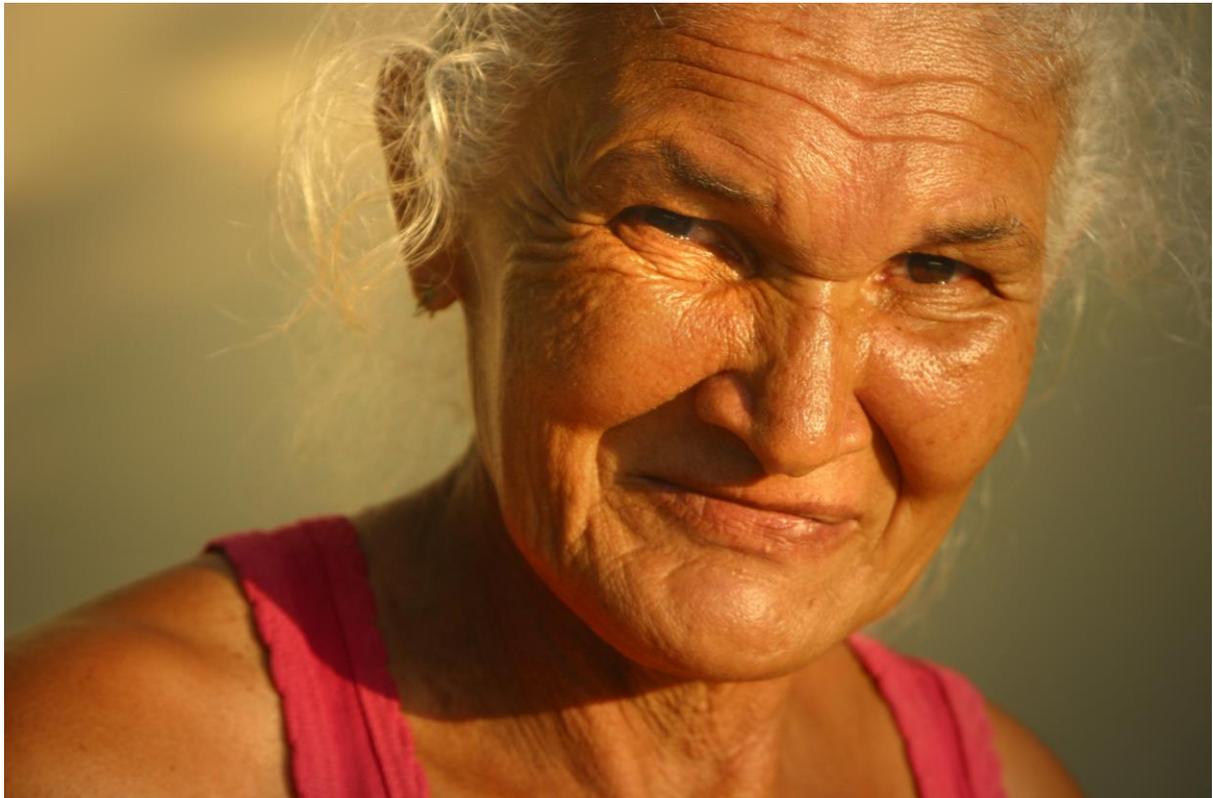
- Ensure outreach training responds to the concerns of volunteers around personal safety and support to actively approach and engage with older people through outreach activity

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<sup>9</sup> ‘An ordinary conversation’ – what works in street outreach? Strategies and tips for good practice from those working in street outreach’, available at [ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/what-we-are-learning](http://ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/what-we-are-learning)

- Buddy up volunteers with an outreach worker to ensure the volunteer is supported and the outreach worker can respond to and manage any risks

## Summary



ABC is committed to a 'test and learn' approach, sharing what we are learning in our work, and adapting what we do accordingly. Our Outreach Team developed their street outreach approach on the job, in the context of little experience or available training in this area. As a result their practice has developed intuitively and reflects their learning of effective ways to engage older people on the street and to create an interaction which has as much potential as possible to enable support or change. This report shares that learning.

In practice, street outreach with older people means being friendly, focusing on the individual and allowing conversations to develop naturally. Workers need to know the area and tailor information and conversations to meet the needs of individuals, including where these branch away from the activity offer. This reflects the team's underlying recognition that every conversation is valuable, even in single or one-off interactions.

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