



Tackling loneliness and social isolation in older people:

Top tips for a successful activity

Setting up a local group or activity? Read this

Social connections are important for wellbeing and happiness. Older people can be more vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation. If you are thinking of setting up a group or activity to help reduce social isolation, this leaflet is full of tips and ideas to help you.

Get the right skills and support

The most important thing you will need is enthusiasm for making a difference to others and an interest in people. A sense of humour is important too. Organising your activity might involve finding a suitable venue, organising refreshments,

handling money and arranging speakers or tutors. But you don't need to do it all yourself.

“ If you don't see some of the ones you usually see, you wonder what's happened, you'll pop down at their door to see if everything is fine. I think personal contact is very, very helpful. I think it's showing people that you care, there are people out there that are in the same boat as yourself as well. ”





- Team up with other people with different skills. A people-person may not necessarily be the best person to manage money. Effective organisers get help from other members of the group.
- Seek support and expertise from community organisations. Organisations like Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) and other local community groups have a wealth of experience and can help you get your idea off the ground. There is a list of useful contacts at the end of this leaflet.
- Get in touch with your local faith groups, sports clubs or community centres - they may be able to offer resources, such as a free meeting space, or help to advertise your activity.

Put older people at the heart of decision-making

Successful groups involve their members in running them. Active involvement helps to build a sense of community and friendship among those attending. This helps to create a stronger, more resilient group, with a greater chance of it continuing. But bear in mind that different people will want to contribute in different ways.

- Take time to speak to people to find out how they wish to be involved and what they can offer.

- There are easy ways people can contribute to making your activity a success – such as bringing food to share, welcoming newcomers, making refreshments and sharing ideas, skills and talents.
- Find out what people want to do – gather suggestions and let people have a say in key decisions about the activity, such as locations for visits and what to eat.
- Getting the views of those involved in your activity will not only help it to be more successful, but can also help if you apply for funding.

What kind of activity should you run?

- Physical activity (it doesn't have to be strenuous) is both popular and can have additional benefits for people's wellbeing. Think about how you might



The group members decided where they want to go for the activities. They've picked out what they want to eat. What I do is I put all the stuff I knew they wanted on the funding application form and ran the form by them, explained how much we'd ask for - it's important they know what's going on.

incorporate movement and physical activity as part of your group.

- People like to be able to 'give something back' and this helps them to feel valued. Think about how your group could contribute to the community or good causes, for example, some craft groups make articles that are sold to raise money for charity and gardening groups help to make community spaces more attractive.

Journey MCC Asylum Seekers' Support Group

This group offers friendship and advice to asylum seekers who are in the UK because they are LGBT. They used Ageing Better in Birmingham funding to run a lunch club to reach an older audience. Although the group offers support to LGBT asylum seekers of all ages, the lunch club has been a successful way of expanding older people's social interactions. A number of older volunteers befriend asylum seekers and offer them support, for example, by accompanying them to court. The older volunteers particularly benefit from feeling that they are being useful to someone in need, as well as enjoying the social interaction of befriending others.

Some people are attracted to groups that offer an opportunity to socialise. Others may be more interested in pursuing a particular interest or pastime. Think about what sort of group yours will be and tailor it accordingly.

- If your focus is on socialising, offer a variety of activities and make space and time for people to simply chat to one another. This could be a refreshments break or simply offering time to chat at the start or end of your activity.

This kind of group can still be organised around a specific activity (such as crafts), but this is less important than the chance to socialise.

- If your focus is on a particular hobby or pastime (such as photography), consider how your activity could be enhanced by talks from experts or professional tuition - this can be helpful in attracting new members.
- Most importantly, make it fun.

Practical pointers

- Making participants feel welcome is vital. Make sure someone is on hand to greet new members as they arrive, show them where to go and introduce them to other people. Think about ways to get people talking to each other. For example, sharing a photograph can be a great conversation starter.
- Food is always welcome and often a key draw in attracting people to an activity. Offering opportunities to share a meal of some kind can be a good way to get people talking and making friends.
- Think about how long and how often your group will meet. Activities need to be long enough for people to feel attending is worthwhile, but not so long that it is seen as a chore. Try and avoid timing your activity so that people have to travel during rush hour or when free bus travel is not available.
- Groups that meet regularly tend to be more successful in tackling social isolation than one-off events. Use trips and celebrations (such as Christmas lunches) as a way to encourage new members to join and to help generate new friendships.



Helping people get to your activity

For some older people getting out of the front door is one of the biggest hurdles to overcoming loneliness.

This might be due to safety concerns, lack of confidence in doing something new, cost or mobility difficulties. Think about how you could help overcome these issues when planning your activity.

- How might you listen to and respond to participant concerns? Ask people if there are things you could offer that would make a difference to them and help them take part.

- The location of your activity is important. Some people may be prepared to travel, so links with public transport are important, but many often prefer to attend activities within walking distance.
- If transport is necessary, find out whether members could travel together or if neighbours could help. For example, the organiser of one Birmingham group collects members who would otherwise struggle to reach the venue. Another group uses a trusted taxi service that sees people to their door.



- Be flexible about your venue. Groups don't always need a formal meeting room (which you may need to pay for); some work well in an informal setting such as a local café.
- If you need to charge for your activity make sure you are open about what the cost is for.

Promoting your group

- Start with a small group of friends and go from there. This is easier than starting your group from scratch. Word of mouth can be more effective than expensive promotional materials.
- People are more likely to join a group or activity if they know someone who already attends or if they go with a friend the first time. Encourage members to bring a friend or invite a neighbour along to help grow the group.
- Ask if you can put posters or cards advertising your activity in doctors' surgeries, shops, libraries and on community noticeboards.

Does your local faith group or community centre have a regular newsletter you could use to spread the word?



Mind your language

Thinking how you describe your activity in leaflets and other adverts is important too.

- Use positive language to attract people. Promote the benefits of your activity, such as making new friends and learning new things. Show how your group is fun.
- Many people don't see themselves as 'old' or may be reluctant to admit they are isolated. People might be put off joining your group if it is

advertised as for 'older' people or about reducing loneliness. Avoid jargon and words that suggest your activity is for people who may be struggling such as 'beneficiary' or 'mental health'.

- If you want to encourage people to get involved, words like 'volunteer' may also be off-putting for some people, as this suggests a regular commitment or hard work, when what is needed might be more informal and enjoyable.

Add the personal touch

Building a personal element into your activities is important.

- It is important to make sure people feel that they are cared for, listened to and that activities and groups are interested in them as an individual.



Ageing Better in Birmingham helped us with members setting up social media groups so we can reach people who've signed up to our group

- Remembering people's personal details can have a big impact on making them feel welcomed and valued. This may be as simple as making a note of how someone likes their tea or coffee. For example, at one Ageing Better in Birmingham group, a member keeps details of everyone's birthday and then makes sure they get a card and small box of chocolates on the day.

Get younger people involved

Interaction between different age groups has lots of benefits. Intergenerational activities can help create positive attitudes towards ageing and older people. They can build mutual understanding between

generations and, in some cases, enduring friendships.

- Think about how you could get different age groups involved. Could younger people help to organise and run activities? What skills and expertise do older members have that they could share with younger people?

Sara Park Intergenerational Cycling Club

This cycling club was started in Summer 2017, with funding from Ageing Better in Birmingham. The club is open to everybody and not specifically advertised to older people. A wide range of age groups attend the sessions, with the oldest being in their 60s.

“The idea with this project was to bring the older people and younger people in the community together. There is a lot of experience and knowledge among the older members of the community. I think people who attend have made more friends, so less isolation. People who they probably would never have met before, they’ve made good friends with them.”

About this leaflet

This leaflet was produced as part of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. The content is based on learning from the programme. The examples are of activities supported by the programme and the quotes are from people running and taking part in activities. Ageing Better in Birmingham is part of Ageing Better, the six-year (2015-2021), £78 million programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better partnerships are based in 14 locations across England, from Torbay to Middlesbrough and the Isle of Wight to East Lindsey. Working with local people, charities, businesses, public sector services and voluntary groups, the Ageing Better partnerships are exploring creative ways for older people to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. Ageing Better 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.

Further information and useful contacts

Ageing Better in Birmingham

www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk

Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC)

www.bvsc.org

Centre for Ageing Better

www.ageing-better.org.uk

CFE Research evaluated the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme and produced this leaflet. February 2019