



Key messages: What makes groups welcoming for older people and why does it matter?

“Like a whole big family”: key messages from research with older people

Amanda Mainey, November 2019

This is a summary of key messages from research with older people. Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) set out to explore older people's views of what makes community activities welcoming or not, and what difference, if any, this makes. For further detail see ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/what-we-are-learning

This evidence from older people will help to shape future commissioning and provision of activities for older people. It is part of a wider piece of work linked to ABC's 'warm welcome' approach. We will be gathering evidence in future from a range of stakeholders including delivery partners and funders, so they have not been included here.

What did we do?

We spoke to a total of 65 older people¹ who attend activities or receive support from our delivery partners. Topic guides were designed to facilitate discussion of the following key areas:

- What difference does the level of welcome make?
- What makes a group welcoming?
- What makes an unfriendly group more welcoming?

Why should we be working towards welcoming groups at all?

Older people were clear that it makes a real difference to them if groups are welcoming or not. It is a key factor in whether they return or maintain attendance.

Participants felt older people may need more of a focused welcome than others, because it is arguably more important that they access regular social activities. Many discussed how easy it is for older people to become isolated from others, and the negative implications of this for their health and wellbeing.

What did we learn?

The level of welcome in community groups impacts on older people's **wellbeing**, both short and long term, and on their **attendance** – older people will stop attending groups they perceive as unwelcoming.

This is notable given that community activities are a central part of current policies and provision **to decrease loneliness and social isolation** for older people, and thus the resulting negative health implications. It is particularly important to consider in the context of expanding social prescribing services which rely on high quality and welcoming community activities.

¹ We carried out eight focus groups with older people attending community activities in Camden and two individual interviews with clients from Community Connectors who had experienced additional barriers to joining community activities. Focus groups and interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes, were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. The study adhered to GDPR and research ethics protocols.

Older people identified a range of factors which are fundamental to creating a welcoming atmosphere in community activities. These included meeting and greeting, introductions, seating arrangements, opportunities for social interaction and relationship building, fostering a sense of community and various communication strategies. [See the full report](#) for more detail on each of these aspects:

Staff are key to this – **the ethos of a welcoming group is critical**, with an explicit recognition of, and commitment to, providing a welcoming environment. This should be a top down approach from senior management to volunteers and requires buy-in from all front facing staff.

Staff embody the welcoming ethos – through their personalities and commitment to carrying out the various tasks identified as creating a positive welcome, and in modelling welcoming behaviour so that the entire group takes on the shared responsibility of a welcoming atmosphere.

This is a particularly **critical responsibility for facilitators**, whether they are teaching a skills-based class only or employed to coordinate several groups – they are the face of a group/organisation for older people. There should be an explicit expectation that they are responsible for creating a welcoming environment. This responsibility needs to be enabled through appropriate resourcing and training.

Creating a welcoming group needs to be planned for in terms of both responsibilities and resources. Friendliness should be explicit in planning and not assumed to be an inherent part of providing community activities nor contingent on individual practice.

A welcoming approach needs to be **built into activity design** – to allow opportunities for social interaction whether throughout a session or at times around it. Facilitators should be able to spend time with individuals and participants need to have time to talk together either during or after an activity.

Resources include time – facilitators need enough time to spend with individuals during an activity and potentially for some contact outside it. Most older people appreciated **activity reminders, and for some, additional**

check-ins helped them to feel cared for and contributed to a sense of group membership. There were a few examples where this had enabled people to return to community activities; others had not been in this position so did not feel the need for this type of support.

Older people also contribute to whether a group is welcoming or not, by having positive social interactions and making an effort to be friendly to all, but it is challenging for them to do this if the environment is unwelcoming or unfriendly to start with. It is **a shared responsibility**, which should be organisation-led. **Facilitators need to manage group dynamics** which allow friendships to form, which encourage attendance, but also ensure new people are able to join without feeling excluded from those relationships.

All parties can also **challenge unwelcoming behaviour**. Strategies include: encouraging inclusion; making extra effort with unfriendly individuals, adjusting seating arrangements, and reiterating and/or formalising the ethos of being welcoming.

It is encouraging to find that most older people will continue to try to access groups even having experienced something unwelcoming or off-putting. However, it should be noted that the older people taking part in the research are currently attending activities and may perhaps be more able and more confident to access services despite such barriers – others may not try again.

Conclusion

Participants identified a range of factors which are key to creating a welcoming atmosphere. They felt this has a positive impact on their wellbeing and on their continued attendance in community groups where there are opportunities to increase social contact and decrease loneliness.

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