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Creating a Warm Welcome to maintain older people's sense of belonging in the context of Covid-19: a practitioner's guide

Ageing Better in Camden, November 2020

Our earlier [Warm Welcome practitioner's guide](#) detailed methods used by Ageing Better in Camden partners to make older people feel welcome in groups and activities so encouraging their ongoing social engagement.

The heightened risk of isolation for older people observing social distancing, due to Covid-19, makes it more important than ever to organise welcoming programmes to support social connection and a sense of belonging. Doing this safely under very difficult circumstances has posed a huge challenge and the way Ageing Better in Camden partners have adapted and developed their practice is impressive. Groups and activities which they are running – online, using other media and sometimes face to face – include Zumba, chair exercise, yoga, walking, dance, singing, creative writing, photography, arts and crafts, quizzes, cookery, healthy eating, historical talks, general social groups and advisory groups.

This document is a brief practitioner's guide which shares welcoming approaches used by our partners in their adapted programmes.

1. Welcome everyone by using a range of formats

Practitioners are organising groups and activities using a range of media and formats. These include online groups on **Zoom** or **WhatsApp, telephone groups**, and group activities organised using **email, blog, YouTube** or **post**. When regulations permit, some partners are holding small socially distanced **face-to-face** groups which might be outdoors or, space-allowing, indoors.

Running different groups using different formats (or repeating the ‘same’ group using a different format) maximises the number of group members who are included and stay socially connected to one another:

- Some members are happy to be online and some who were not physically able to attend groups pre-pandemic can now take part.
- Others do not have the skills, devices or inclination to join online groups but are happy to join activities organised in other ways.
- For some, in-person groups fulfil a need or longing for fuller social contact. Others cannot risk meeting face to face.

Blended groups, such as an exercise class which is simultaneously run in-person and online, mean that more people are able to attend.

Find [guidance](#) on the ABC website about organising telephone groups or providing support for digital engagement.

2. Provide support to join groups

Preparing people to join an adapted group can help them to do so with confidence and put them at their ease. For example:

- Have **an initial conversation**, if there is a choice, about which groups are of interest and the format they would like to use to attend.
- **Call those who are joining a group for the first time** to talk them through what to expect, answer questions and provide reassurance.
- **Make reminder calls** shortly before a session to encourage participants to come along knowing that they are expected. This call can also be an opportunity to chat about any difficulties or concerns and allow that person to come to a group session in a more positive state of mind.

- Provide **additional practical support**, for example some partners have been able to organise provision of devices and digital training/support to enable a member to join an online group.

3. Make adapted groups welcoming

By their very nature, adapted groups present barriers to creating a welcoming environment. **Interactions are more stilted** in Zoom and telephone groups which can be a particular barrier to social connection when participants do not already know each other well. Some people find using **technology difficult** or feel self-conscious seeing themselves on screen. Face to face, **distancing and face masks** make interactions harder. Important elements of welcoming such as **greeting with a handshake or hug, or sharing food, are not allowed**.

Group leaders play a key role in mitigating these barriers. This can be hard work but is key to making group members still feel included and valued and to giving them opportunities to develop relationships. Many warm welcome elements are broadly the same as before but require tweaking to respond to current circumstances.

- **Greet** group members in a friendly way as soon as they arrive, whatever the format, making sure that everyone is **introduced or introduces themselves by name**.
- **Remember** people's **names and details** about them to use (sensitively) in conversation and reinforce their sense of connection.
- **Give everyone the opportunity to contribute** without interruption. This may require the leader to **structure turn-taking** by naming people and is particularly important when online or in a telephone group where it is not obvious who is next in line to speak. Where necessary remind those not talking to mute their microphones.
- **Encourage and support participation**
 - In more open-ended social groups, you may have a topic as the focus of a session to **help the conversation flow** and can also help by asking follow-up questions.

- In telephone groups, **pay particular attention to voice** to recognise who is speaking, not speaking and who may need encouragement.
- **Technology can make it difficult for everyone to hear one another.** In blended sessions in particular, it may be necessary to repeat what online participants are saying to make it clear to those in the room and vice versa.
- Sometimes you may need to have a **volunteer translator** on hand.
- **Create a friendly, relaxed atmosphere**
 - **Use animated voice and/or body language** to engage participants in distanced activities but do so sensitively: **don't be 'over the top'**.
 - Recognise and **accept when someone does not want to be the focus** or contribute. Similarly, **be relaxed** when someone joins after the start of a session or has trouble with technology.
 - Some leaders **start and end groups with an activity** such as a short meditation to help to create a sense of calm.
- **Build social time into a session**
 - Ringfence **10-15 minutes for informal chat** at the start and/or end of a session.
 - **As part of Zoom or telephone group sessions, use break out groups of 3 or 4 people** to make chat easier and to create a good social mix (e.g. include someone who is friendly and inclusive in each group; vary the mix over sessions so everyone gets to know each other).
 - **In walking groups, finish at a café** where everyone can have a cup of tea and a chat.

There is **less danger of cliques** in these structured/smaller groups and members who have less social activity in their lives because of restrictions are **often happy to meet and welcome new people**.

- **Try to keep some groups small**
 - It will provide the **best chance for all to be involved** especially online/within telephone groups where interactions flow less easily.
 - It will make it **easier for you to be attentive or supportive** when needed. One organisation runs some smaller 'cozy' social groups especially for new members or those who might be nervous.

Face-to-face groups **are smaller** at the moment and can be used to **provide a 'supercharged' warm welcome** which supports relationship development.

4. Maintain and develop a sense of belonging

- **Keep in touch with group members.** For example,
 - Use newsletters, emails, WhatsApp or other forms of communication to **stay in touch with whole groups**.
 - Call individuals by telephone/Zoom, text or email to check-in and **keep in touch with members between sessions**, especially if they have unexpectedly not attended or there is a special concern.
 - **Call or meet up with people who cannot or do not want to attend** adapted groups. Sometimes leaders send cards or small gifts.
 - If needed and possible **organise help** (e.g. shopping, medicines) or **signpost** to emergency support (e.g. CAB, Adult Social Care).

This contact and support from a well-known staff member and organisation can provide huge reassurance.

- **Group members keeping in touch**
 - Set up systems to encourage ongoing member to member contact between those who have given consent e.g. a **WhatsApp group or offline alternative** where group members call and check-in with one another.
- **Value group members by sharing their contributions**
 - **Share work** that members produce in groups or their news. This could be writing, videos, photographs, drawings and so on. Share it on blogs, websites, YouTube, email or by post.
 - Where appropriate **mention/discuss this work** in groups.
- **Involve group members in activities and supporting others**
 - Encourage members to **contribute ideas** about activities they would like or organisation of the group.
 - Encourage members who want to take on **extra responsibility**. Examples include group members 'chairing' Zoom sessions, organising a system for members to check in with one another by

telephone, giving talks, and helping with their organisation's emergency response by delivering food and medicines.

5. Address challenging behaviour

Modelling welcoming behaviour, proactive group management and small groups will limit instances of challenging behaviour e.g. talking for too long, interrupting others or failing to include everyone in the conversation. If problems do occur and persist, the practitioner will need to take further action taking care to challenge the behaviour not the person. For example:

- **Give a reminder to the whole group** at the start of each session about expectations for behaviour.
- **Intervene** to move a conversation on or to counteract negative behaviour **using positive language** as far as possible.
- **Speak to someone outside a session** to address behaviour, checking if they are experiencing problems which might explain it. Given the stresses of the Covid-19 context, this may well be the case.

The style of such interventions will to some extent be personal to the individual group leader. It is likely to be easier when there is an existing relationship between the leader and those involved but may nevertheless be a necessary part of ensuring that a newer member becomes an accepted member of the group.

Thank you!

Our partners in Camden have worked incredibly hard to adapt their programmes for older people in the context of Covid-19. We would like to thank them for their commitment and for sharing their current practice with us to make this guide possible.



@abc_camden



ageingbetterincamden.org.uk

