"Like a whole big family"

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

A research project
Amanda Mainey, November 2019

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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.

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Cover image: Abbey Community Centre canal boat trip. Photo by Abbey Community Centre

Introduction

This report presents evidence from older people in Camden on how to make community groups as welcoming as possible, and what difference this makes.

Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) works with 30 community organisations and has reached over 7,000 people since the beginning of the programme in 2015. The majority of our provision is for those aged over 60. In trialling approaches to our work, we have learned that some community activities can be unwelcoming for older people. To address this ABC changed its commissioning of activities to include the 'warm welcome' approach. We now ask our delivery partners to carry out several measures to attract and maintain attendance at community activities, including providing:

- 'meeters and greeters' at community activities
- phone calls to older people after their first visit to a group
- reminder phone calls for those who need them
- assistance with transport where required
- marketing/reaching out to bring in new people (we set an expectation that delivery partners will focus effort on reaching potential new members)

Summary and implications

The research set out to explore older people's views of what makes community group activities welcoming or not, and what difference this makes for them. It is not an evaluation of ABC's 'warm welcome' approach and is part of a wider piece of work. We will be gathering evidence from a range of stakeholders including delivery partners and funders, so they have not been included here. However, this research confirms that our approach is compatible with what older people need to feel comfortable about attending and returning to community activities. This has real impact on whether or not older people maintain attendance at community groups where there are opportunities to increase social contact and decrease loneliness.

The research highlights the following learning points.

Older people confirmed that whether a group is welcoming or not is a key factor in whether they return or maintain attendance in it.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Why are we interested in exploring the concept of a 'welcome'?

ABC assumes that certain approaches help older people feel more welcome in groups, and that this increases their enjoyment and maintains their attendance. As the ABC programme is in its final two years, we wanted to find out from older people whether this is indeed the case, and to provide evidence for future commissioners and providers of activities for older people.

What did we do?

The research aimed to gather older people's views on what makes groups welcoming or not, and what difference this makes for those attending. We ran a series of focus groups and interviews, speaking to 65 older people attending activities or receiving support from our delivery partners[1, 2]. Topic guides were designed to facilitate discussion of the following key areas:

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

Art class at Dragon Hall. Photo by Lydia Shellien-Walker

Focus groups and interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes, were audio-recorded[3] and transcripts analysed thematically. All quotations in this report are from members of community activities delivered by ABC partners[4].

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[1] We carried out eight focus groups with a total of 63 older people attending community activities in Camden. We also carried out individual interviews with two clients from Age UK Camden's Community Connectors, who had experienced additional barriers to attending community activities. Men were under-represented; six participants were male and 59 were female.

[2] The study adhered to GDPR requirements and the research ethics protocols of the Social Research Association.

[3] Except one individual interview.

[4] Participants' views do not necessarily reflect those of ABC.

What did we learn?

The remainder of this report outlines the findings from the research with older people. It will include:

- Why should we be working towards welcoming groups at all?
- What difference does the level of welcome make?
- What makes a group welcoming?
- How can we challenge unfriendliness in group activities?

Why should we be working towards welcoming groups at all?

The vast majority of older people thought it was critical that we should be specifically trying to make groups welcoming for older people. They suggested that older people do need more of a welcome than other groups, and this should not be seen as patronising or that they are not capable of accessing activities themselves, but because it is more important that they join. Many discussed that it is easy for older people to become isolated and stay at home, because they are less involved in work or family than in the past, and that this is associated with potential loneliness and ill health.

> *…because they need more of a welcome and it is more important they join … they need more attention, from staff, and within the group also you know.*

There were a few outliers, who felt it was up to individuals to make themselves comfortable, that groups didn't need to be "super-friendly" but agreed they need at least a few friendly faces and an enjoyable activity[5]. However, as will be discussed next, the impact of non-welcoming groups is that older people do not return, and this may have implications for their health and wellbeing.

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[5] Older people defined being welcoming as being friendly – they used the terms interchangeably.

What difference does the level of welcome make?

Enjoyment and sense of wellbeing

It is not surprising to hear that a welcoming and friendly group is more enjoyable and makes people feel more positive. Participants spoke of having fun, enjoying other people's **company, banter, laughter,** and enjoying the activities.

> *Firstly, you must enjoy what you are doing, and then the people, the people and the group that you are in…even if you don't feel like coming it's like, 'oh no I want to come, I have to come to see the people'.*

Enjoying the time spent in the groups made people **feel more positive and confident. Conversely, unfriendly groups impacted negatively on participants' wellbeing.**

> *I tried to go to different communities there and it wasn't very nice, I felt more depressed when I went home.*

> *If it's a friendly and happy group you are going to leave brightened up, you brighten up.*

Older people frequently raised the point that attending groups **enables them to get out of their homes**, to meet people, socialise and not be alone. Increased social contact in a friendly environment helps them to **feel less isolated** and encourages them to go out again as a result.

> *Because I come on my own, and you come to something like this to have a chat because otherwise you would go stir-crazy being indoors, it's nice to sort of get out.*

Several spoke of **making friends at activities**, with whom they socialise within the group session or, sometimes, outside of it. Regardless, when other people are engaged in activities, taking part and enjoying it then "you feel a part of it".

> *And you make good friends with the other women. If you all enjoy it then you're going to get on and then you'll become friends, you know.*

Continued attendance

Friendly groups encourage older people to return and potentially bring others along too, increasing group numbers and the reach of community activities.

> *We feel like to come back again, you know, that's the main thing if you want people to come to centres like this, you need more and more politeness you know.*

The vast majority of participants in this research indicated that **they will not attend a group again if it has been an unwelcoming experience.**

> *It's very upsetting, it's very upsetting if they are like that and I just think forget it, forget it.*

> *Because if you go somewhere where you feel you are not welcome, then you don't go again.*

Older People's Advisory Group at Ageing Better in Camden. Photo by Lydia Shellien-Walker

Some are more resilient than others and will continue to attend groups even if they feel unwelcoming, recognising the need to make an effort to stay engaged when older or be subject to isolation and loneliness. However, these tended to be participants who attend multiple community activities and demonstrated confidence in finding and trying new groups, indicating that even they may not attend unfriendly activities indefinitely.

> *Persevere, think sod them, you know, I want to come and enjoy myself, I'm not going to sit at home and watch bloody television.*

However, it is positive to note that most older people will not be deterred from attending other community activities. If they have experienced an unfriendly or unwelcoming group, most will continue to try to find a group that is welcoming, and where they can enjoy being with others, although a few may find this somewhat harder as a result of their previous negative experience.

I think if it's taken you great courage to go to that group in the first place and if it's not welcoming when you're going, it could put you off for quite a long while even turning up to a class.

Again, it should be noted that participants in the research are already engaged in community activities, with successful experiences of joining groups – others may not have the same experience or level of confidence to try again.

What makes a group welcoming?

Participants were asked to identify the key factors in whether a group activity was perceived as welcoming or not. They named a wide variety of contributing elements, which are particularly relevant to make newcomers welcome but also help to maintain a welcoming atmosphere for regular or established members.

The range of factors illustrates that **creating a welcoming atmosphere requires effort and resources from community partners** and does not necessarily happen incidentally or without planning. The following should be read as a guide for good practice for making older people welcome at community activities.

Key factors identified by older people were:

- A clear ethos and shared responsibility for being welcoming
- Introductions
- Refreshments
- Group size/staffing ratios
- Being aware of individual needs
- Seating arrangements
- Encouraging social interactions
- Developing relationships
- Fostering a sense of belonging
- Communication beyond group activities

A clear ethos and shared responsibility for being welcoming

The overarching facet is that every group needs to be built around an ethos that a welcoming and inclusive group is important. Being welcoming should be

the aim of all community activities. This recognition and ethos should ideally be set by management, implemented and modelled by the group facilitator, upheld by other staff and volunteers, and copied by group members. Creating a welcoming environment is everyone's responsibility, and all welcoming approaches and tasks stem from this.

It is clear from discussions with older people about the factors that make groups welcoming that a lot of responsibility rests on the **group facilitator** to manage this. They are the main person older people spend time with and, for them, the main face of the activity or organisation. They set the tone of how group members will relate to each other. This responsibility is the same whether for someone employed to coordinate several groups, within a centre for instance, or someone who is employed to teach a specific class or skill only.

While there was recognition that everyone should take some responsibility for making a group welcoming, it is the facilitator who needs to have an overview of how the approach is working in practice and to ensure it is happening on the ground on a continual basis.

> *So I think it's important for everybody to be aware if somebody is new or whatever, and I think it's the organiser's job to try to smooth the way.*

> *The person facilitating the group, they would notice, if they were good at their job, they would notice if this person is not really being included so again, the responsibility would be with that person.*

Older people from Ageless Thanet and We Are Ageing Better (Camden) play a game of boccia together

This is an ongoing responsibility for the duration of the activity/session which goes beyond the initial welcome. This must also be revisited over time to ensure that groups remain welcoming for newcomers and more established members alike.

Older people felt personality was critical to the facilitator role, suggesting

they need **humour, a positive attitude and a warm, caring, non-judgemental and encouraging personality**, in order to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

> *She has a lovely personality, she's incredibly warm, and if you don't understand she comes and she simplifies it, nothing is ever too much trouble for her.*

> *I think it's the leaders* [of the group] *who set the tone and keep a nice atmosphere and they're welcoming, and willing to introduce you to other people.*

Being neutral is also a key criterion – older people who had experienced conflict with others in groups reported they need impartiality. They appreciated facilitators who do not show favouritism and try to engage with everyone in the same way. One spoke of being supported by a facilitator who was not judgmental of either party, which, along with regular contact, enabled her to return to a group after an absence because of conflict with another member.

Several participants also spoke of facilitators needing to take responsibility for making sure everyone is included and acting if there is unfriendliness.

> *Well if you are the organiser, there you go, it's your responsibility, or how can you be here?*

There was some discussion about the degree to which participants are responsible for their own level of comfort in groups. A minority felt it was not the facilitator's responsibility. Participants felt **group members** must take some responsibility themselves.

> *It's also important to yourself how you interact with the others as well. If you are going to say, be indifferent, I mean you are here to show your enthusiasm in meeting others as well, it's very important, you can't isolate yourself and say nobody cared for me, nobody took care of me, you also have to reach out, it works both ways.*

Other staff also have roles to play. **Centre management** sets the ethos of the organisation, which is brought to life by the group facilitator, but ideally should

be a 'top-down' approach. Where management has direct contact with group members their approach can make members feel welcome and valued in a similar way to contact with facilitators.

> *Having someone like* [name] *at the helm of things is just, I mean she is just awesome, she knows her job very well, she executes it very well, and everybody plays a part in the running of the centre, and I think she is just so warm, she's a very warm person, she's a people person, and she manages the centre incredibly well and she has a supportive team behind her as well so the staff and everybody who comes into the centre plays a part as well.*

Reception staff are often the first point of contact for older people arriving at an activity. For those who are hesitant about joining, the interaction with reception staff can define whether they perceive a group as welcoming or not, and even influence whether they return. Participants felt it is important that reception staff should look directly at people arriving (rather than at their computers), ask names, help them to understand who everyone is and try to get to know people who come back regularly. Some also felt they should introduce or hand over newcomers to the facilitator and not leave them to find the activity space alone.

> *It's a barrier…. I think if you go to a place and somebody doesn't pay you much attention then it puts you off straight away.*

> *Yes, the first person you see when you go in a building and if they're polite and smiling at you, it sets the tone and you feel like you can go in.*

Participants didn't see any difference in roles for paid staff or **volunteers**, saying that everyone needs to play their part in making members welcome. The key factor is that someone, whatever their role, should meet and greet new arrivals, acknowledging them, smiling, and helping them to find where they need to be.

Introductions

Introductions are crucial when joining a community group. Participants usually expected that the facilitator of an activity would introduce new people to an existing group. All felt this was necessary for someone to feel welcome.

This was especially helpful in the initial moments of meeting a group, but many also expressed that knowing names facilitates ongoing conversation and helps people to have a sense of belonging in a group. So how groups handle introductions can have a longer lasting impact than might be initially understood.

> *If someone knows your name it breaks down a barrier.*

While facilitators should introduce all newcomers, participants reflected that there were a variety of ways this could be done; e.g. to one other person or to the whole group, names only or more background information, or through a blurb in a members' newsletter. Some had experienced community activities where all members gave their names at the beginning of the session; they felt this helped "break the ice" for everybody coming back together as well as helping those new to the group.

> *I think it's important just everybody, like for a child in a new school, when your coordinator, your teacher, or your tutor, takes you in hand and takes you to wherever and introduces you to everyone else, and makes you feel warm and welcome. That makes a lot of difference because when you come in you are very hesitant, you come in, you come here to meet, to join but if you are all alone you don't want to be isolated*

Refreshments

Refreshments are commonly available in community activities. Older people agreed these help people feel welcome in a group and offer an easy opportunity to speak to someone i.e. **saying hello and offering tea or coffee go hand in hand.** This was also a task that could be carried out by anyone in the group, not only the facilitator but by group members themselves; anyone can offer or make those arriving a tea or coffee or let them know they can help themselves.

> *Say come in, hello, have a coffee*

Group size/staffing ratio

Smaller groups are more welcoming; larger groups make it harder for participants to get to know each other.

> *A small community is always friendly, we know each other well, but when a group is larger you know, you can't…*

However, this may also be affected by staffing ratios; one group discussed that larger groups can still be welcoming as long as there are enough staff to spend time with participants.

Being aware of individual needs

While there are some basic tenets of providing a welcome to a group, the degree to which these are delivered may vary for different individuals. Participants reported that some people need more support from staff, and possibly the rest of the group, to feel welcome.

> *For some of us who are like that, we don't feel shy about reaching out and going forwards not waiting for the other one to come, but there are others who are a little bit more hesitant and I think we should make the effort to whoever it is to support them, should make a lot more effort to bring that person in, the coordinator should make that effort.*

For participants to feel like they 'fit' in a group, **facilitators need to be aware of different needs and adapt activities to suit**, whether this is physical, language-related or related to levels of experience. This may include facilitators explaining things to everyone individually if needed, going around the room checking to ensure all understand, or keeping an eye out for those who may need additional support or reassurance to feel welcome.

This is particularly important for new members joining an activity. For example, one participant found it easier to settle into a group with mixed abilities because the facilitator adjusted activities to meet the needs of a group with varied experience and expertise and checked on individuals throughout the session.

> *She tried to make it easy for me, to watch or try something else, or put me with someone who is in the same, so she adapt it so I don't go there and not know what I am doing. And I feel very easy, because I watch and this, slowly slowly, this week it comes.*

It also reflects that staff have taken time to get to know someone; knowing that someone has remembered something they spoke of makes people feel cared for and valued.

Seating arrangements

Participants made a number of suggestions around seating arrangements to maximise opportunities for conversation and friendly social interactions, including:

- **change the seating every week**, not allowing set places for people
- **use small tables instead of one long table**, so people can talk more easily to each other
- **use circular seating** so people can face each other, see others' faces and make eye contact, which is more conducive to talking and interaction
- **use small group activities to break up larger groups**, or to force people to change tables so they move around and mix with others in the wider group

One participant identified seating as the key point of difference in two groups, where the same two individuals are either friendly to and communicate with the whole group or only talk to each other.

> *It's like this is a circle, with people all around, everyone is included. The seating's very important. If it's a table there, and a table here, a table there, some people will be excluded… in the circular table they have no choice.*

North London Cares older and younger neighbours spend time together in a garden. Photo by North London Cares

Many older people had experienced informal reserved seating when arriving at groups, where they had not been able to easily find a seat because people were saving seats for others. It seems this is not uncommon where people have been attending groups for an extended period and seating arrangements (perhaps naturally) have become established. Focus group participants had mixed feelings about this: while some accepted it as

just part of people wanting to sit with their friends, and discuss things they have in common, no-one found it comfortable or welcoming.

Facing reserved seating was particularly challenging during participants' first visits to activities, and when arriving on their own. Managing seating would also help to prevent 'cliques' forming; this will be discussed on page 21.

> *But nobody actually said to me, nobody was kind enough to say to me, 'Oh hi, you're new, we have this', or 'normally so and so sits here but come and sit with us'. Nobody said that.*

In theory participants agreed that group attendees shouldn't reserve seating because this is not welcoming to others, and it can create unnecessary conflict. However, they also wanted to be able to sit in their usual seats at certain groups, either because of friendship or sometimes because they help specific people with difficulties e.g. Parkinson's or disability. The consensus was that all group members need to be patient, and that organisers can help by being aware of seating issues, finding seats for newcomers and making introductions, and intervening to prevent or resolve any conflict which arises over seating. Some thought facilitators shouldn't necessarily outlaw reserved seating but only allow this if they can ensure seating is more flexible when needed and mitigate any seating-related conflict.

> *The teacher, the teacher needs to say come and sit down, and say welcome, and* [claps hands] *that's it, you are welcome in this place, you can sit here, what we are going to do today is… and notice, it's just that concern.*

Encouraging social interactions

Many older people attend group activities in order to socialise with others, rather than spend their day alone. Integral to this is **conversation**. It helps people feel connected, lifts their mood and encourages them to return. Older people suggested group settings lend themselves to conversations and initial conversations generate possibilities for more. For facilitators this can assist when making introductions to others.

> *The organiser could introduce each other, smooth the way a bit, maybe ask a few questions like 'What do you like doing? Oh so and so over there*

plays x as well let me introduce you' perhaps, so really it's taking the time to get to know the people who come, to start with.

Staff should be aware however, that though the vast majority of older people want to talk to others, some may not. Participants acknowledged that there is sometimes a balance between trying to make someone feel included and being intrusive.

You don't want to be interrogated, not too much, but just enough to make you feel, because sometimes especially if you're a bit shy you might just want to slip into the class and not be too intrusive but just have someone smile and say hello.

I'm often quite moody and don't feel like chatting, and one particular group I go to, the teacher at the end will always ask me how I am, and what's happening for me and that makes me feel very much safer, if I haven't managed to be cheerful and chat to people and that's ok, the teacher makes that kind of connection with me.

For this reason, it is critical that community groups set out to encourage social interaction as sometimes it doesn't happen naturally, but also be aware of different personalities and needs in the group. Older people made several suggestions on how to encourage interaction.

Having someone, usually a facilitator or volunteer, who encourages conversation or social interactions helps to create an atmosphere and an ethos that people talk to each other in this setting.

Light-hearted activities and humour (e.g. dance, theatre, exercise, icebreakers) create a certain atmosphere which may be more welcoming or friendlier, by generating jokes or shared laughter at something the group is doing.

…it's the way you feel, the minute you walk through the door you feel welcome. It's lovely, you know, there's a lot of banter going on. The banter, there's lovely banter going on, all of us talking and saying 'oi you' and you know.

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Design activities to include opportunities for social interaction. Some activities allow a great deal of conversation at the same time e.g. craft activities, while others mean individuals are task-focused, and may need additional opportunities, such as scheduled trips, or a dedicated time for tea/coffee at the end of a session.

What makes a big difference is if there is a place to sit and have a cup of tea…[place name] *where I'm going for a class now is lovely, there's sunshine, there's tea, there's cushions to lean against and you can linger* [after the class] *and chat, because it's often the only thing you go out for in the day when you're older.*

Developing relationships

Many participants in focus groups reported that getting to know each other creates a friendly and welcoming atmosphere they want to return to. This ranges from people expressing concern for each other during activities to friendships where people see each other outside groups. Relationships develop through the opportunities for social interaction described above, as participants recognise each other, ask after each other, notice if someone is not well, and are remembered if they have not attended the group for a while.

Sometimes when someone doesn't turn up when they do come the following session, someone will ask 'so what happened to you, where were you?' so you've got that camaraderie going on.

Participants felt a central role for either the facilitator or centre manager is encouraging such interest in others, agreeing that groups feel more welcoming and supportive where someone in the organisation sets out to get to know members beyond just knowing their names. This type of **staff involvement and engagement with older people generates relationship building and trust.** Participants identified a number of factors which contribute to this:

- **Time.** Facilitators need time to talk to members, beyond an initial hello or passing comment, to talk about participants' lives and show an interest in what they say. This is easier at an activity which is self-managing e.g. crafts, where facilitators may have more opportunity to spend time with individuals or small groups within the session but could also take place

during time at either end. For example, as mentioned, one group shares a treat after their exercise class, where the centre manager and facilitator are present to chat around the room

- **Remembering and revisiting details**, e.g. when a family member is visiting or unwell, builds relationships and helps people feel valued and part of the group or community
- **Staff and volunteers joining in the activity** means that they are physically present and available to talk to individuals as well as to encourage conversation in a group
- **Staff setting the ethos – modelling the approach** of talking to others and encouraging others to join conversations where appropriate. Participants felt when staff do this well this approach will be followed by everyone else
- Staff should prioritise **talking to those who are new** to a group, to make them feel welcome, but it is the **ongoing conversations** which help people feel part of the group community. This encourages people to settle in as well as to return in the future.

Fostering a sense of belonging

Abbey Community Centre CHAPs group play a game of dominoes. Photo by Abbey Community Centre.

Groups can bond over a similar interest, for example talking about different approaches to a craft, or all being beginners at an activity. This can be encouraged by the facilitator to help create a "team spirit". Involving group participants in the planning of future activities or sessions may generate a sense of ownership too.

Volunteering can also help people feel settled in a group and encourage them to take some responsibility for helping others to feel welcome. Some focus group participants volunteered in some capacity at community organisations, as well as being group participants. Their roles enabled opportunities for them to talk to group members and staff, e.g. when making reminder phone calls, and contributed to a sense of responsibility or ownership of the activity or venue. One participant joining community activities for the first time

immediately offered to volunteer at his community centre, as a way of feeling comfortable taking part. He found working alongside staff was an easy and welcoming experience, and he saw his role as helping others to enjoy trips and outings.

Communication beyond group activities

There were mixed views about the form and level of communication older people want from organisations running community activities. Many received weekly texts or phone calls for activities they regularly attend; the majority welcomed reminders, they were especially helpful for those with memory issues, and for some, were an indication that they are remembered and viewed as a member of a group. Only a few older people felt such reminders were not necessary, that individuals can access information and manage their diaries themselves, but none found such communication intrusive or objectionable.

The preferred format for being contacted varied – **either phone calls or texts were acceptable.** Some groups also have a **WhatsApp group**. Phone calls allowed a more personal approach and conversation but may be less convenient for some than a text, which does not need to be answered immediately nor require voicemail services. One participant valued text reminders but felt phone calls amounted to pressure to attend.

> *It's fantastic because I am a person who forgets very easily so it helps me a lot.*

> *I get a call before every exercise class, because I'm a person who needs pushing, and they are fantastic to push me to go.*

The reminder phone call could also act as a way of checking in with participants – several of whom felt comforted by this because they lived alone.

> *When you live on your own, I might have had a heart attack last night, and she's ringing me up to say are you coming, and no answer, alarm bells and I love that, that feeling that I am wanted and welcome.*

When asked how they would feel if called after an absence, some felt this indicated a level of concern and helped them feel cared for and part of a community or connected to the group.

Because you are wanted there, and somebody is missing you… And that gives you a great confidence.

Made me feel good that someone actually cares, I was valued as a member of the group.

Groups discussed that they will usually tell the organisation if they were not coming, so many felt in theory this was unnecessary. Several said they would feel embarrassed or apologetic if called when they had missed a class; they had never been in a situation where they felt they needed this type of contact.

No, it's not necessary I don't think. It's only one week. If you were missing for weeks then maybe.

How can we challenge unfriendliness in group activities?

Many of the factors discussed work to create a welcoming atmosphere and therefore circumvent unfriendliness. When asked specifically how to prevent unfriendliness older people named factors such as buddy systems, friendly faces, seating arrangements, and facilitators setting the ethos of friendliness and acceptance within groups.

However, the main form of unfriendliness experienced by older people in group settings is being faced by established groups of people who know each other, and who are not welcoming to newcomers. Such 'cliques' are usually synonymous with reserved seating. Many had experienced cliques and had felt excluded from an activity as a result.

You've got a clique, and they don't want anyone coming into their little gang. It's a gang, it's as simple as that, you know like youngsters have gangs, well these are old people that's got gangs.

Whilst older people felt it is easier to prevent than challenge or change unfriendliness, they did share some thoughts about addressing unfriendliness if it occurs. Overall there was a sense of a shared responsibility for tackling

unfriendliness in groups although participants felt staff, specifically facilitators, have ultimate responsibility to mitigate the impact of unfriendliness on the wider group. Strategies may vary whether unfriendly behaviour is exhibited by one person or several. Some practical suggestions included[6]:

- All members and staff **encouraging conversation and inclusion** in all groups
- **Make extra efforts to attempt to build a relationship with someone who is not friendly**, to gauge how they can be supported, find common interests, and hope that they will become more friendly as a result
- The facilitator or manager taking the person aside and **reiterating the ethos of being welcoming to others** and what that means in practice
- The ethos of the group being formally acknowledged via a **code of behaviour** – this can be used as a tool if behaviour needs to be challenged at some point
- **Changing seating around**, introducing small group activities, and/or ice breaker activities to mix up groups and introduce humour and fun
- **Ignoring unfriendliness where possible** – realising that not everyone is friendly or that people may be experiencing difficulties which cause them to act in an unfriendly way, so accepting people as they are
- **Challenging existing cliques** by changing seating arrangements, supporting communication and inclusion throughout the group.

Conclusion

This research explored older people's views of what makes community groups welcoming and why this matters. 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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[6] Future research will explore these suggestions from providers' perspective.