



Learning from Chat and Splash

Ageing Better in Birmingham aims to create a new movement of community action on ageing and isolation using a grassroots, asset-based approach. By harnessing active citizenship, the programme aims to reduce isolation among people over 50 and to prevent it happening in the future. This case study illustrates how one of the projects supported by Ageing Better in Birmingham, Chat and Splash, has helped to improve the lives of older people, as well as adding benefit to the wider community.

About Chat and Splash

Chat and Splash is a group for women that meets once a week at Moseley Road Baths in Balsall Heath. Sessions comprise of a class in English language skills, followed by an hour's swim. The group's founder, who has experience of teaching English

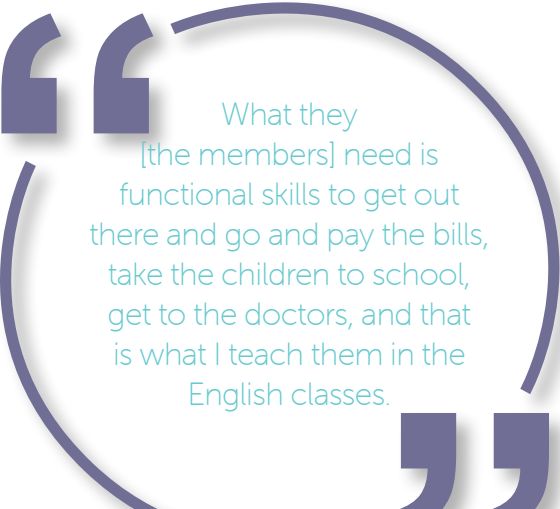
as a second language and as a swim instructor, was approached by trustees of the Moseley Road Baths to provide additional support for non-English speaking women who were attending Birmingham City Council's Be Active swimming lessons at the baths.

The group has grown considerably since it was established. Initially

starting with six participants, 41 women now attend, the maximum capacity the swimming pool can host at any one time.

Chat and Splash is attended by women with diverse backgrounds and from many different countries, including Ukraine, Egypt, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Iraq, Somalia and Syria. Over half the women are aged over 50. Some of the women have been in the UK many years, yet have not socialised a great deal outside their own homes. Others have recently arrived as refugees or asylum seekers.

A lack of spoken English can contribute to feelings of loneliness and social isolation. The English class focuses on providing the women with practical skills to help them in their everyday lives.



What they
[the members] need is
functional skills to get out
there and go and pay the bills,
take the children to school,
get to the doctors, and that
is what I teach them in the
English classes.

A steering committee meets every 6 to 8 weeks and members make suggestions and vote on activities they would like to do, for example, arts and crafts.

About Moseley Road Baths

Moseley Road Baths is a Grade II listed Edwardian swimming pool in Balsall Heath. The baths were under threat of closure for many years. Local people grouped together to take over the pool as a community-run swimming facility. Moseley Road Baths Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) was set up at the end of 2017. The baths help to ensure that the people of Balsall Heath, a deprived area of Birmingham, can continue to enjoy swimming, fitness and wellbeing activities that would otherwise be unavailable to them. The CIO trustees are members of the local community and regular swimmers and the pool is run by a mixture of volunteers and paid staff, so community engagement is an important element in keeping the baths open.

Support from Ageing Better in Birmingham

Chat and Splash successfully applied for funding from the Ageing Better Fund. This enabled them to set up the first 15-week programme of English classes and swimming. The funding was used to hire the room for classes, book the pool and buy snacks for the women. The group leader is experienced at running community groups but still appreciated the support, advice and encouragement from the Ageing Better in Birmingham Network Enabler, who could help connect the group to other community activities and resources.

"She's been absolutely fantastic. [...] I think she's key because she has an overview of what else is happening in Birmingham [...] Very supportive, very positive, always available."

Ingredients for success

Chat and Splash has been successful in attracting women from a diverse range of backgrounds because they are particularly sensitive to their cultural and religious needs and preferences. Moseley Road Baths changed their timetable to ensure that no school groups are present while the women have their swimming lesson. A female staff member is on reception to greet them and the instructor and lifeguard are always female. Creating a women-only space

has been really important in encouraging the women to come along.

It does make us more relaxed it's women only, wherever we go, not just swimming. Some of the women in my group, if there is a man coming to a class to learn Arabic or English, they will not feel comfortable.



Some potential members initially lacked the confidence to attend. In order to relieve any concerns, members were encouraged to bring a female family member (usually daughters and daughters-in-law) to participate in the session and support them. This was appreciated by many of the older women and was a key factor in attracting them to the activity and sustaining their involvement. Members have since grown in confidence, in both their language skills and attending the baths and so no longer feel the need to have their family with them. The group cultivates a sense of community and mutual support among members, with more able

women supporting their peers, whether that be with swimming or English.

Those running groups need to be 'open and curious' about participants in order to understand their needs and preferences. The Chat and Splash group lead gets into the pool to interact with the women and make them feel welcome and included. Learning about their circumstances and history also means she is in a stronger position to support them.

Holding the sessions in a familiar community space like Moseley Road Baths means people feel comfortable attending and it is within walking distance for

locals. Membership is flexible and participants can just 'drop in' so that if they have to miss a week for whatever reason, they do not lose their place on the course.

Impact

Chat and Splash has had a positive impact on those attending the sessions, on Moseley Road Baths and the wider community.

Impact on participants

The group provides opportunities for learning, fun and friendships. These different elements contribute to a sense of emotional wellbeing for members, as well as the physical health benefits of regular exercise.

Some of the group members have had traumatic past experiences and have sought asylum in the UK. Some have grown up without the opportunity to learn and play as a child. The sessions are designed to provide emotional support, give participants space to support one another and most importantly, have fun.



The experienced swimmers help the non-swimmers and there's a nice sense of fun and playfulness. I like that. It's good to see them having opportunities just to let go of all their other worries and troubles and responsibilities. Have a bit of time for them.

Many members have felt socially isolated. The group provides them with opportunities to socialise and feel connected to other women and the wider community. Real friendships have developed as a result.

The group has also enabled the women to try new things and discover their capabilities. They have grown in confidence as a result and some have subsequently gone on to take up courses at local colleges to retrain for work or join other community groups.

Shaima's experience

Shaima has been attending Chat and Splash since Autumn 2019. She found out about the group through a friend. All her children are grown up and most of her time is spent alone. Her understanding of English is limited and consequently she finds it difficult to communicate by phone or social media and even, at times, with her children.

She enjoys attending Chat and Splash as she is able to socialise with women of similar background and age to her, away from some of the pressures of everyday life. Here she can share her problems and learn new things from other women. She particularly enjoys the swimming aspect of the group and looks forward to this every week. Overall the group has helped her to feel happier.

"We need the swimming, everybody needs to exercise because we can't go anywhere, you understand? This is a big effort for us, because we've got to speak English. ... We've got the swimming and we are happier."



Hawah's experience

Hawah is retired and has a lot of spare time. Chat and Splash provides her with the only opportunity to meet new people and socialise. As a former teaching assistant at a primary school, Hawah does not need the English classes but comes along to support her friends.

"For some of us, the socialising is the main thing. We come in the morning to have a chat, talk about relatives back home, what's happening in Birmingham. [...] For us, it's just excellent."

As well as learning to swim, Hawah has seen a positive improvement in her health and physical fitness. She values the group's respect for her religious beliefs by providing a women-only swimming class. She feels she is able to enjoy herself without worrying.

Through attending Chat and Splash Hawah has made new friends. She has joined a WhatsApp group to keep in touch and is planning to meet up with members outside the group.

Impact on Moseley Road Baths and the local community

The success of Chat and Splash has also made a difference to the baths and the wider community.

Moseley Road Baths is a listed building requiring ongoing repairs and maintenance. Groups like Chat and Splash that use the baths are an important source of income. The popularity of Chat

and Splash prompted the baths to add five sessions of women-only swimming per week.

This has increased the volume of people paying to use the facilities. The baths also decided to employ a swimming instructor and offer lessons, which has helped to further broaden its offer to the community.

The involvement of Chat and Splash has helped the baths

become a more inclusive space for women. Staff are now more aware of the women's specific needs, whether around privacy or the need to ensure that activities are flexible enough to accommodate religious events such as Ramadan, where members may be fasting.

A lot of them spoke about how relaxing it [creating the paintings] was [...] We've got different life experience, different languages, different cultures, different levels of understanding of English. Something like arts and crafts is very unifying, because it's its own language in a way. You don't need to speak English to paint a picture.

I think the people in Moseley Road Baths and this community working with these women learn from them and that really helps break down barriers, stereotypes, all kinds of often false ideas about what we should or shouldn't expect from a certain person. Say a woman walking in wearing a full hijab sort of thing.

These women have a rightful place in the space here.

As word about Chat and Splash has spread, members of other women's community groups have started to attend. This connection between community groups has also led to conversations about funding opportunities and working together in future.

The baths have also provided additional opportunities for Chat and Splash members. The baths worked with local artists to create an animated film to celebrate the reopening of the Gala Pool. The women from the Chat and Splash group all contributed paintings for the film.

This type of collaboration has helped the baths to develop stronger connections to local community groups. As a result, they are able to reach more people in the local area, which in turn supports them as a charitable organisation to generate more income.



...this has become
a real hub and meeting point.
Not just for personal friendships
but also for community groups
to meet each other. There's a lot
of criss-crossing going on now.
It is just growing and growing, it's
wonderful

Looking to the future

The Ageing Better funding ended in November 2019, however, the success of the programme has encouraged Moseley Road Baths CIO to secure additional funding from other sources. They have secured two years of funding from The Active Wellbeing Society and recruited a Women's Community Development Officer. The Officer will work one day a week to help organise activities and trips for the women and do outreach work with local GPs and schools. The aim is to maintain the support for the women who attend the group and help broaden their horizons by providing additional activities.



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 reducing isolation and loneliness and improving wellbeing for people over 50 across the city. It is funded by a £6million, six-year grant from The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It is delivered by a partnership of voluntary and community sector organisations led by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) and is part of the six-year (2015-2021) Ageing Better national strategic programme.

Further information and useful contacts

Ageing Better in Birmingham

www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk

Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC)

www.bvsc.org

Moseley Road Baths:

<https://moseleyroadbaths.org.uk/>

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