Growing Sustainable Groups

with the Age of Experience group

in Birmingham

AGEING BETTER **IN** BIRMINGHAM

COMMUNITY FUND

bvsc
the centre for voluntary action

Growing sustainable groups takes time and it's vital to involve people with lived experience; co-production is vital to growing a sustainable group.

The Age of Experience group members share their top tips for starting and sustaining community groups.

The Age of Experience group is a group of 20 – 25 individuals that meet every other month to discuss topics related to social isolation and loneliness in Birmingham and to undertake activities that help shape important elements of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme.

Top Tips for starting a community group

Be helpful towards others.

Have the ability to listen and not just hear.

A group will be successful if members are engaged and interested.

Make sure you work together as a group towards the same goal.

Support and be fair to all, and welcome people from all faiths, backgrounds and cultures.

Develop activities that are inclusive of all faiths and culture.

Members should have the opportunity to gain and share knowledge and skills and the opportunity to develop new skills.

All members should feel valued and all have the opportunity to contribute.

Ensure timings of meeting and the venue/location are accessible to members.

It helps to have support from statutory organisations and the council.

Be patient, it takes time to gain trust.

- Remember the group belongs to the members and not to one individual.

- Be flexible and prepared to modify in light of changing circumstances.

- "The whole is often greater than the sum of its parts".

Ways to support groups to be sustainable

Proactive members
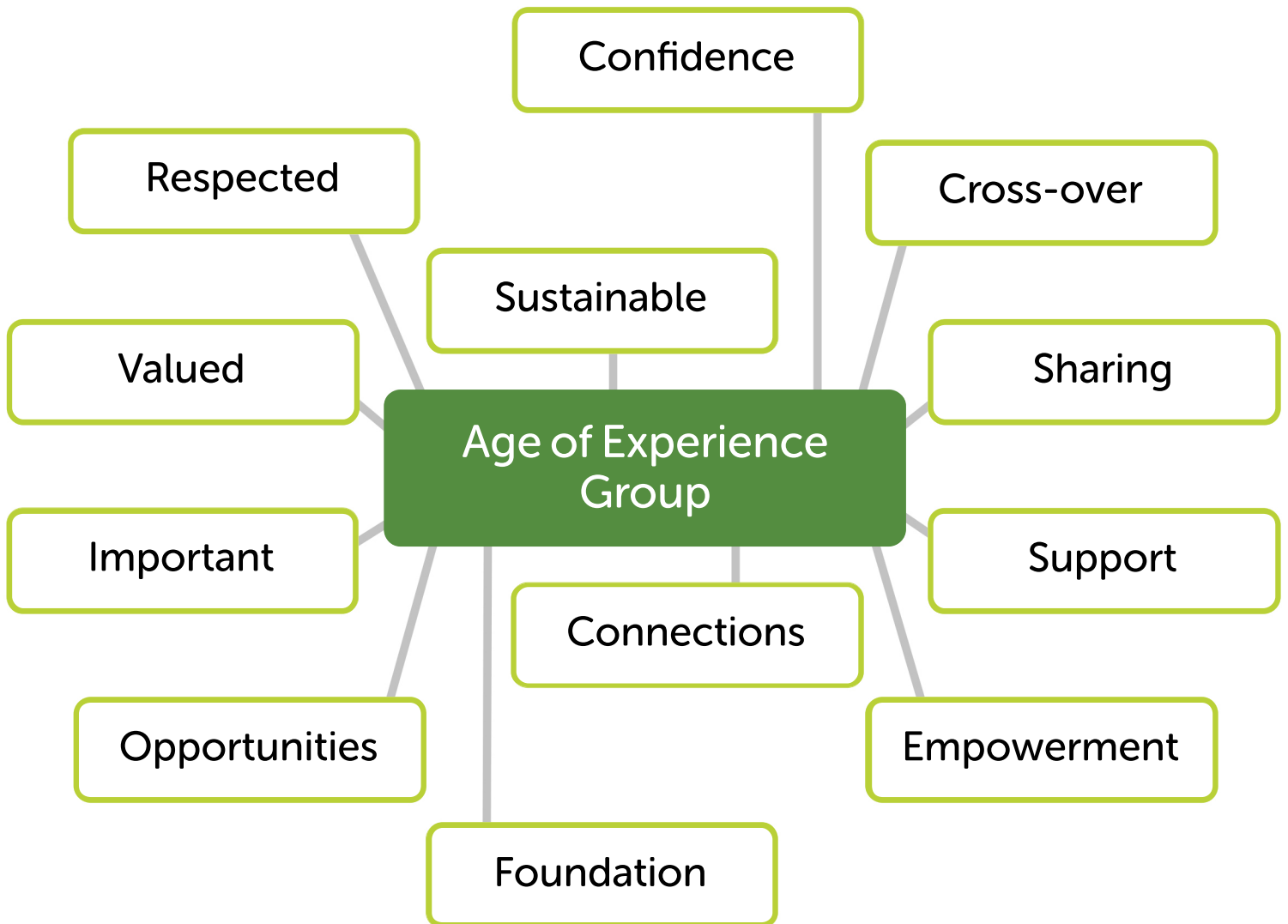
Good community links

Relationship building

Knowledge of different types of funding streams

Not relying on one person – building a network, team work

Research other successful groups

Contribution from participants

Confidence

Respected

Cross-over

Sustainable

Valued

Sharing

Age of Experience Group

Important

Support

Connections

Opportunities

Empowerment

Foundation

Why did they join the group?

- Experience
- Helping
- Meeting people
- Knowledge
- Learning
- Get together
- Value of senior citizens
- Sharing
- Keep the brain sharp
- Share skills
- Friendship
- To give back to the community
- To help out
- Because I was invited
- To get involved in something different
- Different challenge as was newly retired
- Connect with people
- Share stories
- Diversity of different people
- Take positive action (more than a social group)
- To give new things a go
- To be involved in things that matter to me

What have they gained from joining the group?

- Kept brain sharp
- Experiences
- Value
- Sharing
- Stimulation
- New friendships
- Leadership
- Make things better for other people (charity)
- Feeling of value and being able to give my contribution
- New skills
- Knowledge
- Readjustment
- New ways of looking at things
- Involvement
- Making use of my brain
- Seeing people differently
- New experiences through engagement with diverse groups
- Listening skills
- Loving without judgement
- Confidence to share my opinions

Ageing Better in Birmingham's Co-Production Model

AGEING BETTER HUBS: BVSC, who leads the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme, partnered with organisations across the city. One key part of the programme was the creation of "Ageing Better Hubs". The hubs are led by organisations with knowledge of the communities the programme is working with, and are responsible for promoting, developing and supporting Ageing Better community groups. There are five hubs in total, four of which focus on priority communities: older carers, the older LGBT community, inner-city Sparkbrook and outer-city Tyburn.

NETWORK ENABLERS: Network Enablers are trained to advise and support active citizens to create new and develop existing community groups and activities for the benefit of socially isolated people over 50. Enablers are based within the five hubs and give a local presence and a point of call for members of the community.

AGE OF EXPERIENCE GROUP: Meetings allow individuals to share their experiences, contribute to decision making and take an active part in developing the programme. The group's active contributions ensure that the voices and experiences of older people are at the heart of Ageing Better.

Link to Ageing Better in Birmingham's Vision and Key Messages report

Link to an Ageing Better in Birmingham Co-Pro Briefing Paper: Involving Older People in Creating Services & Activities

My visit to an
Age of Experience meeting

6th February 2020, by Vicky O'Donoghue

18 Age of Experience group members attended, representing a diverse range of older people across Birmingham including the Asian, Black and LGBTQ communities, as well as older people with a range of disabilities. Also in attendance were the Network Enablers from each of the Ageing Better hubs and volunteers who provide support for participants, such as reading notes, supporting access and organising transport. One member is profoundly deaf, and doesn't use sign language so all presenters were asked to stand facing her so that she could lip read. A microphone was used to ensure that everyone could hear the presentations and discussions clearly and it was used to pose any questions from members in attendance.

On the agenda was the annual celebration of people over 50, an event the Age of Experience group has named as "Spring Forward". The 2020 event was due to take place at the Library of Birmingham in March 2020.

Spring Forward 2020

Members involved in the Spring Forward steering group gave an update on how planning was taking shape. This included updates on the co-ordination of a marketplace for exhibitors, an overview of what participants could expect, details on the venue and the travel options to get there. They also talked about plans for a wellbeing walk to be led by the Canal & River Trust. This was an idea they had taken from the Ageing Better Conference hosted in Sheffield the year prior. Members were keen to ensure good

access to the venue, including participants with mobility scooters, and noted that Network Enablers would support this. The event would include workshops focussing on different aspects of age-friendly activities, celebrating opportunities available across the city and promoting positivity around ageing.

The event was also going to coincide with the launch of a behaviour-change campaign developed together with members of the Age of Experience group, called Make Someone's Day.

Promotional material
https://forwardcarers.org.uk/spring-forward/

https://www.ageuk.org.uk/bp-assets/globalassets/sandwell/original-blocks/about-us/latest-news/spring-forward-2020.pdf

*NB Unfortunately the 2020 event couldn't go ahead due to COVID-19, and the group is planning on holding the event later in the year instead.

The meeting also focussed on the launch of the Make Someone's Day campaign and members gave an update about photography and filming members of the Age of Experience group. The film focuses on casual conversations and ways in which people can make themselves open to "having a conversation" as a way of connecting with other people, with top tips from the Age of Experience members such as "switch off your phone, look up, take time to talk to people you haven't spoken to before".

As the event was due to take place as the country entered the first lockdown in sporing 2020, the event had to be cancelled and the Make Someone's Day campaign launch moved online, changing its messaging to focus on the importance of reaching out to

socially isolated people over the phone, by text messages and video-calls.

Link to the campaign:
www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk/makesomeonesday

Hub updates
Next up were updates from the five Ageing Better hubs. Here's a snapshot of the diverse range of activity:

Citywide hub
Organised an intergenerational afternoon at a local school for Age of Experience members, activities as part of International Men's Women's Day and supported a new over 50's cookery club.

Tyburn
Working on applications to Birmingham's micro fund (Ageing Better Fund), supported groups such as Tyburn Walking football, a new yoga group and circulating winter blues advice among their community groups.

Sparkbrook
Supported new activities: Ancient Village cooking group, IT groups with non-English speakers, an art group for Pakistani Women, weekly calligraphy sessions for local women from the Yemeni community, supported data collection for the AB programme around cultural assumptions and digital skills, an intergenerational book club for the older Arabic and Urdu speaking community, working with people in the community to tackle health inequalities.

Carers Hub

Engaged carers to complete a questionnaire to get feedback and opinions – realising the difficulties and complexity of getting people to complete something as simple as a questionnaire.

LGBT Hub

A local theatre group called Acting Out recently lost their practice and performance venue which has been as important as a 'home' for them and are now raising funds to find a suitable alternative. This hub takes a lead on enabling new and existing LGBT groups. Groups focus on story sharing, abuse, discrimination and arrange events to help raise awareness. They welcome AB members and are an uplifting and non-discriminatory group.

Feeding back on "developing campaigns" training

Network Enablers then gave feedback on training they had attended on developing campaigns, which included things such as the importance of setting up aims, thinking about when is the "right time" to launch a campaign, how to link in with Local Authorities to promote and engage with campaigns and much more.

There was also a programme update from Ageing Better in Birmingham central team staff which included some statistics:

The programme had at this point engaged with **8,701 people** across Birmingham, **3,000 participants** expressed an **increase in their wellbeing** and **3,108 people** expressed an **increase in resilience.**

The group then enjoyed a lunch and the opportunity to chat with each other. The afternoon session included a guest visit from a

guest visit from a local project called There's No Place Like Home, a collaboration with Groundwork West Midlands and Home from Hospital Care which focussed on energy efficiency, and support for those on low incomes.

Feedback from the Age of Experience Group

How have you got involved in the co-production of Ageing Better in Birmingham and what has this meant to you?

What have been some of the moments that have stood out for you? (Bravest moments)

Members said:

"I got involved through my GP surgery through a group called Healthy Friends via a diabetic nurse. Healthy Friends ended and the leader thought I'd be good at this. I broke down due to loneliness and didn't want to be here anymore, but now I have regular activities and friends!"

"I got involved after being made redundant and when I found out about the Age of Experience group, I wanted to offer my experience and knowledge."

Age of Experience members

"I got involved through the LGBT centre, it's enabled me to be more positive about myself and improved my mental and physical health."

"It is a very good group – good hubs and something is happening in each area of Birmingham. I wanted to get involved to help and assist those groups who need my skills – ensuring that our well wishes are out there!"

Birmingham Pride 2019

What specific themes do you think have emerged through the work of the Age of Experience group that has supported the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme?

- Accessibility of funding for smaller groups

- Involving people in decision making and how to organise a group the size of the Age of Experience Group with representatives across Birmingham and how to make it work!

- Being understood in meaningful ways where "everybody" matters!

- Understanding what helps people to cope, being able to take part and build resilience

- Building a network of what is available across the city and sharing that through mini hubs – not working in silos

- How to develop a group that represents the citizens of an area or region to allow the sharing of ideas

- Sharing skills and how to do better with the Local Authority and assist in how to listen, share skills and do co-production well

- A voice to make what is available better – through the city-wide hubs; being able to reach people across the whole of Birmingham

Age of Experience members

Feedback from the Hubs
on their experiences of co-production
over the course of the programme

Maria – LGBT Hub

What's important?

It is important to build trust, due to our track record in community development we are trusted and have built relationships with a range of different people. We were able to support and reassure and help put people at ease, supporting people's nervousness to apply for funding at a grassroots level. It's important to be reassuring, sincere and to support with planning. Reputation is key!

Key challenges

As a hub we helped to manage any conflict amongst group members, facilitating the drawing up and implementation of basic ground rules to ensure sustainability. We discussed different themes every 6 weeks or so and chatted through any issues. We shared ideas around arising issues such as numbers dropping off, openly sharing any trickiness and encouraging and helping each other through. (A kind of self-mediation around different dynamics and personalities). Always coming back to why the group set up in the first place – and keeping that focus.

Hannah – City Wide Hub

What's important?

We made sure that people understood what it means to be community led and to uphold the citizen led criteria; ensuring that everyone had a part to play and a crucial role. We held meetings

with groups to talk things through and drew out and listened to ideas from our community, taking in to account different personalities and dynamics.

Roles and responsibilities were delegated in terms of who would most like to take lead roles and/or active roles within a range of different activities. This included visually impaired yoga, setting up social groups and incorporating a buddying system. We drew out ideas by finding out what people's interests are, determining what the aim of the different activities would be and then asking what can you bring to this? We encouraged those interested to believe in themselves and reiterated the message of sustainability, also emphasising that the overall aim was to ensure that all funded grassroots activities would be self-managed.

Challenges

There were some complications around managing groups expectations. It was important to be flexible and to adapt to the needs to change the way that activities were delivered. One example of this is the funding of a Gardening Club activity which was delayed due to weather restrictions and the planned activity had to be put on hold until the spring. The learning from this is was that we could create different ways of delivering an activity, in this case in the interim, the group prepared for the activity to take place inside as in URBAN style garden, using the time to plan and create ideas. It is therefore always a good idea to have a contingency plan in place to ensure that you can be flexible in your approach.

The Network Enabler's Key Considerations for Developing Citizen Led Activities:

- Fostering autonomy

- Supporting groups to navigate their way through from the get-go!

- Promote peer led group activity

- Ensure that groups think long term and think about what they want to achieve – focusing on the BIGGER PICTURE

- Provide resources around tapping into other funding streams

- Facilitate an Asset Based Community approach

- Ageing Better already have an influence in the local communities, network with other neighbourhood schemes to create collaboration and sharing

- Clearly define expectations around groups of people working together and what needs to happen for that to work well

- As part of the bigger picture embedding health & wellbeing and social exclusion within group activities

- Share what we do wider within other neighbourhoods to promote our approach and encourage other communities to embed our approach

- Delivering public launches to support our pioneered model with the aim to mainstream this approach across the city

- We keep focused on doing what local people wanted and keep an eye on the wider network to see what's happening

- Working closely other community funding schemes (who award local groups funding to help them grow their activities)

Video: How to grow sustainable community groups

Click this link to see more learnings from
the Age of Experience group:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=sV40p24joH4