



Coproducing with diverse communities

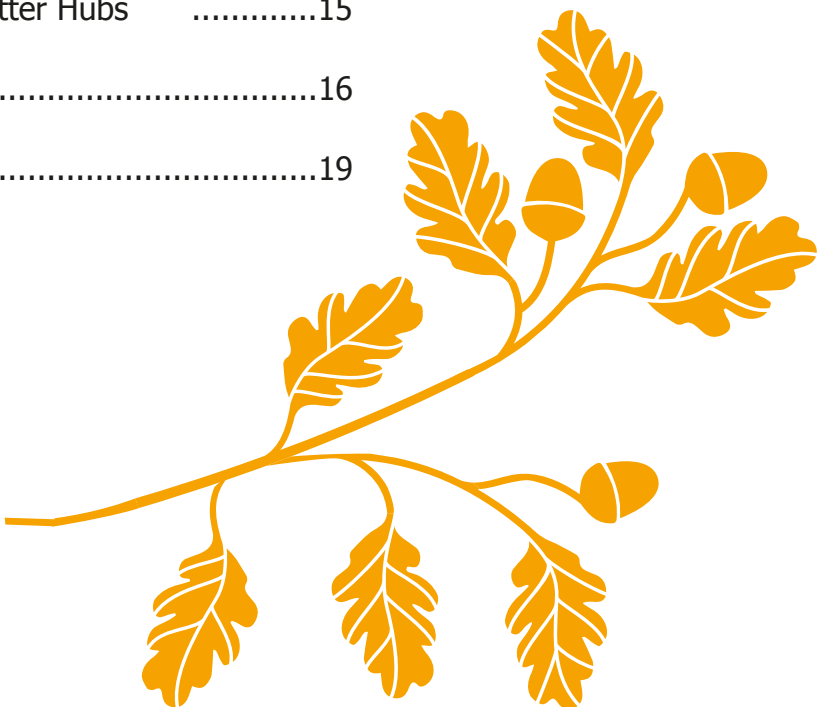


Introduction

This document gives a brief overview of Ageing Better in Birmingham and how the programme was co-produced and delivered with older people in this super-diverse city. It explores how we structured the programme and some of the ways we approached creating an inclusive environment. We hope it offers some insights and ideas for working with and reaching people from a variety of backgrounds.

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ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

“ Put simply, we wanted Birmingham to become a better place in which to age. ”



Ageing Better in Birmingham worked to reduce social isolation for people over 50.

We created a new movement for community action on ageing and isolation that harnessed active citizenship to reduce isolation and prevent it from happening in the future. Our approach emphasised mutual aid, community action, and preventative interventions.

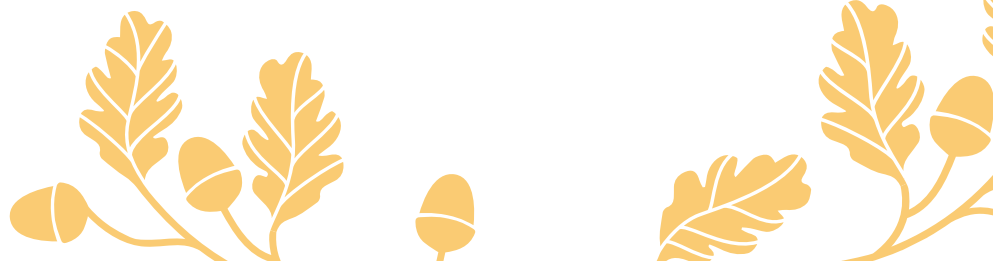


The programme was funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and delivered in partnership with different organisations across the city, led by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC).



Over seven years, the programme supported hundreds of groups who together engaged over 9,000 citizens of all ages across the city. The programme used a methodology called Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) which focusses on sustainable development of communities based on their strengths and potentials, their 'assets'.

We encouraged Birmingham citizens to take an active role in connecting people in their local neighbourhood. Activities ranged from organising bicycle clubs, coffee mornings, ballet and Bhangra dance classes, woodworking to floristry, men's sheds and gardening together. The programme supported the creation of over 280 new activities across the city.





ABOUT BIRMINGHAM

Birmingham, a diverse place

Birmingham's population was 1,141,800 in 2019, and outside of London, it is the UK's most diverse city. Due to recent migrations and longer established minority populations, the city is home to people from an estimated 200 countries. Its communities and neighbourhoods are dynamic, complex and culturally diverse due to a rich mix of social attitudes, languages, identities, cultures, faiths and beliefs. It is also the youngest major city in Europe, with under 25s accounting for nearly 40% of its population. It has more people in the younger age groups, and less in the older age groups, 13% of its population is over 65+ compared to the England average of 18.4%. That said, 37% of those over 65 live alone in the city, increasing their risk of social isolation. The city has significant wealth and income disparities. It is in the top 10% of the country when it comes to pensioner poverty. An estimated 25,000 people aged 60+ experience income deprivation here.

Understanding isolated people over 50 in Birmingham

Birmingham is a complex and diverse environment. To better allocate resources to achieve the most impact, it was essential to understand the localised causes of social isolation. Mapping and analysis determined that while the project could, and should, operate on a city-wide basis, resources should be targeted within four priority areas.

- Supporting older carers
- Ensuring the older LGBT community does not go 'back into the closet.'
- Tyburn, which has a high population over 80
- Sparkbrook where there are language barriers and cultural differences.

To help us identify those priority areas, we commissioned research by Aston Research Centre for Healthy Ageing at Aston University (ARCHA). Their study revealed that by 2020 57,000 people aged 65+ would be living alone in Birmingham. That was higher than the England and regional figures.

We identified that carers in Birmingham are a substantial group that face particular difficulties. 1-in-8 Birmingham residents are carers (around 105,000), and many experience isolation, anxiety and stress arising from their ongoing care responsibilities.

We found that older LGBT people face additional problems due to discrimination and cultural isolation. Some felt compelled to "go back in the closet" when they lose a partner or have to leave home and enter care. Some LGBT people choose not to use statutory services because their lived experience has led them to expect discrimination and prejudice.

We learnt that Birmingham's increasing ethnic diversity meant that a much higher proportion of potentially isolated older people would be from BAME communities. That is a higher proportion than for any other region in England.

PARTNERSHIP WORKING

As well as working cross-city, our priority areas included both geographic areas and communities of interest.

- Two geographical areas where the risk factors leading to social isolation were especially heavily clustered – outer-city Tyburn, and inner-city Sparkbrook.
- Two thematic groups where other factors, such as cultural isolation or personal circumstances (stress, exhaustion, depression), significantly increase social isolation risks, these being older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, and older carers.



BVSC partnered with organisations who were trusted by and had expertise in those communities. Thus ensuring the programme was immediately embedded within them.

Our partners were Age UK Birmingham; Birmingham LGBT; Narthex Sparkhill; Compass Support; Forward Carers and Age Concern. Partner organisations identified community members with experience of social isolation who co-produced the programme at all levels.

WHAT WE DELIVERED

Our programme was designed around seven key activities, all co-produced with people over 50. This allowed us to test new approaches to tackling isolation.

1) Ageing Better Networks

Local people were encouraged and supported to create Ageing Better Networks that re-engaged people over 50 with their local community. Networks were mostly autonomous, self-organising groups of people who wanted to do good in their local community by bringing people together. To support them, Ageing Better in Birmingham funded community-based staff called Network Enablers.



WHAT WE DELIVERED

There were five hubs in total:

- A City-Wide Ageing Better Hub to ensure a city-wide offer and function.
- Four Priority-area Ageing Better Hubs supported four priority groups/localities where the risks of isolation were identified as being greatest: older LGBT people; older carers; outer-city Tyburn and inner-city Sparkbrook.

2) Network Enablers

Five Network Enablers advised and supported Ageing Better Networks. They offered a local grassroots presence to Ageing Better and a friendly face so that people in Birmingham who wanted to start a project or activity had support. They helped groups set up and organise in a way that meant they could keep going for years to come.

3) Service directory

We produced a service directory for older people. This 'social prescribing' portal enabled older people to find and access local provision and support.
<https://route2wellbeing.info/>

4) Ageing Better Local Action Plans

Influencing policy and service design locally, to create long-term change, service redesign, and prevent isolation was a key ambition of Ageing Better in Birmingham. One approach to achieve that was through four locally-determined Ageing Better Action Plans; which provided a framework for targeted investments of up to £500,000 in each priority area. The focus of Ageing Better Action Plans was decided by older people linked to the priority areas and the organisations supporting them. Their creation was assisted and supported by the Ageing Better Partnership, including Birmingham City Council Public Health Team, the Health and Wellbeing Board, Birmingham Community Health NHS Trust and the three Birmingham clinical commissioning groups.

5) The Ageing Better Fund

The programme set up a micro-fund to enable grassroots activity, allowing groups of people to apply for up to £2,000 to start a new activity in their area. The fund proved highly successful and supported the start of nearly 300 new activities across the city. These Ageing Better Networks activities increased the number of opportunities for isolated people over 50 to meet new people and make life-long connections. The people in Birmingham who participated in activities were representative of the super-diversity of the city.



WHAT WE DELIVERED

6) Empowerment and support

Over 50s were supported to co-produce at all levels through a programme of empowerment, called Every Step of the Way. The training programme included specialist components for experts by experience, Ageing Better Network participants from across generations and communities, steering group members, and those seldom heard and already experiencing significant social isolation.

7) Evaluation and Learning

Approaches to tackling loneliness and social isolation are a mainstream debate in the UK. The programme's integrated 'test and learn' approach to delivery provided us with regular information and learning, which we shared widely and acted upon. The effective sharing of learning was critical, to influence service providers and broader opinion/attitudes in local communities.



OUR IMPACT

9,000 +

people took part in activities designed to help build bridges between people



3,000 +

people were identified as lonely or isolated by a peer, friend or support worker



41%

of the programme participants came from BAME and mixed ethnic backgrounds which is reflective of the city's super diversity



63%

of Ageing Better in Birmingham participants show an improvement in their overall wellbeing



89%

of people who have taken part in activities, show continued or increased engagement in social activities. Our surveys showed that Brummies are some of the loneliest and show more improvement having engaged in community activity

INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

We wanted to ensure that everyone who wanted to participate in Ageing Better in Birmingham could do so, and that groups and individuals had meaningful involvement in ways that were most appropriate to them and their circumstances.

To achieve that, we put in place the following processes and practical actions;

- A Starter Pack for Ageing Better Networks which contained materials and templates covering critical issues of conduct and practice, including equality and non-discrimination. It also used inclusive imagery representative of the city's diverse ageing population using real-life examples from programme-supported, organised activity in the local community.
- We created marketing and promotional materials in community languages which were culturally appropriate for target audiences. We worked with partners to ensure other accessibility issues, including sight, hearing impairment, and online accessibility, were considered.
- Project partners and organisations contracted to deliver parts of our programme were required to have an equal opportunities policy with clear guidance on equality and non-discrimination.
- Our evaluation framework included a requirement for the programmes independent evaluator to conduct an Equality Impact Assessment every year and report findings with recommendations for remedial action if needed.
- As the lead body, BVSCs own Equal Opportunities Policy informed the programme by planning and providing services with due regard to age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation.
- We worked to ensure that any national Ageing Better evaluation materials were available in community languages spoken in Birmingham.



EXPERTS BY EXPERIENCE

From its inception, Ageing Better in Birmingham worked with partner organisations whose beneficiaries reflected the city's diversity. We recruited older adults to co-produce the programme through those partners, adopting the 'experts by experience' approach. The group of older people had lived experience of isolation, and we supported them to engage through a tailored programme of empowerment and training.

Older people were involved in every aspect of delivery from grassroots activity to project governance;

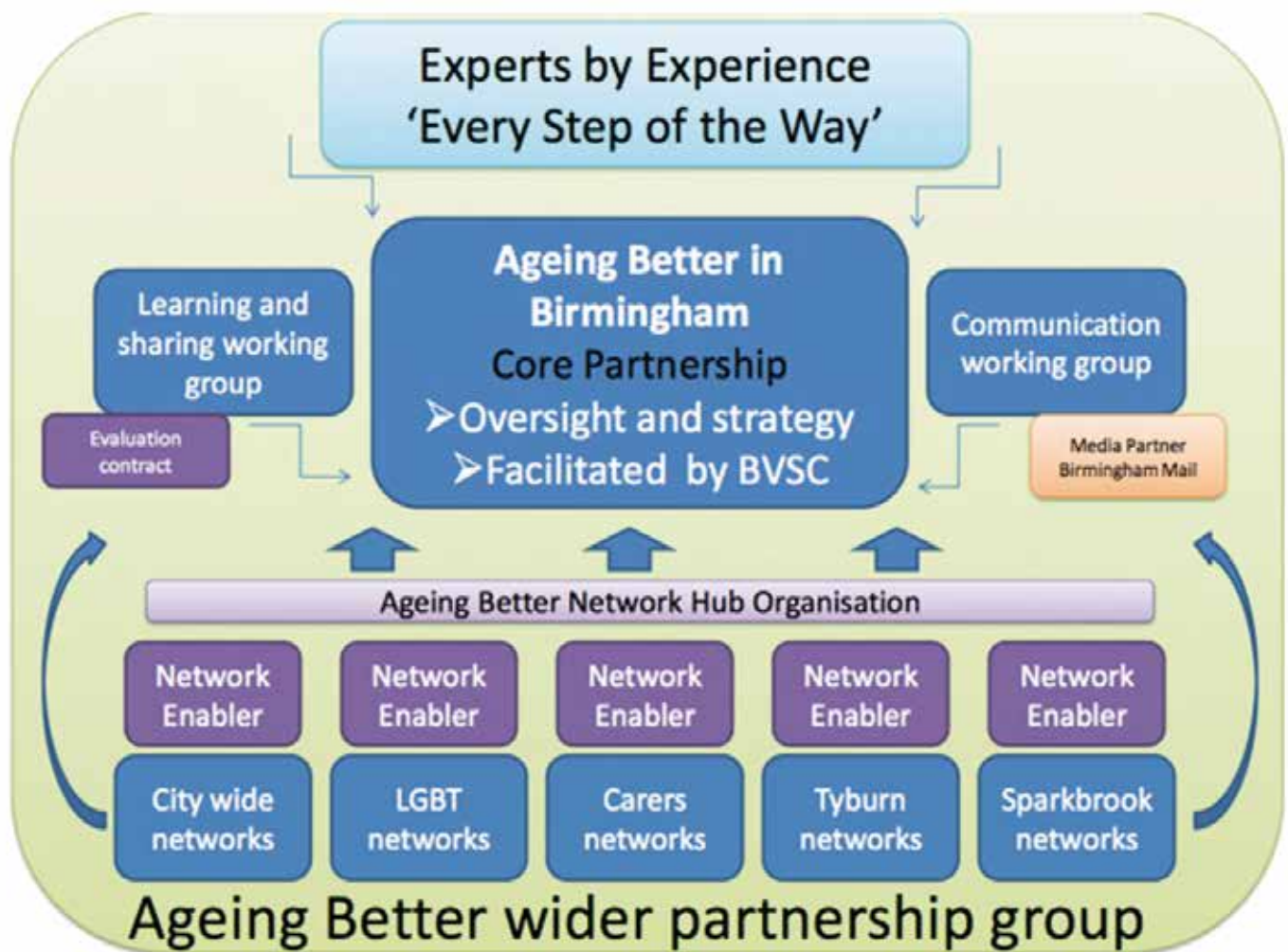
- Core Partnership Board
- Ageing Better Fund Panel
- Staff Recruitment
- Procurement
- Ageing Better Networks
- Marketing and Communications
- Learning and Sharing
- Legacy planning



Our guiding principles for co-production are outlined below, with a strong focus on creating an accessible and inclusive programme that addressed barriers to participation:

- 1) Asking people their views on issues before decision-making;
- 2) Ongoing monitoring and evaluation to demonstrate the difference Every Step of the Way is making (outputs, outcomes and impact);
- 3) Staff training to understand how to work and communicate with older people, bringing an understanding of some age-related physical or mental impairments, e.g. communicating with someone with dementia;
- 4) Supported by strong leadership within BVSC and the wider Ageing Better partnership;
- 5) Addresss as many barriers to participation as possible and be as flexible as possible and recognise obstacles including:
 - Culture and Language
 - Physical and mental health issues
 - Transport and other access issues
 - Time commitments and timing of meetings
- 6) Use different channels of communication, with a preference for real-life relationships and face-to-face interactions;
- 7) Understanding local demographics and ensure engagement was considerate of the local landscape (poverty, health etc.);
- 8) A continuous process rather than a one-off event embedded in the way Ageing Better in Birmingham worked from start to finish.





As people take part in the programme, our surveys show that they become more involved in their wider community joining social groups and clubs.

I'd describe myself as a respectful and trustworthy person who is always keen to help.

I first got involved with Ageing Better in Birmingham 4 years ago, when the Tyburn group received funding to host a party in the park for the Queen's 90th Birthday.

I was an isolated person for many years before I got involved with the programme. Now I lead "Think Positive" which is a group of 24 who meet on Tuesday mornings at The Sanctuary. I attend "Befriending Service" group meetings on Wednesday mornings, in addition to this I have befriended a 92- year old lady who I visit once a week. I also lead a Bereavement group and am a Member of the Age of Experience group.

I've really enjoyed the way the programme has built my confidence and increased my learning. It is a very motivated team.

Nina, 56
from Tyburn



COPRODUCTION IN ACTION - THE AGE OF EXPERIENCE GROUP

Using our partners to recruit participants, we initially identified a cohort of 20 over 50 individuals who became actively involved in co-producing Ageing Better in Birmingham. This group became the Age of Experience Group (AoE). As the programme progressed, additional members were recruited, which introduced new perspectives and responded to learning from programme activity. The group broadly reflected the city's diversity.

AoE ensured that older people's voices and experiences were at the heart of the programme from the beginning to the end. Meeting every other month, they discussed topics relating to ageing; informing the programme's strategic direction and shaping the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme's essential elements. Members contributed to decision-making around developments within the programme and informed the programme's development, management, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation.

Each member had their personal experiences of social isolation. Early on, to create a safe space for individuals to share those experiences, the group developed a set of ground rules that established trust and respect, allowing them to communicate comfortably. These ground rules influenced the policies and procedures that ensured meaningful involvement from people over 50 in the project.

- Listen to each other, without interrupting
- All opinions are valid
- Challenge the issue and not the person
- Don't make assumptions
- Check to understand
- Personal experiences and stories are confidential, talk about the issues instead
- Personal experiences and stories should not be repeated elsewhere without approval from the individual
- Don't monopolise the discussion and allow others to contribute
- Be truthful, honest and open
- Respect difference – don't judge
- Take care of each other, there may be times when sharing an experience will be difficult to tell but also challenging for someone to hear
- Take space if needed
- Good communication with each other and from the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme
- Leave well - make sure that everyone is in a good place after engaging



CHALLENGES WE FACED AND OVERCAME

We faced several challenges in ensuring diverse voices co-produced the programme. These challenges were not confined to enabling access to those experts by experience with characteristics protected under equality act 2010 and included broader issues including skills, educational attainment and poverty.

Recruitment to the Age of Experience Group

During the setup for 'Every Step of the Way' we struggled to engage a multi-ethnic group of experts by experience, representing the city's diversity. While members were often from a lower socio-economic background and different parts of the city, it was a predominantly White British membership. We worked with our partners to address this challenge. We asked Network Enablers to consider diversity when recruiting members and to understand what might enable those from ethnic minorities to participate.

Leaving Sparkbrook

While the Age of Experience group broadly reflected the city's diversity, we found it challenging to recruit experts by experience from the Sparkbrook Hub, located in a predominantly Muslim suburb of the city. The Hub reported that people who took part in its activities didn't want to engage with organisations or activity outside of the suburb. We addressed the issue by creating a local Age of Experience group hosted by a local organisation. However, it did mean that their input was missing from conversations about the rest of the city.



Skills

We realised early on that some of the legally required processes we had to follow around procurement acted as a barrier to inclusion, excluding those with little to no educational qualifications. Initially, we had to rely on several experts whose professional background allowed them to understand the processes best.

To ensure a wider group of older people were involved in these critical processes, we used learning from early commissioning to re-shape our processes. We used experts to co-produce the projects from the start, so they knew the outcomes and then supported them in whatever way they needed to learn the processes. Support included one to one time with project team members in advance of the commissioning meetings, with time to ask questions. We also stripped back documentation to make the process more accessible.

Limited Income

Birmingham has pockets of severe deprivation, including within some of our priority areas. Every Step of the Way and the Age of Experience Group was adequately funded and provided a taxi service, lunches and any out-of-pocket expenses for participants. We ensured that those on limited incomes could fully participate in the programme.



EXPERIENCES FROM AGEING BETTER HUBS

The following case studies explore the experiences of network enablers working at the Sparkbrook and LGBT Hubs respectively. Sparkbrook's network enabler discusses some of the issue they faced securing micro funding for grassroots activity, while the LGBT network enabler discusses co-producing The Ageing with Pride campaign.

Sparkbrook Hub

This case study explores how Sparkbrook Hub worked with local people to access micro-funding. Sparkbrook Hub covers one of the most deprived areas of Birmingham. In the 2011 census, over half of the population was of South Asian background (predominately Pakistani). There is a significant immigrant population with a lower level of residents born in the UK than the national average and a higher rate of residents born in other EU countries or outside the EU. 61.9% of people living in Sparkbrook speak English, with multiple languages spoken including Urdu, Arabic, Bengali, Panjabi, Somali, Pashto and Gujarati.

Since the 1980s, public sector funding and public realm programmes attempted to address deprivation and its impacts. Those programmes' legacy created several issues that the hub needed to accommodate and address when facilitating asset-based activity.

Established organisations often morphed to accommodate new and differing funding regimes, leading to mission drift. There was an 'expectation' of entitlement to funding. The requirement to maintain a critical mass of funding to continue service delivery and/or employment of staff may take priority ahead of engaging and developing community activists.

The area has significant VCS and community group activity of varying scale and duration of existence, sustained by various funding programmes. Sparkbrook Hub aimed to augment and enrich social action locally by supporting micro-funding applications for grassroots groups to plan and develop activities that could sustain beyond the Ageing Better programme.

Sparkbrook Hub was delivered by a partnership of local community organisations and approached developing Ageing Better networks in two ways;

1. Hosting networks with established organisations as part of, or development of their provision.
2. Independent networks led by local assets who identified a potential to engage local people in activity

In both network types, a Network Lead was identified and supported by the hub's Network Enabler to develop the activity. Ideas were developed through discussion to the point where they could apply for micro-funding, with support to write and submit applications. These conversations enabled Network Leads to identify how the activity could be sustained and explore potential links with other activities in the area. For hosted networks, organisations used the process to identify new community assets within their provision, which allowed some participants to take on more responsibility within the organisation.

Challenges

- Multiple languages are spoken in the area, with poor spoken and written English identified as a potential barrier to participation. By 'hosting' networks with existing local organisations, language support was available if required.
- The project overcame distrust of external agencies, by working with existing community organisations within Sparkbrook who had deep roots in the community.

Successes

- Network development provided local organisations with new community assets to engage in future programme development. These individuals, and their access to individuals within the community, widen any future co-design/production activity.
- Some of the newly identified community assets wanted to create activity beyond the scope of Ageing Better, which would require more support. An additional programme was designed to accommodate this demand through the Ageing Better Local Action Plan called Sparkbrook Connect.
- Smaller host organisations who delivered traditional 'service led' models were offered guidance on governance, marketing, recruitment, engagement and Asset Based Community Development.





EXAMPLES OF MICRO INVESTMENTS

Men's Walking Football

What: A small group of men who met in local cafes and parks were interested in undertaking sports activities and wished to invite other older men to participate. They identified activities that would be healthy and keep them active and worked with a venue and the Network Enabler to apply to the Ageing Better Fund to set up a gentle Walking Football Club.

Outcome: Engaging older men in community-led activity can be difficult, but the group has been successful, with around 10 people are attending each week. Initially, the group were Yemeni but Pakistani men also attend now. Most of the men are in their 60s to 70s. They meet up for a warmup and kick about, and then they sit together for tea and biscuits to socialise.



Women Getting Together

What: Four Pakistani women who had benefited from community organisations' service decided to start the group as a way of giving back to the community. They set about asking neighbours and friends (women over 50 in the area) what activities they would enjoy. Arts, crafts and exercise came up most often. They utilised their contact with established organisations to identify a suitable venue and times. They started meeting in December of 2019 and initially attracted 14 participants. On Tuesday mornings they ran a gentle aerobics class suitable for older people. On Thursdays, they put on a 'learn how to crochet' class. They get together for refreshments and conversation afterwards.

Outcome: The women report immensely enjoying both activities, and they say attending has improved their quality of life. COVID-19 stopped this activity. However, some participants became active volunteers supporting those self-isolating or shielding, undertaking shopping or providing house deliveries of food from local food banks. The group provided them with confidence and a willingness to engage as activists in the community.

LGBT Hub

Co-production case study Ageing with Pride Campaign



An LGBT Local Action Plan was co-created with input from stakeholders and the LGBT community, setting out several interventions to address the increased risks of social isolation within the older LGBT community. The Ageing with Pride campaign was one element of that plan, an intensive marketing and communications campaign with elements of community development.

The plan identified that the circumstances of social isolation for older LGBT people are informed by several community-specific factors, including prejudice/ homophobia in society and amongst public service providers. It also found ageism and other forms of discrimination within the LGBT community itself.

“ We haven't yet worked out a way to be both gay and old. We don't know what that life should look like or feel like, and the LGBT community isn't helping us to try and make this adjustment. ”

“ Age and infirmity, loneliness, isolation and concerns regarding care, are not yet seen as mainstream 'LGBT issues' in how sexual or mental health is. We need to change that. ”

The year-long campaign 'Ageing with Pride', aimed to:

- To celebrate older LGBT people's lives.
- To present positive images of LGBT ageing.
- To raise awareness and understanding of the causes of social isolation amongst older LGBT people and means of preventing this.
- To address ageism in the LGBT community.
- To challenge homophobia and stereotypes.
- To change behaviour and attitudes and help older LGBT people prepare for ageing.

- To increase the visibility of the older LGBT community.
- To promote positive messages about all members of the LGBT community and from all backgrounds.
- To publicise the issues and causes of social isolation amongst older LGBT people, and highlight positive human interest stories about coming out of isolation to encourage others to take the first step.
- To utilise volunteers/ active citizens wherever possible.

Delivered by Birmingham LGBT, The Ageing with Pride campaign consisted of street displays, leaflets, blogs, articles, social media and events. Its aims included:

- To celebrate older LGBT people's lives.
- Raise awareness of the causes and risks of social isolation amongst older LGBT people.
- Preparing for ageing by increasing confidence and creating connections across all communities.

The campaign was built around three key messages, delivered in three stages:

- Keep Your Rainbow – "Getting older shouldn't mean fading away. Keep your rainbow and age with pride."
- Bridge The Gap – "Over 50 isn't 'over the hill'. Find out why by bridging the gap between youth and experience."
- Continue The Journey – "They fought for our equality. Don't let them drift into the background. Celebrate our over 50s and continue what they started."

Volunteers were recruited to co-produce the campaign. They acted as storytellers, ambassadors, and peer researchers. Taking part in photo and video shoots, informing, and influencing service providers and researching effective methods to reach target audiences.



One of our Campaign volunteers and Ambassadors, Robert, describes his experience:

"I am a member of the Age of Experience group for the Ageing Better Programme in Birmingham. I joined this group via the LGBT Hub, being an older gay man and interested in seeing my needs met by society and having some influence on decisions taken.

"When the idea of an awareness campaign on the issues of older LGBT+ people, but aimed at the population in general as well, I was keen to be involved.

"I participated in the formation of the project prior to the agreed funding. Once the funding was secured for the year-long project and a project manager employed, I stayed with the project through its lifetime at various levels of involvement.

"An organisation was recruited to evaluate the impact of the Campaign by measuring attitudes to the older LGBT+ community pre-campaign and post-campaign and I assisted with the development of the questionnaires, modifying questions, and suggesting places to circulate them.

"Within the main Campaign, I was part of the group that supported the project manager in the development and execution of the campaign. This included being on photo/ video shoots for leaflets, bus stop posters, social media, as well as walking in Birmingham Pride under the 'Ageing with Pride' banner in 2019, with an inter-generational group.

"Another strand was visiting the three hospices in Birmingham, with the project manager, looking to work with the hospice to be 'LGBT+ welcoming' for those needing an end of life service and not feel they would need to hide the fact they are LGBT. It was pleasing that seven hospices in the Midlands got together and joined the Birmingham Pride that year. I was able to introduce a friend who runs a care home to the project team at looking at LGBT+ awareness for staff, as the Care Quality Commission is looking at how the care sector addresses this matter.

"This has given Ageing Better in Birmingham the knowledge to fund an additional project to improve the services care homes provide to older LGBT people. I was involved in the interview process to select the person to do this development work.

"As simply a member of society it has very rewarding to be involved on many levels, to support an area that is important to me and influence the development outcomes."





Coproducing with diverse communities

For more information about Ageing Better in Birmingham, email comms@bvsc.org or call 0121 643 4343