EVALUATION
Key messages

(May 2020)

Reducing social isolation and loneliness amongst older people in Hackney

Interim findings from the phase two programme evaluation*

* Evaluation activities described in this report were all conducted prior to COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, imposed by the UK government on 23 March 2020.

Key messages

'Connect Hackney' is addressing social isolation and loneliness for people aged 50 and over. Fifty projects delivered by local community and voluntary sector organisations have been commissioned and these have reached 4251 residents to date. Connect Hackney is part of the 'Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better' programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund from 2015 for six years. The local evaluation is seeking to find out how the programme is making a difference to older residents in Hackney. These key messages were generated from findings before the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown. They are, however, even more relevant during this time and for life as the lockdown eases.

- Taking a programme approach is important as this can systematically harness the strengths of the community and voluntary sector in working with diverse and underserved groups. These include men, Black Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and older people at greatest risk of loneliness such as carers and those with long term health conditions or disabilities.

- Working in partnership with older people is fundamental to delivering activities which can meet their needs and aspirations. Co-production in the commissioning, design, delivery, and monitoring of services is still a very new way of working. Challenges can be overcome through co-production training for professionals to avoid tokenism and dedicated resources for administration and pastoral care.

- Dedicated investment in targeted outreach and skills in partnership working, branding and marketing is needed to achieve good reach. Strong networks of referral across the voluntary, public and private sectors need to be developed and supported within the local system. Proactive creation of 'social glue' – warm and friendly staff and peers, refreshments, unstructured time for socialising alongside structured activities, an open door policy – is key for engagement and retention in activities.

- The provision of inclusive and engaging community activities is important but not sufficient. Older people who are already socially isolated and lonely are likely to need one to one support before they can take part in community activities. One to one coaching provided by the Community Connector programme was a powerful catalyst for change amongst participant interviewees who reported improved wellbeing, self-esteem and confidence.

- It is necessary to achieve a balance between digital and non-digital activities and support. Older people can develop new skills in using tablets and smartphones, but the use of new skills is dependent on whether participants own a device, their personal preferences and abilities for engaging with technology, and availability of Wi-Fi at home or data packages. The time required to train or upskill older people in the use of technology should not be underestimated.

- The experience and appetite for volunteering amongst participants in the Connect Hackney programme should be mobilised in a systematic way to support the co-production aspirations of local policy initiatives.