

**CONNECT  
HACKNEY**  
ageing better



# EVALUATION Summary

(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.*



# Summary

## Background and purpose

The 'Connect Hackney' programme is addressing social isolation and loneliness for people aged 50 and over. A total of 50 projects<sup>1</sup> have been commissioned in two phases (phase 1 and 2) to provide a range of community-based projects. To date these projects have reached 4521 residents. Connect Hackney is part of the 'Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better' programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund<sup>2</sup> in 14 areas in England.

The local evaluation is focused on phase 2 (2018-21) of the programme and is seeking to find out how the programme is making a difference to older residents in Hackney through documenting the experiences of participants, project staff, and wider stakeholders. The findings are from evaluation activities conducted before the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown.

The purpose of this report is to summarise the findings of the first year of the evaluation with a view to helping local stakeholders to embed learning in local policies and initiatives within and across health and social care, housing, public and community spaces and transport.

## Who is the programme reaching?

The programme has reached diverse groups of older people, including those groups that are traditionally underserved such as Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups and participants identifying as LGBT+. Men are known to be a group that social programmes often find harder to engage. Projects targeting men were introduced in Phase 2 and numbers have increased from just over one quarter of all participants to over a third of participants.

The programme is also reaching socially isolated and lonely older people and those at risk including those aged 80 and over, carers, those living alone and those who have a longstanding illness or disability.

## What strategies work to reach older people?

Successful strategies for promoting projects were those combining print and other media with



**67% BAME group //**  
**66% longstanding illness or disability //**  
**48% already socially isolated and lonely //**  
**38% men //** **34% Live alone //**  
**21% aged 80 and over //**  
**7% LGBT+ //** **6% carer**<sup>3</sup>

targeted outreach to other organisations and older people themselves<sup>4</sup>.

Expertise in marketing, branding and outreach is key. Outreach skills include relationship building for partnership working.

## What strategies work to engage and retain older people in community projects?

Partnership working with community transport facilities helped participants unable to travel independently to get to projects.

Projects need to create a warm environment which is supportive and friendly. Key components include: providing refreshments; 'social butterfly' participants; unstructured as well as structured time for socialising, and working with people's interests and need.

Project staff and volunteers need to be kind, approachable and non-judgemental. Key skills are group facilitation and the ability to listen.

A flexible 'open door' policy helped older people to keep coming back to projects. Preventing drop-out could be achieved through project staff keeping in touch and making it clear that people were welcome back at any point.

## How can already socially isolated and lonely older people be supported to make new social connections and friendships?

The Community Connector project aimed to (re)connect older people to community activities through one to one coaching, referral and support

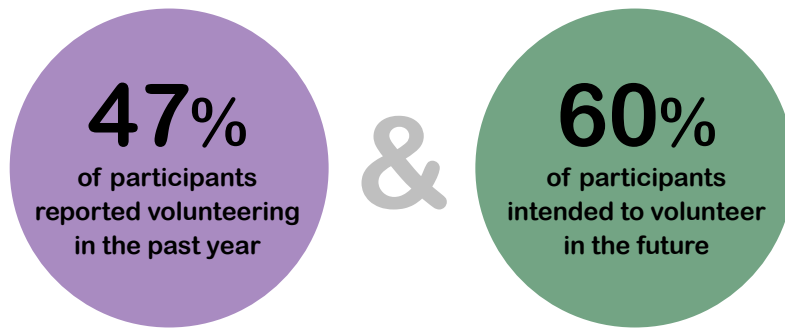
1 A total of 26 projects were commissioned in Phase 1 (2015-2018) and 24 projects in Phase 2 (2018-2021).

2 <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk>

3 These survey findings are based on 297 participants in phase 2 of the programme. Figures are subject to change and reflect data up to the beginning of December 2019. For full details of the findings

see 'Connect Hackney Phase Two Baseline Profile Report' <https://www.connecthackney.org.uk>

4 For full details see the 'Reach, engagement and retention of participants in phase two Connect Hackney projects: interim findings from project providers and participants' <https://www.connecthackney.org.uk>



to attend community projects. Community co-ordinators offered sessions in participants homes or community venues.

One to one coaching was a powerful catalyst for change amongst participant interviewees who reported improved wellbeing; self-esteem and confidence<sup>5</sup>. Some participants reported new friendships or social connections from taking part in community activities, others were simply enjoying the feeling of being noticed and remembered by others.

Step by step approaches worked best for those socially isolated and lonely for a number of years; focusing on the activity rather than the group worked better for those who did not like 'groups' and; linking with community transport projects helped with mobility issues.

### Can developing tablets or smartphone skills help older people to create and maintain social connections?

Digital inclusion projects<sup>6</sup> provided group based sessions to develop smartphone and tablet skills. The opportunity to learn digital skills was attractive to older people, especially those aged 70 and over. For those with no or limited prior knowledge and skills, sessions supported participants inclusion in conversations about digital life. Those with higher levels of prior skills were able to develop these further and were keen to attend follow-up courses.

Some participants developed social connections during group sessions. All participants had non-digital ways of staying in touch with family and friends; technology provided a new tool for communication, but it did not replace usual ways of communicating.

There was limited evidence on the impact of any new digital skills developed supporting participants to create and maintain social

connections beyond the project. The use of new skills was dependent on whether participants owned a device, their personal preferences in engaging with technology, and whether they had Wi-Fi at home or data packages.

### How can commissioners and providers work in partnership with older people to shape local policy and services?

There is considerable appetite for volunteering amongst Connect Hackney participants. This can be mobilised in support of the co-production aspirations of local policy initiatives.

The Connect Hackney Older People's Committee is a key mechanism for co-production on the programme. The Committee have helped to commission projects that are more likely to meet the needs of older people aged over 50 and developed more inclusive working practices within the Connect Hackney team.

Co-production is a very new way of working. Challenges were overcome through co-production training for the Connect Hackney team to avoid tokenism and dedicated resources for administration and pastoral care. Developing shared understandings and expectations around co-production should be a focus of practice going forward.

### Conclusion

The findings of the evaluation thus far provide evidence on: how to reach, engage and retain diverse and underserved groups of older people in projects to reduce social isolation and loneliness; the perceived impact of projects on older people; and the processes needed to facilitate good quality co-production. The focus of the second year of the evaluation will be on: assessing the extent of changes in quantitative measures of social isolation and loneliness, deepening understanding of the characteristics of effective projects, and examining the wider impact of the programme on the local system. The second year will also examine the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown on projects and participants. Taken together, the findings from the first and second year will contribute to promoting lockdown recovery and resilience amongst communities aged over 50 in Hackney and the organisations that support them.

5 Please note these are interim findings and are subject to changes as more data become available. For full details see 'An in-depth study of the Community Connectors project for older people in Hackney living with or at risk of social isolation and loneliness' <https://www.connecthackney.org.uk>

6 As previous footnote, these are interim findings and are subject to changes as more data become available. For full details of findings so far see 'An in-depth study of Digital Inclusion projects for older people in Hackney living with or at risk of social isolation and loneliness' <https://www.connecthackney.org.uk>