



# Tackling loneliness and social isolation in older people:

## How to get more men involved

### Men are at a greater risk of social isolation

Older men are more likely to be socially isolated than women. There is a lot of national and international research that suggests men tend to build social relationships differently to women and this can make them vulnerable to isolation as they age. Older men often rely on their partner to maintain friendship groups and social networks. As a result, men who are bereaved or divorced are at risk of becoming isolated.

Men's social interaction can often be centred around the workplace, increasing the risk of isolation on retirement.

“Men are more likely to become isolated because they don't necessarily have the social skills to socialise, make those connections, have those close friendships or friendship groups. Their socialisation may have been tied to work and professional things rather than domestic and friendship things.”





## What stops men getting involved?

Men generally are less likely to take part in activities and projects designed to address loneliness and social isolation in later life.

- They can be reluctant to seek help, feeling that they should be self-reliant, independent and not be a 'burden'.
- Some older men are concerned about feeling 'left out' in groups full of couples or may be worried about joining a group built around socialising if they don't see themselves as 'social butterflies'.

- Some activities can be perceived as by men as 'for women'. If groups are attended predominantly by women this can be daunting for men and can limit opportunities to discuss personal circumstances with people with similar experiences.

## Top tips for getting more men to attend your group

Where groups have been successful in overcoming these barriers and getting more men involved, they have:

- recognised and understood what older men want and what stops them taking part in some activities

- built their group around an activity that appeals to men, rather than just socialising
- offered opportunities for members to make an active contribution and give something back, and
- created a supportive environment.

## Get the activity right

Older men's identities, social circumstances and life-experiences differ considerably. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to providing the 'right' activity. However, it is worth considering the following:

- Speak to older men. Don't assume that you know what older men want or need. They are more likely to be involved if they feel they have been consulted from the beginning.
- Some older men are put off by groups they perceive as a 'talking shop' or an excuse for chatting. Instead, they are more likely to be attracted to groups built around a particular shared interest, such as a hobby, or a

common experience, such as support for a sporting team or former job role.

“ Especially when people feel a bit shy or they're not confident, they're not going to go unless it's something they feel that interests them. ”

- Practical opportunities and activities with a specific goal or purpose are often welcomed. Consider how you could incorporate this into what your group does. Socialising will come from men taking part in the activity.

“ Men's groups in particular that have been successful have had a particular theme or something for them to actually do, with a goal in mind. The men are more focussed about what they want to achieve and the end result. ”

- Offering expert advice and opportunities to develop everyday useful skills may also be effective in reaching older men.
- Try to have an ongoing programme of activity or a flow of project opportunities to keep men engaged over a longer period of time.
- Food for thought – offering food and drink as part of or after your activity are often attractive for many people

“ A group where people learn skills around English and communicating with services, seems to be in demand because people need letters translating from the hospital or to know about things like Motability or pensions. ”

“ Unless you’ve got very proactive supervisors who pounce on them as soon as they finish one job and talk them through another activity then they tend to disappear. ”



## Men in Sheds – Acocks Green

Men in Sheds UK is a national organisation which helps people to set up local 'sheds'. These are larger versions of the typical garden shed, a place where men can feel comfortable and free to pursue their interests but with other like-minded men. The sheds help recreate the routine and camaraderie among colleagues that men experience during their working lives.

The success of the other Men in Sheds groups in Birmingham encouraged the formation of the Acocks Green shed. Here, men come together to do woodworking and DIY activities. It is up to the individual what they make, but examples have included garden planters, furniture and notice boards.

Attendees can craft items for themselves, as gifts or to be used as part of a community project. Wherever their work ends up, attendees feel a sense of purpose and accomplishment, as well as benefitting from social interaction.

“What we're trying to offer is an opportunity to do something purposeful, whether it be helping in the gardens making bird boxes or repairing furniture, but more importantly, the chance to sit down and have a chat with other men.”



## Create opportunities to give something back.

Think about how members can make a positive contribution to the group or the wider community.

- Are there particular roles that older men could play to help run your group? Try and avoid describing this as volunteering, and keep it flexible and informal. Helping out can provide a sense of achievement and increase people's confidence.
- Are there opportunities for men to pass on skills and knowledge to other members? This is mutually beneficial, giving a sense of purpose and value for the person sharing their expertise and increasing the knowledge of others.
- Could the group run activities that benefit the wider community, such as developing an allotment or fundraising for a local charity? Again, this can help create a sense of purpose that is appealing to many men.

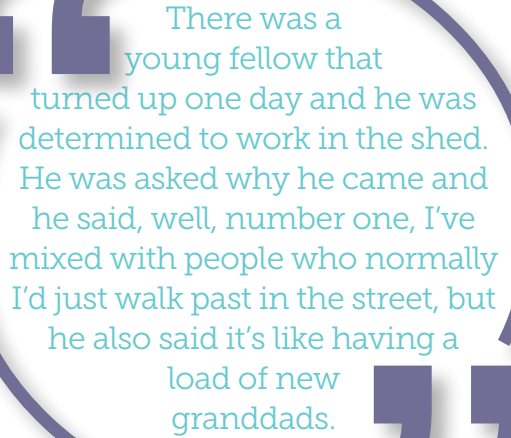
## 'A load of new granddads' – make activities intergenerational

- Older men often don't want to attend groups especially for older people. Mixed generation activities can help older people feel valued and enhance younger people's attitudes towards ageing. Think about how your group could attract people of different age groups – the benefits for all can be great.

## Provide a supportive environment

Some older men, particularly those that have been alone for significant periods, may find it difficult at first to engage with others in a group setting.

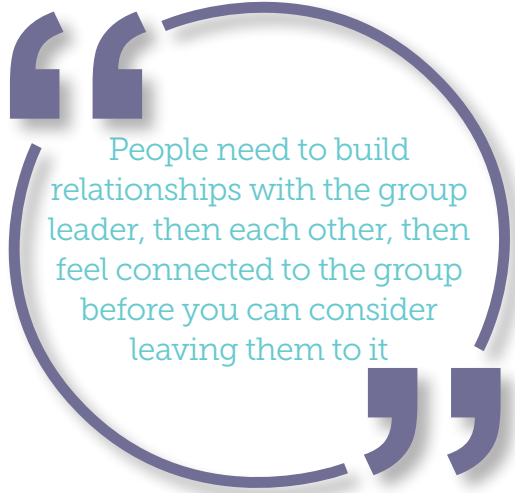
- Make sure your group offers a relaxed, casual, friendly and non-competitive environment.
- Take time to welcome and build relationships with new members on a one-to-one basis. This can be key to making sure people keep walking back through



There was a young fellow that turned up one day and he was determined to work in the shed. He was asked why he came and he said, well, number one, I've mixed with people who normally I'd just walk past in the street, but he also said it's like having a load of new granddads.

the door. Make sure you introduce newcomers to the regulars.

- Consider whether there is a need for a men-only group or activity.



People need to build relationships with the group leader, then each other, then feel connected to the group before you can consider leaving them to it

## Men's Walking Football

Men's Walking Football was started by Mike, a man in his 50s, after he realised that many of his old friends were socially isolated and had no outlet to connect and talk with other men. It originally began with himself and two friends, and has now grown considerably through word of mouth. The group has been successful on the pitch too, winning awards and gaining considerable media attention. Mike explained that having an activity that appeals to men is key to the group's success.

It's the football that is the main draw for attendees. However, Mike is keen to build on the relationships built so far to continue to help address loneliness. He plans to introduce a weekly informal social meet-up event.

“ We bring people out so they can meet under a single common interest of football and that will help them help escape their confines, and men traditionally don't talk about their feelings, they bottle it up... We have people that never went out for weeks and weeks and we told them, 'Come and play walking football



## Promoting your group to men

Offering activities that appeal to men is not enough if they don't know about your group. Consider how best you can reach men.

- Promote in places that men go to. This could include pubs, working men's clubs and sports venues. Also consider churches, temples and mosques. Talk to schools, colleges and youth groups about making your activity inter-generational.
  - Word of mouth is often very effective. Ask your members to spread the word. This could be talking to friends, relatives, neighbours and colleagues.
  - Encourage older men to become champions and ambassadors for the group.
- Potential new members are more likely to be encouraged to join if they identify with someone and can see first-hand how the group could benefit them.
  - While not all older people use social media, increasing numbers do. Using social media, such as Facebook, or circulating electronic newsletters can help to reach potential new members.
  - Consider organising one-off events to 'hook' new members. This might be a trip, a special guest or a taster session.
  - Promote through success – celebrate your achievements in the local press, on social media and in newsletters, leaflets or posters.



## Men in Sheds – Perry Common

Perry Common Men in Sheds group received Ageing Better in Birmingham funding to train members to run the work-shed safely and sustain the group.

The group has also raised money taking on jobs for the local community, for example, repairing park benches and building a planter for the local library.

To promote the group the members maintain a Facebook presence, which they use to display their work. They have also run a number of free workshops, which has led to an increase in membership of fifty per cent and encouraged intergenerational participation.

I was retired for three or four years

and I found that I wasn't talking to anyone, so I started looking for something. My interest initially was that I wanted to learn woodwork, and I called the FE colleges who used to offer it and they seemed to be closing them down, so that's

when I found Men in Sheds.

Men aren't always the best at making new friends or talking to one another, but get them around a piece of wood or a DIY task and it's amazing how they open up.

We've had a great response to the Shed.

## 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, including the views of participants, and evidence from other studies. 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 part of Ageing Better, the six-year (2015-2021) £78 million programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better partnerships are based in 14 locations across England, from Torbay to Middlesbrough and the Isle of Wight to East Lindsey. Working with local people, charities, businesses, public sector services and voluntary groups the Ageing Better partnerships are exploring creative ways for older people to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. Ageing Better is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

## Further information and useful contacts

### **Ageing Better in Birmingham**

[www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk](http://www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk)

### **Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC)**

[www.bvsc.org](http://www.bvsc.org)

### **Men in Sheds**

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

CFE Research evaluated the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme and produced this leaflet. June 2019