



Tackling loneliness and social isolation in older people:

Overcoming barriers to joining in

This leaflet offers practical suggestions for overcoming some common barriers that can stop older people from taking part in community groups and activities. Barriers may be practical, such as not being able to get to an activity, and personal, such as lacking confidence to join a new group.

The most important thing to remember is that people's needs and preferences will differ. Therefore, knowing your audience is key.

“ We had one lady who said that she just literally wants to get out of the house and do a bit of shopping herself. We went round to visit her, found out what she wanted, got to know her a little bit, assigned her some volunteers. She had lost her confidence in going out on her own, so because of their support she's gone out into the community again.”



Getting to the activity

This can be particularly difficult for those who are disabled or are isolated. It's important to understand what the challenges are for people and consider practical steps you can take to tackle them.

Keep it local

- Not everyone has their own transport and some people may not be comfortable using public transport. Try to

arrange activities as close as possible to where potential participants live.

“ People wanted to go to something really, really close to where they lived. They didn't want to get on the bus but were okay walking around the corner. They felt confident because it's their area. ”

Forget-Me-Nots – social group and film club

Challenge

Residents of sheltered housing found it difficult to get to activities taking place outside the complex.

Solution

Using Aging Better funding, Forget-Me-Nots meets in a recreational room within the sheltered housing, attracting residents of the complex and the surrounding area. The space was hardly being used before. After speaking with the residents' committee, it was agreed that the space could be used by the group.

By holding the activities so close to where they live, participants found it much easier to get there. There is little travel time and members can get there without assistance. This has contributed towards the group's popularity.

- Sheltered housing and retirement complexes often have a community or recreation room which could be used, making access to activities easier for people living there.

Using public transport

- If you know where people are travelling from, find out what public transport is on offer from that area.
- Older and disabled people may be entitled to free bus travel, but this usually only applies to off-peak hours. Bear this in mind when deciding what time to hold your activity.
- Public transport journeys can sometimes be complicated. Make things easy for people by planning common routes and including public transport advice in your promotional material.

Alternatives to public transport

There are other ways in which participants can get to your chosen venue – where public transport isn't practical, you might want to consider the following alternatives.

- If group members or volunteers have a car, are they willing to give others a lift? Sharing a car journey can be a good way for people to get to know each other too. Try to spread the load between several volunteer drivers and have a back-up plan in case a driver is unavailable.
- Community transport providers are often available to older or disabled people. They are safe and are used to giving door-to-door help, all at an often very reasonable price. The Community Transport Association (see useful contacts at the end of this leaflet) can help you find local community transport.



*Ring and Ride is a door-to-door service for anyone living in the urban areas of the West Midlands that struggles to use conventional transport. <http://ringandride.org/>



- If taxis are necessary, think about working with a local taxi firm that can cater for older and disabled people and arrange door-to-door services. Consider whether journeys can be shared to lower the cost for people.
- If you are offering a transport service, or help with planning public transport, make sure you mention this when promoting your group or activity. If the cost of attending your activity includes travel, make sure this is made clear.

Venue

Choice of venue can make a difference to who will attend. You can avoid creating additional barriers for people by making sure venues are familiar, accessible and suitable for your target audience. These pointers will help you choose the ideal venue.

Familiarity

- People may prefer to attend activities somewhere they are familiar with. Bear this in mind when considering setting up your activity. Using a venue already used by your target audience will help with advertising and awareness raising.

- Using a venue which already attracts your target audience also means you will be better placed to make sure that your activity does not clash with other groups and events. Find out what else is taking place in the local area and talk to them about how you can coordinate times and venues to offer complementary activities.

Getting in and around buildings

- Talk to your participants about what they need to make sure they can get in and around your chosen venue easily. Consider, for example, how easily people using a wheelchair, mobility scooter, walker or stick can get around. Are there steps, a ramp, or a lift? Are there toilets, and are they accessible to people with disabilities? Are there disabled parking spaces close by?

Type of venue

- People from some religions may be uncomfortable about attending an activity that is held in a venue licensed to sell alcohol. Some may be uncomfortable about taking part in an activity held in a

place of worship. Try and make your choice of venue as inclusive as possible.

Confidence

Sometimes people lack the confidence to take part in an activity, particularly if they have been on their own for a long time. Joining a new group or doing something for the first time can be daunting.

Some can feel nervous leaving their home.

By the same token, many people do not think of themselves as old or lonely and feelings of pride and wanting to be independent can stop people asking for help.

- A personal invitation to attend - in the street, by post or on the doorstep - can help to give people the confidence to take that first step to come along to your activity and meet new people.
- Ask members and volunteers to invite their friends and neighbours and offer to accompany them. Make sure someone familiar is around to welcome new members to the group and make them feel at home.

- Think carefully about the words you use on leaflets and posters, or in person, to promote your activity. People are likely to be put off by activities they perceive to be about helping people who are old or tackling loneliness. Keep it upbeat and positive.
- People are often keen to help their local community or to 'give something back'. Activities focused on a particular cause or project may be especially attractive to those who do not see themselves as being 'in need'.

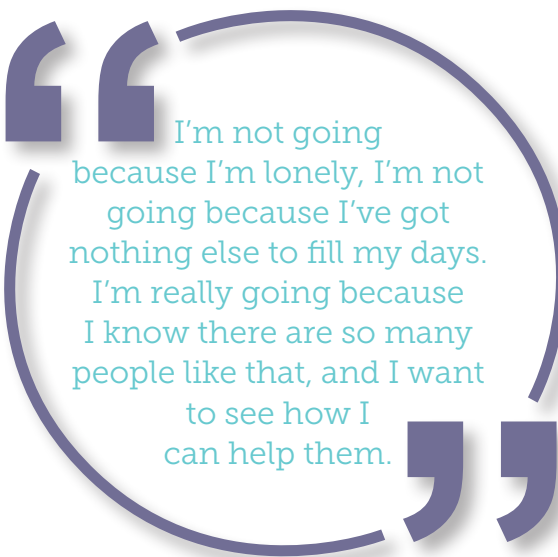
Reaching people from different backgrounds

It can sometimes be appropriate to organise activities just for people from specific backgrounds if this makes them feel more comfortable about taking part. But there are also huge benefits to bringing people together from different backgrounds. It can enhance mutual understanding and challenge fears and misconceptions.

Speakers of languages other than English

A lack of English language skills can result in people being isolated and less likely to engage in community activities.

- Language-café-style groups (where people meet in a café setting to chat and practise their conversational skills with help from a tutor) are a great way for people to improve their language skills in an informal setting.



I'm not going because I'm lonely, I'm not going because I've got nothing else to fill my days. I'm really going because I know there are so many people like that, and I want to see how I can help them.

- Even if your group is not specifically looking to improve people's English, it may help do this just by bringing people together to chat. Use this benefit to attract people who want to improve their English.
- Find out what community languages are spoken locally. If there are groups of people you are struggling to get involved, consider promoting your activity in the appropriate language, or getting someone from the community to help you.

Ammanah Ladies' Group

Challenge

Engaging older women with limited English language skills.

Solution

Ammanah Ladies' Group provides a range of activities for women over 60 from the Yemeni community and is run by younger female volunteers.

English lessons are offered alongside exercise classes and day trips, which provide further opportunities to speak English and practice what they have learnt in an informal environment amongst friends.

The English lessons focus on everyday English – getting the bus, going to the shops and so on, thereby making it easier for the women to engage with the wider community and reduce isolation.

The organiser suggests the Group's growing popularity is down to positive word-of-mouth within the community. This has helped to tackle negative perceptions about learning. Younger Yemeni women are now bringing along their older female relatives or neighbours to the Group.



The group knew they were going to struggle to get the Somalian community involved, so they got a Somalian speaker to go out and promote it. That's been the most successful.

Some older LGBT people also feel that the gay scene is mainly focused on young people and that there are fewer opportunities to join activities where they feel comfortable as an older person. Older LGBT people may also be more reticent about their sexuality.

Sexual orientation

Older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are also at greater risk of social isolation. They may be wary about joining general community activities and social groups following a lifetime's experience of discrimination, stigma and family rejection.

We're not talking just about people who are hidden, as in hard to reach, but are in hiding. You have to get information to people who don't want other people to know they're getting that information.

- Make it clear if your activity is open to all and is welcoming to people who are LGBT. Think about how to make people feel safe and comfortable when they attend.



- Consider whether a group or activity specifically for LGBT people may provide a more comfortable space for some.
- Distribute information about your activity in public places and not only in LGBT-specific venues in order to reach a wide audience.

Carers

A carer is someone who cares for a family member or friend

who, due to disability, a mental health condition, an addiction or illness, cannot manage without their support.

Because of these sometimes considerable commitments, carers can find it more difficult to take part in social activities and groups.

- While many people may care for a partner, relative or friend, they may not see themselves as a 'carer'. So you might want to avoid using this word when promoting your group. Instead, emphasise the activity and what is appealing about it.
- Those who are responsible for the care of a relative or partner may find it difficult to make time to take part in activities. Plan and advertise events several weeks in advance so that carers are able to make alternative caring arrangements more easily.
- Strategies which encourage participants to bring a friend have been successful at attracting carers to attend community groups – consider doing the same.

Walk Down Memory Lane, Birmingham

Challenge

Engaging older carers

Solution

Walk Down Memory Lane was started by Gloria, whose husband has dementia. Gloria decided to apply to Ageing Better in Birmingham for funding to start a group where people with dementia can come and spend time reminiscing about the past, listening to music and visiting places of interest.

The group attracts people with dementia, their carers, and older people from the local community who enjoy the company and the chance to talk about the past. Not only does the group welcome carers to attend, but it also provides a safe space for their loved-ones for a couple of hours while they take some well-deserved respite.



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. 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) £78million 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

Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC)

www.bvsc.org

Centre for Ageing Better

www.ageing-better.org.uk

Community Transport Association

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

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