

Informal conversational strategies

Engaging people less likely to access formal groups, services, activities and support

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This toolkit was developed by Age UK Camden and The Good Practice Mentor Team and shares learning from the Ageing Better programme (2015-2022), a National Lottery Community funded project that developed innovative ways to connect people aged 50+ to their communities to reduce loneliness and isolation.

Age UK Camden specialised in supporting community groups and organisations across the UK, to use tried and tested, practical outreach approaches to find, engage and capture insight from harder to reach people, particularly those less likely to access or be known to formal groups, activities, services and support.



Using outreach as a tool to find and engage the people ‘no-one knows’

A proactive outreach approach involves going out into the community to find and engage people in the places and spaces people live their lives, including out on the street and on the doorstep.

Ageing Better in Camden successfully found and engaged with almost 3,000 people via street outreach, door-knocking and hosting informal pop-up events. 23% of those engaged through outreach activity went on to attend an outreach stepping-stone event and over 10% went on to embed in ongoing activities. This outreach approach also helped to find and connect individuals to their local communities and help people to establish their own informal social networks.



You can read more about the outreach approach developed by Ageing Better in Camden in the **Working with Older People Journal**.

This toolkit brings together practical outreach learning and informal conversational approaches to overcome barriers to engagement and capturing insight from people less likely to be found or participate in formal methods of engagement.



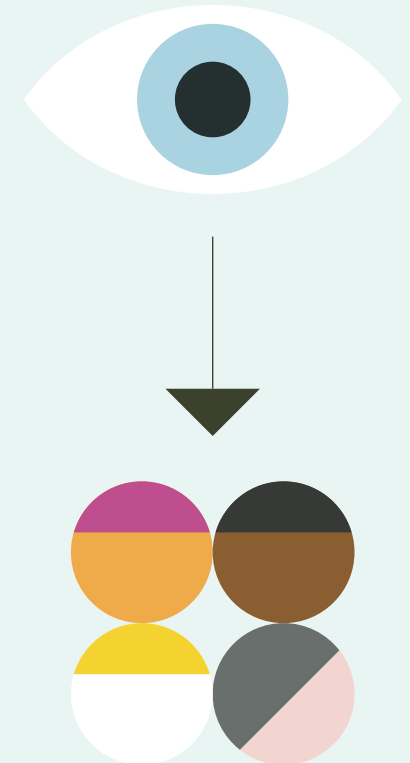
Insight from people less likely to access groups, activities, services and support - common preconceptions and barriers to engaging harder to reach people

Often the people we most want to reach, say 'no' to our offer of groups, activities, services, and support.

The informal nature of outreach engagements enables insight to be captured from the people and voices we might not hear from otherwise. For many people, 'it's not for me' preconceptions are common and can be a significant barrier to successful engagement.

Commonly held preconceptions and barriers include:

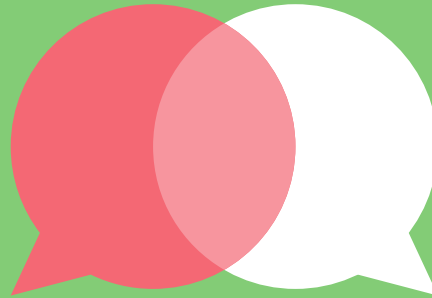
- **Perceptions around age and 'older people'.** Very few people in their 50s, 60, 70s and often 80s, regard themselves as an 'older person'. When asked, they assume that groups and services are for people who are much older e.g. 80s and 90s, and are for the people they identify as being older.
- Preconceptions about services and support being for people who are **'vulnerable'**, the people who really need help and looking after **'the people who need it more than me'**.



- Life experience has not involved joining or participating in groups, clubs or activities in the past resulting in **a preconception that 'it's not a space/place for me'.**

- Once someone becomes isolated, people often develop an **'I'm not a joiner/I don't go to things' mindset** which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and significant barrier to future participation and engagement.

- Precontemplation - **Not thinking about taking action. Not actively looking for, or proactively seeking out information or opportunities** to expand social networks.
- If people are socially isolated, the thought of taking a **social risk** - having to go somewhere new for the first time, meet new people, make small talk, make friends and/or experience social rejection, can be overwhelming. **As a result, it becomes easier not to take this step.**



**Using an informal conversation
approach to build rapport with
people less likely to engage with
a formal offer**

What is a light-touch conversational approach?

- Non-intrusive (not case work, advice giving, a questionnaire or opportunity to ask personal questions e.g. 'do you live alone?').
- Needs to feel like a natural and 'ordinary conversation'.
- Responsive to what the person shares with you and follows their conversational lead.

Be prepared to make chit-chat and keep the conversation running and/or to be the listener and give verbal signs of acknowledgement, 'yes', 'hmm', 'that's interesting/I didn't know that' etc.



During the conversation:

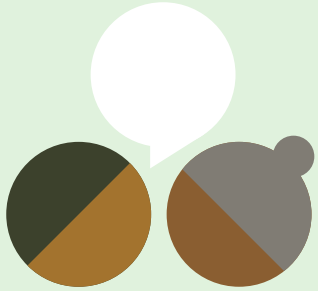
- Stay relaxed and try to make the conversation enjoyable for you both – it could be a valuable social interaction for the person you are engaging.

- Avoid switching to ‘professional mode’ e.g. giving advice. This changes the balance of power and informal nature of your conversation.
- Listen and reflect on what the person is sharing with you.

- Avoid using formal or service jargon as this can quickly bring your conversation to a close.

- Always acknowledge what someone shares with you ‘thank you for telling me that’.
- If the person could benefit from information, help and support, a good ‘non-case worker’ approach can be to say: ‘that sounds like something you might find it useful to talk to someone about. I don’t know about that and/or I’m not the right person but...’. Share the signposting information but most importantly reassurance to get in touch. ‘They would love to hear from you’.

Outreach interactions can range from a brief chat about local activities and social opportunities, to a more in-depth conversation in which the person chooses to share information about themselves.



Due to the light-touch nature and informal feeling of outreach interactions, and the necessity of this approach to build trust and rapport, it's often not appropriate for workers to ask personal questions about the person's situation or circumstances.

However, meaningful insight can still be captured about the person's social world, connections, loneliness and/or isolation based upon:

- something the person discloses/shares in conversation with the outreach worker
- what the outreach worker learns or observes about the person based on the outreach interaction and/or OP's behaviour (e.g. evidence of memory loss, social anxiety, signs of neglect)

Common 'informal conversational indicators' of loneliness and isolation:

It's very rare that a person will tell you 'I'm lonely/I'm isolated'. People often don't want to be perceived as vulnerable and may want to put a positive spin on things, but there are other tells:

- The person 'holds' you in conversation - may not want you to leave, or for the conversation to come to an end.
- The person describes a culture of 'nothing happens here' or not knowing their neighbours. 'People don't talk to each other'.
- The person shares with you 'I don't go out. I don't see people. I don't go to things. I'm not a joiner'.
- Conversation focused upon a specific issue on their mind, e.g. bereavement, health issues, family situation. This might indicate that the person does not have a strong social network to share their worries and concerns with.



Useful conversational questions used to capture insight about the person's social world and connections:

Challenges

Asking someone if they are lonely or isolated and 'closing down' a conversation due to stigma around loneliness and social isolation.

Asking someone with 'it's not for me' barriers and preconceptions about formal groups and activities 'what groups and activities would you like?'

Asking someone who may be isolated and feels 'I don't have any interests' about their hobbies and interests, and might reinforce their sense of isolation.

Solutions

→ Gaining insight about how a person feels about their social world by asking 'Do you feel that you are meeting enough people?'

→ Keeping questions focused around how and what social connection needs to look and feel like for the person. For example:

- 'Would you like more opportunities to meet other local people?'
- 'Where and how would you like to meet people?'
- What would help you to meet people?

→ Opening up a conversation and gaining insight about a person's day-to-day activities by asking 'How do you enjoy spending your time?'

Challenges

Assuming that someone is isolated if they aren't part of any formal groups and activities.

Underestimating the impact and value of 'weak social ties' (research shows that casual acquaintances can boost happiness, knowledge and a sense of belonging, particularly where you live).

Asking someone directly if they are getting out into the community.

Solutions

→ Capture insight about how they might be engaging with other, less formal assets in their community, by asking for recommendations, for example:

- 'Lots of people I'm meeting are looking for good places to go locally, for example like a friendly café, park or somewhere to exercise. Is there anywhere you could recommend that I could tell other people about?'

→ Capture insight about the person's informal social connections and their local community by asking:


- 'Do you know your neighbours – do you find people say hello to each other?'

→ Finding out if someone is getting out and being active in the local area by asking about local transport routes and infrastructure:


- 'What's the local transport network like, is it easy to get around?'
- 'Where are the best places to go shopping locally?'

Asking the questions:

- Be friendly, informal and conversational. Ask follow-up and prompt questions to capture deeper insight: 'I don't know my neighbours – nobody speaks to each other around here'. Ask 'why do you think that is? Do you ever chat or say hello to neighbours?'
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- Don't treat the questions like a 'questionnaire'. Take any notes discreetly after the conversation has ended or ask the person if they would mind you making a note of something shared with you – for example, feedback or recommendations about their area.
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- Asking for personal contact details is likely to feel too formal and/or raise suspicion and by doing so compromise the interaction and opportunity to capture insight. If you need to collect any formal data, keep this to a minimum. Don't let data collection become a barrier to engagement.



**I don't know my
neighbours –
nobody speaks
to each other
around here**



**Why do you
think that is?
Do you ever chat
or say hello to
neighbours?**

Using street outreach and informal conversational strategies as a tool for social action research

In addition to using outreach approaches and informal conversational strategies to capture insight about loneliness and isolation, this approach has also been used successfully to support organisations to capture other areas of insight from seldom-heard voices.

For example, a large primary care network adopted this method to capture insight from people more likely to visit A&E

rather than GPs for support with breathing problems. A local authority also captured insight to inform their Older People's Strategic Needs Assessment.

As an example of street outreach as a tool for social action research in practice, please read the following Ageing Better in Camden report 'Connecting Older Men to their Communities', which shares details of the approach and

the insight captured from older men about their preferences for social connection, out in the street, in pubs and in sheltered housing:

Outreach Learning Report – Connecting older men to their communities (PDF, 977KB)

Further information, training and support, including;

- street outreach skills
 - producing outreach-friendly comms
 - using street outreach as a tool for social action research
 - informal conversational strategies
 - where and how to find the people you most want to reach
- are available to groups and organisations anywhere in the UK.

For more information, please contact:

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<https://www.syha.co.uk/wellbeing/improve-your-wellbeing/good-practice-mentors/>

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