

Positives of Digital Connection

Introduction

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme. It is collecting information and insights from across 14 partnerships to identify learning that will be useful for other programmes and organisations delivering activities aimed at reducing social isolation in people aged 50+.

We have grouped our national learning around Ageing Better into three themes:

- **CONTEXT** - We know from Ageing Better that the reasons for social isolation are many and varied and happen for a myriad of reasons including macro issues such as inequalities and deprivation as well as personal circumstances. These often occur in combination meaning people's situations are complex.
- **CONNECTIONS** - The people who are most socially isolated (where isolation is entrenched and embedded) will need some level of one-to-one support to help address their isolation.
- **ECOSYSTEM** - The Ecosystem is fundamental to addressing social isolation as it is the space where individuals connect with the community. It works preventatively to keep people socially connected and steps in when social isolation occurs. It includes interventions that people 'need'; activities and groups people 'want' to engage with; opportunities and provision for people to set up their own groups and community development, that includes age friendly activity.

This paper focuses on our learning about the advantages which digital has brought to some Ageing Better projects and participants in enabling groups of people to meet, helping people to feel connected and supported in new and evolving ways during Covid-19.

It is based on the learning and insights from nine Ageing Better areas: Bristol, Camden, East Lindsey, Leeds, Leicester, Middlesbrough, Sheffield, Thanet and Torbay who all attended a workshop to explore this theme plus learning reports produced by partnerships.

Covid-19 is an unprecedented situation affecting the lives of people across the globe, but which is particularly impacting on the older and those classed as "vulnerable". Since March 2020, when the initial Covid-19 "lockdown" restrictions were introduced, Ageing Better has produced a series of briefings capturing real "in-time" learning. These are aimed at practitioners, funders and third sector organisations.

They aim to share learning and insights from the Ageing Better network about the issues and challenges faced by those supporting people aged 50+ who are experiencing social isolation and loneliness. We also aim to showcase what is working well and to highlight some of the innovation and good practice which this sector continues to bring to individuals and communities coping with the impact of Covid-19.

Background to our digital learning

One of the key insights from work during the Covid lockdowns was around digital inequalities. We produced a paper, “Bridging the Digital Divide” which identified the different groups of people struggling to access digital content, the barriers they faced and insights from across Ageing Better on how to respond. Revisiting this topic in February 2021, the digital divide remains a huge issue requiring significant focus to ensure equality of access to the wide range of digital opportunities.

The transition to digital platforms, has, however been hugely beneficial to some groups. It has allowed people who were house bound and socially isolated either as a result of mental and physical challenges or caring responsibilities to be a more active participant in groups and activities and therefore more connected than they had been before

Ageing Better aims to work with people who are socially isolated. We have learnt that working to reconnect with people who have entrenched social isolation will take time, needs to be done in a person centred, holistic way often through the development of a relationship built on trust. A distinct feature of the digital interactions created through Ageing Better is that they are promoting meaningful connections. This means creating opportunities for people to get to know one another and to connect in a way that is meaningful to them.

There are many benefits that the digital world provides in allowing people to access events, galleries, talks and activities online - often anonymously. This learning paper aims to explore where digital technology is proving to be an important tool in working to reduce social isolation through the development of meaningful connections.

We fully recognise the continuing inequalities that exist for people in trying to access digital opportunities and at key points throughout this report we reference specific challenges people may face. The main focus for this report, however, is to highlight the positive elements identified for individuals as a result of Ageing Better activities and groups that are now taking place on digital platforms during the pandemic.

For the purposes of this report “digital” means any activity taking place online as well as those group activities that take place over a phone line. These often make use of digital platforms but the participants aren’t having to access digital platforms themselves.

Embracing the difference of digital delivery

An important piece of learning from across Ageing Better is recognising what digital sessions can and can’t offer. At the start of Covid-19 in lockdown 1.0 all face to face activity had to stop and there was a huge investment made to move as much activity as possible online in a bid to replicate previous face to face interaction. A key insight we gained was that online is not the same as face to face. It is different and so the approach to it and our expectations of it need to be different as well.

Digital groups will be different from face to face groups and subsequently the experience they offer to people will also be different. Online offers a type of social

interaction requiring different skills, focus and approach. The most successful digital delivery doesn't just try to replicate what is offered in face to face sessions. The difference needs to be acknowledged and embraced by organisations/groups so that the digital activity can then be judged on its own merits and applied where it provides greatest potential.

For whom does digital activity offer most?

Digital sessions have a particular resonance for people in certain situations. We learned that for many people who had been housebound and isolated for many years they were now more connected than ever as a result of the expansion of online activity and services.

We also heard how digital provision can help provide activities in areas where there aren't enough accessible venues or locations with poor transport links etc., Areas have found that a number of new participants with low levels of confidence have specifically joined online activities as online meant that they could both participate and meet people in a group in a way that feels less daunting.

We also heard that many Connectors or Social Prescribers working with a person who was housebound had always had great difficulty in connecting them to a group or activity that was accessible from their home. The irony is that there have been more opportunities for connection for some during Covid than ever before.

Ageing Better areas have also identified additional ways in which digital delivery will continue to be an important access route and medium beyond lockdown. Digital can help people who may struggle to get out at weekends or in the evening because of caring responsibilities, transport difficulties, their own mobility or external conditions like the weather. Carers in particular, we heard were a group who were particularly isolated within the home (even more so than pre pandemic as a result of the loss of respite care and face to face activities) and for whom being connected online provided a lifeline.

Crucially this means that having "opened the door" to this group of people and the increased opportunities it presents for social connection, digital platforms will play an ongoing part of future delivery models. Covid-19 has shown how digital platforms can help reach and connect with people who would otherwise be excluded.

A different approach for a different medium

As discussed above, it is important for the third sector to think about how inclusive they can make their digital offer. We suggest that it is also important to adopt a different approach when developing digital provision. This means looking at it as a different medium - not as "simply" moving a class or group online. There is a wider spectrum of support needs and organisational requirements to consider including ensuring that people have the right kit and the right on-going support for them to use it as well as also thinking about the best way to organise and facilitate an activity online.

It is important to acknowledge the challenge and time associated with getting people online. People often need and benefit from 1:1 IT support. Across Ageing Better areas we heard that between the lockdowns (when restrictions were relaxed) offering "tea and technology" type sessions helped get people started and gain more confidence with IT. Organisations have also offered digital support in groups to help people make better use of and access the range of opportunities provided online. These happen by first investing time through phone calls and "how to" guides to help people get online, before holding group sessions that allow them to connect with

other people going on a similar digital journey. This support includes the technical know how and how to guides but also providing mentoring and increasing a person's confidence to use the technology. We explored this and the important role that a "Digital Connector" could perform in supporting people to move online in our "Digital Divide" report.

The support required can be roughly grouped into:

- providing the equipment
- resourcing and setting up the wifi or data links needed to go online
- the support and training to use the IT and access online platforms such as Zoom etc.,

We heard how many areas have been working hard to help fund raise for these resources. We found that gifts of or funding for the kit is generally easier to access. However, there is less understanding or appreciation of the time commitment/person hours needed to support an individual to increase their confidence to go online. This is proving much harder to find funding for.

We also heard about the additional challenge involved in supporting people who had low levels of functional literacy to get online as it was very difficult to assist through normal online guides or trying to support people to navigate via what was written on keyboard keys. There is considerable stigma associated with poor literacy and this is an area that digital connectors and those supporting people to get online need to be aware of in working with individuals and in adapting resources as a result. A further challenge that has had to be faced during the pandemic has been how to help people navigate new IT equipment when they can't be in the same room face to face. Many areas have been doing this work over the phone and in some situations socially distanced through living room windows or gardens.

The benefits of getting people online go beyond the initial ability or opportunity to interact with a group or activity into developing the ability and confidence in order to then take part in a broader range of online activities such as online shopping or banking.

Co-production has been a key principle within Ageing Better but projects have found that when first introducing and supporting people to access digital sessions or opportunities it was more helpful to start in a more directive way with an initial narrow range of options from which people could select. This then allowed people to gain more confidence more quickly. Being too optimistic and opening the door to the huge opportunities presented by technology initially could often be overwhelming and lead to decision paralysis.

Telephone

Alongside the groups that take place online we also heard about the importance of telephone groups. Much of the learning highlighted during this work around digital platforms applies equally to telephone groups. These "phone in" groups play an important role in Ageing Better. They are a vital means for those people who are unable or unwilling to go online to still benefit from meaningful connections with others via the phone. These groups may provide a stepping stone to support members to move into the online world but it is important to recognise that telephone groups offer members something equally valuable in themselves for those who use them to connect.

Most of the telephone groups use the format of participants phoning in. Many people are confident with doing this, but it does mean that it is not accessible for everyone

e.g. it usually involves inputting a pin/access code, which some people may find tricky. Some phone systems use an automated voice or a voice with an American accent, which people may suspect is a scam. In some cases, the facilitator will 'phone out' to the participant so that all they need to do is answer the phone. This makes it more accessible but whether this is possible depends on the phone system being used and also the size of the group.

Learning was that the maximum optimum size for a telephone group was 4 or 5 so as to ensure people weren't talking over each other. We heard from one phone club made up of local older neighbours that members now recognised each other from the sound of their voices having never met in person. We also found that phone groups might need to be shorter than online groups, as it can be uncomfortable to hold the phone to your ear for a long period of time (particularly if using a phone without a speaker e.g. many landlines).

Key Learning: Digital delivery offers something different from face to face. Covid-19 has shown it is an effective tool for developing meaningful connections. It has been particularly beneficial for those people already socially isolated due to mobility, ill health or caring responsibilities. Getting people online is hard and the challenge should not be underestimated and considering ways of doing this should form part of developing online opportunities. Funders also need to appreciate the need to resource the ongoing support needs people have beyond providing the "kit". Getting people online has a wider ripple of benefits beyond the initial class or activity they access.

Activities and reach

Across Ageing Better there has been a huge variety of types of activities that have been offered online. A key feature of Ageing Better learning to date has been the importance of being able to offer this wide variety of activity because one of the ways in which we make a social connection and develop a friendship with someone is by having a shared interest. So having a variety of activities increases the opportunities for people to go on and make those connections.

This holds true for online activities and the range of activity has included virtual world tours, history talks and festivals alongside physical activity sessions and 1:1 support services (including counselling and social prescribing). The breadth and variety reflect the impact and universality of the Covid-19 pandemic and the speed at which new ways of working needed to be found. However, as the Covid-19 pandemic has progressed the understanding of what translates well to digital platforms has also grown. It has also allowed a greater understanding of those activities that lead to a meaningful connection.

Across Ageing Better, we found that already established groups transitioned best to digital platforms as there was an existing connection within the group. New people could join of course but there was an existing dynamic in the group to start with. New groups can also work, but they need a lot more support and active facilitation to help make them work and for people within them to belong and feel connected.

We also found shared activities work well, for example reading groups and even cooking. Across Ageing Better, however, there were mixed experiences about the effectiveness of singing groups moving online, largely as a result of the technology and timelag. Activities that involved a presenter also translated well. This included physical activity sessions such as yoga or pilates but also talks.

A key requirement of the digital offer through Ageing Better was the opportunity to create meaningful connections within the groups which was aided by creating opportunities for informal social interaction at the start and end of a session. This was a key piece of learning from our earlier learning work around face to face groups. Informal social time provides the space for people to create meaningful connections and friendships and this is hugely valuable whether face to face or online.

We heard about ways in which projects are helping create a sense of belonging within an online group such as providing members with a similar mug so that everyone could have a cup of tea together during the session. Additional ways to develop the social interaction and connectedness included setting up WhatsApp or Facebook groups alongside the activities so that people could chat between sessions. We heard that it was particularly valuable to have a “getting to know you” session for telephone groups, due to the lack of body language and other visual clues.

Digital activities present a clear opportunity to reach more people. But we continued to find that for many online Ageing Better activities and groups keeping the sessions and activities authentically local remained important. This links back to earlier learning around having a hook, base or point of shared interest for people. This is an important part of helping people to connect with each other through their local areas for example by being able to discuss local landmarks and shops etc., and has the potential to develop friendships beyond Covid.

We fully recognise the role digital platforms play in helping dispersed groups to connect. Again the range of online activities mean that there is a greater chance of there being a group that an individual wants to be part of and connect with. We were struck that during the pandemic Ageing Better delivery our learning highlighted another way of using digital platforms that allows for digital delivery to be local and so to allow meaningful connections to form.

We found across Ageing Better a wide range of tools and techniques being used to reach people. These included non-digital tools, such as printed newsletters, directing people to digital opportunities as well as social media. A key insight was how useful social media could be as family and friends would often use this to link people to opportunities.

Key Learning: Many different types of groups have translated to digital platforms. Shared activities work as do those where there is a presenter. All activities benefit from opportunities for social interaction. As with face to face activities it remains important to offer as wide a selection as possible (including a range of activities and interests or geography) to increase the opportunities for people to meet and connect with others. We found that people could be reached to join sessions via both on and offline routes.

Online volunteers

Volunteers play an important role across all the activities offered by Ageing Better. But Covid-19 has been enormously challenging for many volunteers aged 50+. At the start of the pandemic a wide range of these volunteer roles were “stood down”. Many Ageing Better volunteers found themselves in the groups deemed most vulnerable to Covid-19 and as the country shut down their normal volunteering roles also ceased.

Pre pandemic many Ageing Better projects were running volunteer led activities alongside groups and activities led by paid staff. As the pandemic has evolved more

activity has been developed online but we have heard that areas have not been successful in recruiting or re-engaging pre pandemic volunteers aged 50+ to lead online group sessions. Some volunteers who had been attracted by the social opportunity provided by face to face groups just felt this could not be replicated online. For others it was the pressure of the IT and hosting online. But we also heard that several areas had been recruiting specifically for volunteer “digital buddies” and had had a good response for this one to one support.

Across Ageing Better our learning points to the continued importance of a person centred approach and this applies as much to supporting volunteers as it does to supporting participants. Ageing Better as well as the wider sector will be looking at how to support the re-engagement of volunteers aged 50+ into activity as this becomes more possible following the vaccination roll out and lifting of Government restrictions.

Previous established good practice in working with volunteers can be revisited and adapted for online delivery and volunteering opportunities. For example, identifying the “new” roles and functions so that people are clear about what is involved as well as the support and training which would be available. In the case of online groups some volunteers might be very happy to concentrate on covering the technology side during online sessions whilst others prefer to facilitate or act as social convener during the session. A key piece of learning from across Ageing Better is how important it is to create time to check in with and support volunteers in the same way as for participants.

At the same time we have seen that a “new” cohort of volunteers have been motivated to get active and contribute within their community through the pandemic. In some settings the digital opportunities have opened up the volunteering opportunities to a much wider range of people. These are people of all ages who as a result of furlough or the fact that activities are now taking place in evenings and weekends are now in a position to volunteer. In addition many organisations have now adapted training and induction sessions to take place online meaning that these can be accessed by people who either didn’t have the time or mobility to attend face to face sessions during working hours or at a particular location. Online training sessions can also run regardless of the volunteer’s location meaning it can be accessed more quickly and so reducing waiting times. This is a potential opportunity to develop in the future.

Key Learning: There is huge diversity in the volunteer pool and what they may be happy to lead on or support with. As with earlier learning it is important that we support volunteers through a person centred approach. In general, across Ageing Better we found some volunteers were reluctant to lead on digital sessions. But Covid-19 had also broadened the number of people interested in volunteering.

Practicalities

Our learning from Ageing Better is that digital sessions are one of the tools that can be used to help create meaningful connections and so help tackle social isolation and loneliness.

As we have referenced already in this report, digital platforms provide a vital means to connect for a range of people who are otherwise effectively excluded. But how the groups themselves actually operate is also hugely important. Effective groups operate in a way that helps build the confidence of members, making them feel

welcome and valued. These are crucial features in supporting people to connect and feel part of a community which in turn helps reduce their feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

We highlighted in our “Groups” report the critical role the facilitator plays and this remains as important (if not more so) when it comes to digital groups. The facilitator helps to set the group’s culture as well as its rules and expectations. These include for example, etiquette around “muting”, rules on speaking in the group, what to do if people lose internet connection and use of names before speaking.

The facilitator also plays an important role in supporting everyone to engage with the session. Taking part in a digital session requires people to feel supported so as to be able to not only contribute but equally to allow others to speak and be an active listener. Ageing Better projects by definition are working with people who are socially isolated and who have felt lonely for some time. People experiencing loneliness can, when they join a group often either say very little or be the participant who is speaking all the time and both those behaviours can be a challenge when facilitating a group online.

We also heard that the development of online groups now requires the facilitator role to effectively cover two elements - that of the traditional facilitator and that of the technology organiser. The facilitator helps spark social interactions in the group. The technology lead helps organise the technology but also keeps participants aware of digital privacy and online safety. They can also help manage break out rooms or provide the one to one support a person may need to get online or if they lose connection during the session etc., Having two facilitators can be particularly beneficial in running a successful online group, so allowing one person to manage the technology and any issues arising whilst the other can focus on the group. It also provides a back-up in case one of the facilitators experiences internet problems on the day.

Overall, the preference across Ageing Better was to use Zoom rather than MS Teams. And our learning was small groups of 8 to 12 people were the optimum size, although they could be larger if the session was a talk or presentation. This links to being clear on the purpose of the group and recognising how the purpose will influence the size of the group.

More information on practical approaches to digital activities is provided in Appendix 1. Camden have adapted their Warm Welcome guidance for groups to specifically highlight the features of welcoming digital delivery.

Looking forward

Covid-19 accelerated the transition to digital working. For some socially isolated people aged 50+ this has opened a world of opportunity. This is particularly the case for people with mobility and health challenges, transport issues and caring responsibilities. This is not to downplay the continuing impact of the digital divide or the challenge of supporting people to connect online.

Digital opportunities have not only increased access for an important group of people who we now need to continue to support but also offers a range of advantages as a medium in delivering opportunities to connect. Having “opened the door” to a group of people and the increased opportunities it presents for social connection, digital platforms will play an ongoing part of future delivery models.

Covid-19 has shown how digital platforms can help to both reach and connect with people who would otherwise be excluded. Digital provision will remain an important and evolving way to provide activities and opportunities for people within the mixed

model of “new normal” delivery.

Appendix 1 – A “digital” warm welcome

All of the Ageing Better areas have identified the importance of providing a warm welcome as part of a successful group, with Camden in particular having looked very closely at what this means and ways to achieve it. Ageing Better in Camden partners have adapted and developed their practice as a result of delivering through a variety of media often online during the pandemic.

The following is a summary of their guide which shares welcoming approaches used by Camden partners in their adapted programmes.

1. Welcome everyone by using a range of formats

Running different groups using different formats (or repeating the ‘same’ group using a different format) maximises the number of group members who are included and stay socially connected to one another:

Blended groups, such as an exercise class which is simultaneously run in person and online, mean that more people are able to attend.

2. Provide support to join groups

Preparing people to join an adapted group can help them to do so with confidence and put them at their ease.

For example:

- Have an initial conversation, if there is a choice, about which groups are of interest and the format they would like to use to attend.
- Call those who are joining a group for the first time to talk them through what to expect, answer questions and provide reassurance.
- Make reminder calls shortly before a session to encourage participants to come along knowing that they are expected. This call can also be an opportunity to chat about any difficulties or concerns and allow that person to come to a group session in a more positive state of mind.
- Provide additional practical support, for example some partners have been able to organise provision of devices and digital training/support to enable a member to join an online group.

3. Make adapted groups welcoming

- Greet group members in a friendly way as soon as they arrive, whatever the format, making sure that everyone is introduced or introduces themselves by name.
- Remember people’s names and details about them to use (sensitively) in conversation and reinforce their sense of connection.
- Give everyone the opportunity to contribute without interruption. This may require the leader to structure turn-taking by naming people and is particularly important when online or in a telephone group where it is not obvious who is next in line to speak. Where necessary remind those not talking to mute their microphones.

- Encourage and support participation

In more open-ended social groups, you may have a topic as the focus of a session to help the conversation flow and can also help by asking follow-up questions.

In telephone groups, pay particular attention to voice to recognise who is speaking, not speaking and who may need encouragement.

Technology can make it difficult for everyone to hear one another. In blended sessions in particular, it may be necessary to repeat what online participants are saying to make it clear to those in the room and vice versa.

Sometimes you may need to have a volunteer translator on hand.

- Create a friendly, relaxed atmosphere

Use animated voice and/or body language to engage participants in distanced activities but do so sensitively: don't be 'over the top'.

Recognise and accept when someone does not want to be the focus or contribute. Similarly, be relaxed when someone joins after the start of a session or has trouble with technology.

- Build social time into a session

Ringfence 10-15 minutes for informal chat at the start and/or end of a session.

As part of Zoom or telephone group sessions, use break out groups of 3 or 4 people to make chat easier and to create a good social mix (e.g. include someone who is friendly and inclusive in each group; vary the mix over sessions so everyone gets to know each other).

There is less danger of cliques in these structured/smaller groups and members who have less social activity in their lives because of restrictions are often happy to meet and welcome new people.

- Try to keep some groups small

It will provide the best chance for all to be involved especially online/within telephone groups where interactions flow less easily.

It will make it easier for you to be attentive or supportive when needed. One organisation runs some smaller 'cozy' social groups especially for new members or those who might be nervous.

Face-to-face groups are smaller at the moment and can be used to provide a 'supercharged' warm welcome which supports relationship development.

4. Maintain and develop a sense of belonging

- Keep in touch with group members.

Use newsletters, emails, WhatsApp or other forms of communication to stay in touch with whole groups.

Call individuals by telephone/Zoom, text or email to check-in and keep in touch with members between sessions, especially if they have unexpectedly not attended or there is a special concern.

This contact and support from a well-known staff member and organisation can provide huge reassurance.

- Group members keeping in touch

Set up systems to encourage ongoing member to member contact between those who have given consent e.g. a WhatsApp group or offline alternative where group members call and check-in with one another.

- Value group members by sharing their contributions

Share work that members produce in groups or their news. This could be writing, videos, photographs, drawings and so on. Share it on blogs, websites, YouTube, email or by post.

- Involve group members in activities and supporting others

Encourage members to contribute ideas about activities they would like or organisation of the group.

Encourage members who want to take on extra responsibility.

5. Address challenging behaviour

Modelling welcoming behaviour, proactive group management and small groups will limit instances of challenging behaviour e.g. talking for too long, interrupting others or failing to include everyone in the conversation. If problems do occur and persist, the practitioner will need to take further action taking care to challenge the behaviour not the person.

- Give a reminder to the whole group at the start of each session about expectations for behaviour.
- Intervene to move a conversation on or to counteract negative behaviour using positive language as far as possible.
- Speak to someone outside a session to address behaviour, checking if they are experiencing problems which might explain it. Given the stresses of the Covid-19 context, this may well be the case.

The style of such interventions will to some extent be personal to the individual group leader. It is likely to be easier when there is an existing relationship between the leader and those involved but may nevertheless be a necessary part of ensuring that a newer member becomes an accepted member of the group.

Further information

- Age Better in Birmingham - [Staying Connected - Guidance for AB groups in adapting to Covid-19](#)
[Maintaining social connections with older people remotely](#)
- Ageing Better in Camden - [Creating a warm welcome to maintain older people's sense of belonging in the context of Covid-19: a practitioners guide](#)
[Providing support for digital engagement](#)
- Bristol Ageing Better - [What has the Bristol Support Hub for Older People learnt about online and group activities](#)
[Recorded learning event](#)

[Using technology to reach and engage with people aged 50+](#)

- Ambition for Ageing (Greater Manchester) - [Developing social contact models in a time of social distancing](#)

Literature review [Use of information and Communication Technologies to support social connections for older people](#)

- East Lindsey (TED) - [Digital Inclusion](#)

[How to Guides](#)

- Connect Hackney - [Can the use of technology help to reduce social isolation and loneliness](#)
- Ageing Better in Middlesbrough - [Supporting people over 50 to become digitally included](#)
- Time to Shine (Leeds) - [Exploring the online world](#)
[Helping people to get online](#)

Blog on [Digital inclusion](#)

- Age Better in Sheffield - [Smart Phones Smart Friends](#)
- Ageless Thanet Film - [How many activities do you think you can do online](#)
- Ageing Better national learning - [Bridging the Digital Divide](#)
[Telephone Befriending](#)
[Groups](#)

More information on the Ageing Better Programme together including insights from across the programme are available at [Ageing Better](#)