

AGE BETTER
IN SHEFFIELD

Engaging Older Men
in Age Better in Sheffield
projects



Context

Age Better in Sheffield has been working in partnership delivering projects since 2015 aimed at reducing social isolation and loneliness in people aged 50 or over. As one of 14 Ageing Better programmes across the country funded through the National Lottery Community Fund, we are aware of common themes that are emerging across all programmes. One of these is the challenge of engaging older men in our projects. Ageing Better nationally has attracted proportionally more older women than men and this is also true in Sheffield. We know from research that statistically older men are more likely to be socially isolated than older women and that a number of reasons are suggested for this:

- The way in which men build social relationships can make them more vulnerable to social isolation than women as they age
- Retired men are more at risk of social isolation as their social interactions are often centred on their workplace
- Older men who are bereaved or divorced may discover they have relied on a partner for maintaining friendships and social networks and therefore face social isolation.

Despite the fact that older men undoubtedly experience loneliness and social isolation, it has been challenging to engage men in the various ABiS initiatives developed so far. This digest will look at some of the challenges faced by our delivery partners as well as examining what worked well and what could be developed in the future.

The Challenges

Wellbeing Practitioners observed that for men there is a perceived traditional social stigma attached to the concept of talking therapies. Older men have grown up and been socialised in an era when counselling was not as available, where culturally it was not the “done” thing for men to talk about their feelings or to acknowledge they were not coping. Counselling requires acceptance of help and the acknowledgement of the need for support; the prevailing attitude seen among older men was not wanting to access support and that they would “manage it themselves”.

For **Better Journeys** there was a feeling that older men are less likely to use public transport than older women and statistical evidence supports this.

Projects operating in BAME communities are faced with the challenge of gender segregation for group activities. At the **A Better Life** social café, it is interesting to note that those attending naturally divide into 2 groups with a number of older Pakistani women forming one group and BAME men and white British older women sitting round another table. Gender stereotypes can result in some activities being seen as, “for women” or, “not for men”. Community venues in general can appear to be female dominated spaces or perceived as being for “old people” and therefore of less interest to men. Finding suitable venues for a men’s group and finding a focus for the group are both challenges that projects including **Live Better: Get Connected** faced.

** There have also been difficulties engaging men in case studies and getting them to be involved in promoting ABiS e.g. photos etc.

What didn't work well?

Just as with women, "older men" are not one homogenous group and it cannot be assumed that we know what all men prefer, or that all men will be drawn to the same activity. Making assumptions can result in a number of failed activities that never really get off the ground. ABiS projects agreed that the following had not worked well when trying to engage older men:

- Creative activities
- Drop ins
- Anything where they are labelled as a "beneficiary"
- Word of mouth
- Men in sheds - not everyone "fits in"
- Coffee mornings or an invite to "just come along and socialise"
- Group work- sharing weaknesses/problems

All delivery partners agreed that trying to get men to come to you does not work and that it is better to make initial contact with them in their own environment. Wellbeing Practitioners tried making contact through shops and barbers but found proprietors were not keen to raise the topic of loneliness and social isolation in their workplace.

Men in Sheds

It is interesting to note that the Isle of Wight Ageing Better Programme has had considerable success with "Men in Sheds" and have developed a wide range of activities from aviation to engineering to music as well as those more traditional "shed" activities. The variety of the activities on offer in "sheds" is certainly the reason this project's success in engaging with older men.

Camden's delivery partners also felt that Men's Sheds have been instrumental in helping to engage with older men because they offer an environment where men can use their skills in a social setting and the emphasis is on using and improving skills rather than on the socialising.

What worked well

Ignite Imaginations' Start Up project which gives small grants and support to start a group focused on an activity has been successful in engaging men, probably because they are taking the role of organising an activity when setting up a new group. However, Ignite also noted that while their **Sparks project** had engaged lots of men as one off participants, representation on the steering group was minimal even though it was an opportunity for men to lead on something.

The following were found to have worked in engaging men across ABiS projects:

- Male staff/volunteers to engage with men and share common interests
- Trips that are of interest but with a small (non- prohibitive) cost attached as it was felt that men do not like "charity" but do like an invite to something a bit different.
- GP referrals: social prescribing, referring men into ABiS projects. Men were more likely to engage where there was a high level of trust in the referrer
- Collaboration with other people who run groups for men. **Ripple Effect**, a bereavement support project, found it effective to use community connectors which could include undertakers and staff at garden centres to make initial contact with older men.
- Skills or asset-based activities where men feel wanted /helpful or can organise their own activities/ trips
- In predominantly BAME communities it can be good to have separate project activities for men and women
- Informal support
- Having a presence at a group where men already engage

Looking to the future

Our second wave of projects which were commissioned will be running until the end of the Ageing Better National Programme and so there are ongoing opportunities to try new ways to engage with more older men during this period

Ideas from ABiS partners for further engagement:

- Expand on Men's sheds
- Skills swaps
- A focus on the whole family, not just the female client. What help do they need?
- "Pub, pie, pint" informal gathering but promotes talking
- Use local press and publications to get more referrals
- Talk to existing men's groups
- Use other charities for referrals

Top Tip

Offer a variety of activities through the Men's Sheds model. Not all men are attracted to DIY or making something but may prefer music appreciation, local history, photography etc.

Learning from Camden Ageing Better Programme research January 2019

Flexible better than structured: Camden found that men want to retain autonomy over their participation and to be able to come and go within sessions as they would with other activities they might engage in such as going to the gym, visiting pubs, going for a walk etc. Men want opportunities to socialise that do not require a regular commitment or regular attendance. 60% preferred something where they could take part "Whenever I feel like it" and for it to feel "like meeting with friends".

Top Tips

- **Think about the language you use for example, “Skills” not “Support”. Look at how your marketing materials are likely to be received by men and, if appropriate, ensure that an event is marketed as gender neutral. Avoid using the term “volunteer” when asking men to get involved helping to run something. Using the word “men” in the name of a group can have mixed results!**
- **Word of mouth is a great tool for engaging men.**
- **Do use existing networks and be in the place where the people you want to engage are.**
- **Don’t reinvent the wheel - find existing men’s groups to tap in to.**

Learning from Bristol Ageing Better Programme

When choosing a venue, it helps to reflect on who the main users are of that space. Sometimes these differences may appear quite subtle. For example, one project found that having breakfast in a pub was more appealing for older men than having breakfast in a café.

Further reading

<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/older-men-at-the-margins-how-men-combat-loneliness-in-later-life/>

<https://independent-age-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2016-05/isolation-the-emerging-crisis-for-older-men-report.pdf>

<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report.pdf>

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