



Outreach Learning Report

Connecting older men to their communities

A research project by the Ageing Better in Camden Outreach Team
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About Ageing Better in Camden

We are a partnership of older people and Camden organisations, working together to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people. We draw on existing skills and resources in the local community to tackle social isolation and loneliness.



Ageing Better in Camden is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better aims to develop creative ways for people aged over 50 to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. It 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.



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Introduction



The Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) Outreach Team undertook a small research project with older men in Camden, to find out how they currently socialise with others, and what an attractive social activity would look like for them. This report first outlines what research currently tells us about older men and social engagement, and pulls out the key messages from the Outreach Team’s conversations with 38 older men in Camden. Importantly, these are men who are not currently involved in community or social care activities with delivery partners or others.

The ABC Outreach Team works to locate and engage older people who are not accessing activities or support services in Camden. Their focus is on the ‘people no-one knows’. From Feb 2018 - March 2019, 45% of those the Outreach Team met and engaged with were men. However, the vast majority of these 1,361 men did not go on to attend activities with delivery partners. We wanted to gain insight into why this was the case, and what else men wanted if they were not attracted by the offers being presented to them.

For further information about this research or outreach with older men please contact Jo Stapleton, Outreach Manager, Ageing Better in Camden, joanne.stapleton@ageukcamden.org.uk

What do we already know about older men?

Men are more socially isolated than women

Research shows there are differences in how men and women experience loneliness and social isolation.

- The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness estimated that eight million men (of all ages) in the UK feel lonely at least once a week, with nearly three million reporting that it is a daily occurrence¹.
- The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) from 2012/2013 found that over 1.2 million older men reported a moderate to high degree of social isolation and over 700,000 older men reported feeling a high degree of loneliness.
- A review of this data² indicates a higher proportion of older men (14%) experienced moderate to high social isolation compared to 11% of women.
- More men had less than monthly contact with their children or other family members than women, and this contact decreased for men over time as they aged, while it increased for women. Men also had less frequent contact with their friends³.
- Older men without partners are lonelier than women without partners – three-quarters (76%) said they were lonely compared to 71% of single women⁴.
- Men may be more dependent on their partners for social contact and to arrange social engagements and activities with friends, family or others⁵. This may lead to a loss of social contact and increased levels of loneliness when men lose their partners.
- Research shows that increasing numbers of older men are living alone compared to women. The review projected that by 2030, 1.5 million older men will be living alone in England and Wales, an increase of 65%, suggesting that men's levels of loneliness will also increase.

¹ Jopling, K (2017) *Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time A call to action*. Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness

² Beach, B and Bamford, SM (2014) *Isolation: the emerging crisis for older men – A report exploring experiences of social isolation and loneliness among older men in England* Independent Age/International Longevity Centre UK: 2014).

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid; Willis, P and Vickery, A (2019) *Older men at the margins: a study of older men's experiences of seeking social engagement and combating loneliness in later life*. University of Bristol and Age UK

Differences in levels of loneliness holds true for Camden data. Of those taking part in ABC activities, men are experiencing greater social isolation and loneliness than women. Baseline surveys⁶ completed by participants to October 2018 show that:

- 65% of ABC participants to date are female and 35% male;
- 35% of men in ABC projects are classified as ‘most lonely’ compared to 27% of women⁷;
- Conversely, 34% of men are ‘least lonely’, while 45% of women report the same⁸.

It is interesting to note that some research indicates that older women are more likely to say they feel lonely than older men^{9, 10}. Data from the Community Life Survey from 2016-2017 found women reported being lonely more frequently than men, and were much less likely than men to say they never felt lonely. The Ecorys baseline population survey in Camden also found that men reported better outcomes than women for levels of loneliness, social contact and participation¹¹. It is likely however, that this reflects different perceptions of loneliness, and that men may be more reluctant than women to identify as lonely or report this to others¹². While there is little research investigating men’s experience of loneliness and the reasons for it, the Royal Voluntary Service found that more than 1 in 10 men say they are lonely, but would not usually admit it to anyone¹³.

Men are less likely to take part in social activities

Alongside a reliance on partners to arrange social activities, research shows that older men are also less likely to engage with traditional social support services and structured group activities, and are therefore more at risk of social isolation. Key points are

- Men are less likely to seek help from medical services such as their GPs¹⁴
- Men make friends less easily than women¹⁵
- Older women are more likely to take part in activities than men^{16, 17}

⁶ Those taking part or registering for the first time with delivery partners in Camden are asked to complete the Common Measurement Framework survey, which includes the De Jong Gierveld and the UCLA measures of loneliness and social isolation.

⁷ Participants’ loneliness levels were banded into ‘most lonely’, ‘moderately lonely’ and ‘least lonely’ based on their De Jong Gierveld loneliness score.

⁸ Traverse (2018) *CMF analysis report of data July 2015 to October 2018* (December 2018)

⁹ Ferguson, L (2011) and Beaumont (2013) cited in Davidson, S. and Rossall, P. (2015) *Evidence Review: Loneliness in Later Life*. London: Age UK.

¹⁰ ONS (2018) *Loneliness - What characteristics and circumstances are associated with feeling lonely? Analysis of characteristics and circumstances associated with loneliness in England using the Community Life Survey, 2016 to 2017*.

¹¹ Ecorys (2016) *Evaluation of the Ageing Better Programme Wave 1 population survey Baseline profiling: Camden Ecorys*, Brunel University and Bryson Purdon Social Research

¹² Beach, B and Bamford, SM (2014)

¹³ The Royal Voluntary Service cited in Jopling, K (2017)

¹⁴ Beach, B and Bamford, SM (2014)

¹⁵ VAS <https://www.vas.org.uk/research-shows-men-are-more-lonely-than-women/> Accessed 13 March 2019

¹⁶ Age UK (2018) *All the lonely people*

¹⁷ Archer, L, Davidson S, Iparraguirre J, Kohler, M, Pursch, B, Vass, J and Curran, F (April 2018) *Creative and Cultural Activities and Wellbeing in later life*. Age UK

- The types of activities men and women engage in differ. Older women tend to take part in more creative and cultural activities than men¹⁸, while men may be more interested in political organisations, and activities relating to their personal interests or experiences, such as football, for example, or service in the armed forces¹⁹
- There is some anecdotal evidence that voluntary sector services to reduce isolation and loneliness were used more by women than men²⁰. This is supported by the ABC experience which indicates that men are less likely to access activities than women. However it should be noted that expecting gender parity in organised activities is not necessary. It is estimated that 46% of those aged 60-90 years in Camden in 2017 were men²¹
- Beach and Bamford (2014) question whether men are more unwilling to accept that they need support to address loneliness and isolation and so may not respond to offers of activities or services which focus on this

Work on the ground in various Ageing Better areas has also highlighted the difficulties faced in engaging men in the programme. While men may access activities such as a ‘Men’s Shed’, delivery partners have reflected that these appear to attract men because they offer a facility where men can use their skills in a social environment rather than be expected to actively participate in a structured group activity. Using and improving skills is the central theme, rather than active socialising.

“Our conversations with men have suggested that men are less likely to socialise for the sake of socialising and would rather have another reason for going out and meeting other people.”²²

In Camden, of those taking part in the Ageing Better programme activities, 35% are men. Recognising the difference in how men and women are engaging in the Ageing Better programme activities, and learning from the anecdotal evidence from Ageing Better areas, The Community Fund has stated

“We should be doing more to reach men; a number of partnerships have recognised this and are testing new approaches to reaching and engaging men”²³

¹⁸ Age UK (2018)

¹⁹ Beach, B and Bamford, SM (2014)

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Office for National Statistics UK mid-year estimates 2017

²² Age Better in Sheffield cited in VAS (2019)

²³ The Community Fund https://media.biglotteryfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/program_fulfilling_lives_ageing_better_briefing.pdf?mtime=20181219102826 Accessed 7 March 2019

What did we do and how did we do it?

In January 2019, the Outreach Team carried out a small research project with men to explore why our experience in Camden echoed research showing that older men are more socially isolated than older women and less likely to engage in social activities. This aimed to identify:

- The activities men would be interested in or how they would like to socially connect with others
- How men socialise already
- Where men are most comfortable meeting
- Who would be there
- How often and with what degree of formality would men like to meet

Using a listing of current activities as a conversation starter, the team spoke to a total of 38 men who were not attending activities. While team members had a list of key topics they wanted to explore, it should be noted that not everyone was asked all questions so that conversations could be more 'natural', in line with the outreach team's usual approach. These conversations took place in three key settings:

- Sheltered housing (9)
- Pubs (4)
- Street outreach (25)

The Outreach Team approached any older men observed during their outreach in these settings. In this way opportunistic, rather than random sampling, was used to generate participants. However, the three different settings generated a participant group which is a cross-section of older men in Camden. It should also be noted that responses from men in these settings to some extent reflect the different needs in the three groups. While the majority of those interviewed were contacted while 'out and about' on the street, this group of older men are more likely to be more mobile, able to access services, and use community centres than those in sheltered housing for instance, who may face more barriers, as outlined in Table 1. This provides an overview from the Outreach Team of the key differences they often find when working in the different settings.

Table 1 Outreach Team perceptions of differences in settings		
Sheltered housing	Pubs	Street
Some previously homeless, transition from hostel accommodation	Remote from services	Cross-section of men
Mental health issues	Less likely to access GPs	More able, mobile and independent
Disabilities	Alcohol use	Use community centres
Low income	Pub acts a social hub	Accessing other services
Are living alone		Some men spend time wandering the street with little purpose
Have a social hub in the sheltered housing scheme		More younger older people
		Want to engage in conversation
		No established social hub

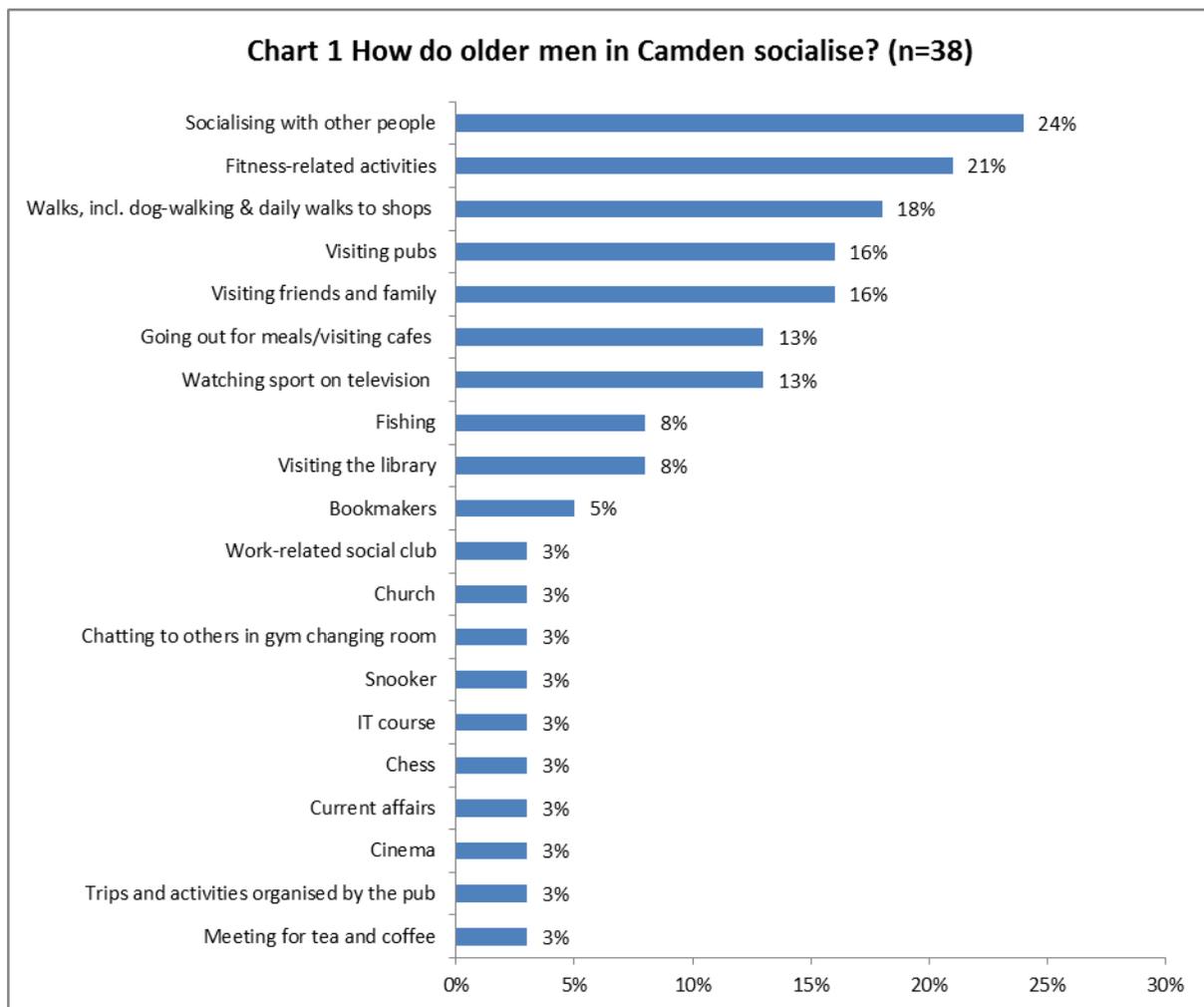
What did we learn?

While the number of interviewees is small, the data provides a valuable overview of men’s current activities and suggestions of areas they would like to access, and offers some insight into what may attract or deter men from social engagement.

Older men were undertaking a range of activities even though they were not engaging in formal groups. When talking about older people who are not engaged with community activities or accessing services, there is an underlying assumption that they are not doing very much. However, conversations with the men in this research indicate they were undertaking various activities or socialising with others, even though the majority were not interested in the ABC offer, or indeed other community or social care activities. While some responses were given by single respondents only, and we don’t know how frequently these activities take place, they illustrate the wide range of activities currently undertaken. This range is shown in Chart 1^{24, 25}.

²⁴ Respondents were deliberately not given specific categories to choose so that they were free to describe their activities in their own ways. For this reason, there may be some overlap between categories. In addition, individuals identified multiple activities, so responses do not add to 100%.

²⁵ Items indicated by single respondents are included here to illustrate the wide range of activities men are involved in.



Men reported both socialising with others, including with neighbours, family and/or friends, and a range of physical pastimes including specific sports, walking, tai chi, visiting the gym and exercising at home. While some activities may be more solitary than others, e.g. watching sport on television, crosswords and chess, this range of pursuits indicate men are active and engaged in a wide range of undertakings.

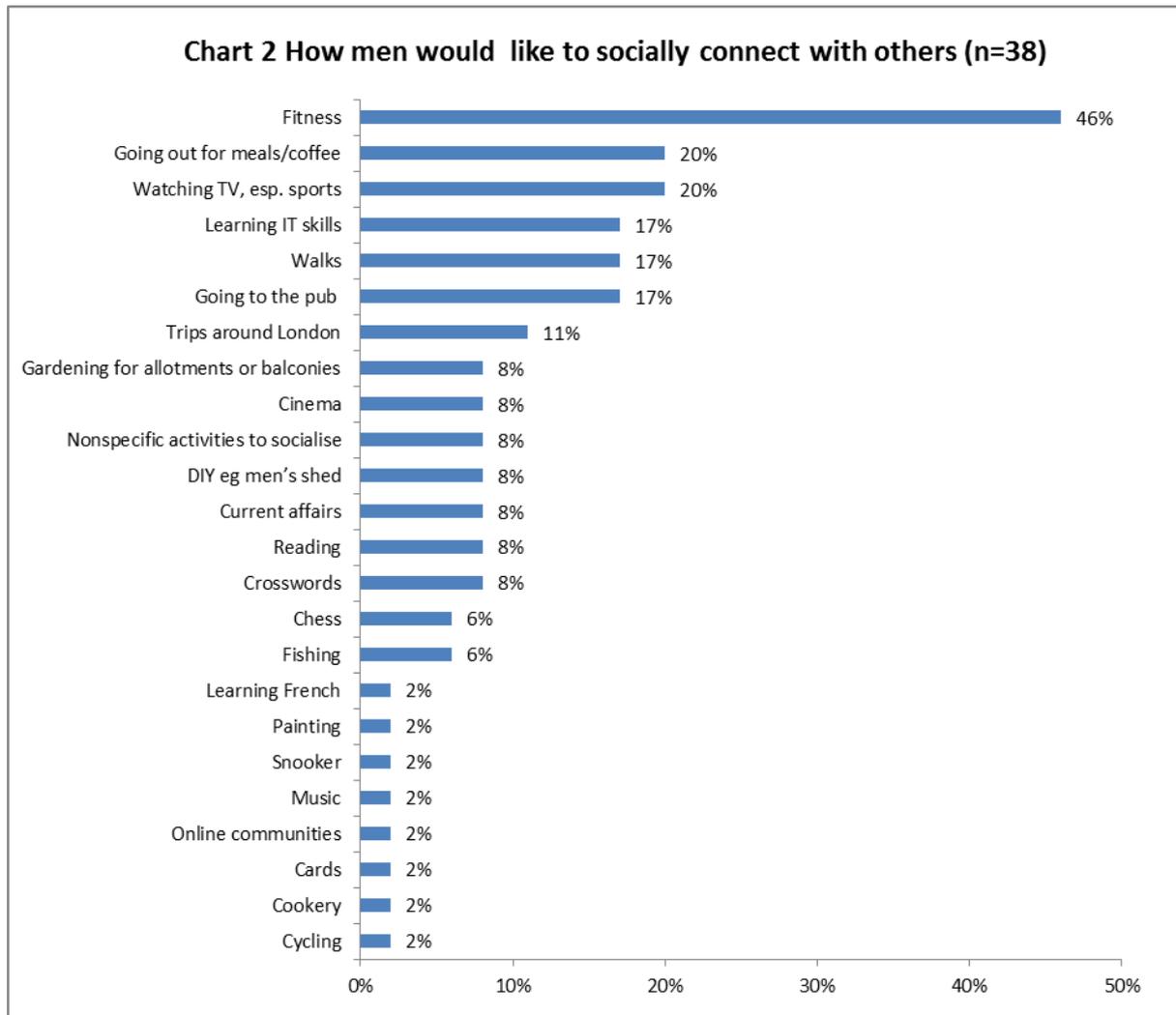
Activities tended to be those which can be undertaken close to home, and on an ad-hoc basis at any time. They do not require a regular commitment, and may be undertaken alongside others rather than requiring active interaction.

There were not many differences in responses depending on the setting in which men were spoken to, although men on the street more commonly indicated they take part in physical activities, possibly reflecting a more able cohort. Just under half of those in sheltered housing reported socialising with others in their scheme, while 20% of men on the street socialised with their wives or partners.

Married men rely on their wives or partners to organise their social activities. During street outreach the team met a number of men who live with their wives. Some felt the activity offer was not relevant to them: *“I don’t need any of this, I’ve got a wife”*. However,

there was some recognition that if this were not the case they would not know how to establish social connections on their own. One man discussed this during street outreach, saying “men are killing themselves by not being able to talk”.

Men are interested in taking part in social activities. Just over a fifth (22%) were interested in the activities currently on offer within ABC. When asked how they would like to socialise, men expressed interest in a range of activities which could be undertaken in the company of others. Chart 2 outlines their range of suggestions²⁶.



What they wanted varied somewhat according to where they were located. Nearly two thirds (60%) of men on the street expressed interest in physical activities such as fitness or walking, compared to only 33% in sheltered housing (walks and cycling), where watching sports on television was the most commonly identified activity (44%). It is interesting to note that all the men interviewed in the pub environment aspired to fitness-related activities. It is likely that these aspirations reflect the different make-up of the cohorts of men, with those on the street more likely to be more physically able and independent.

²⁶ Items indicated by single respondents are included to illustrate the wide range of activities men are potentially interested in.

No one mentioned courses specifically though learning IT, gardening skills, painting and learning a language may be areas where this is implied, albeit by single respondents.

Activities should be local. This is particularly important for those who have mobility and health needs. This is not restricted to those in sheltered housing (66% of whom felt they would be most comfortable meeting in their housing scheme), as the team also met a number of older men with health and mobility issues during street outreach. Nearly two-thirds (60%) of all men across settings expressed preference for locations that are local to them. While not all men discussed this, others implied that the venues identified should be within easy reach²⁷. Approximately 21% of men spoken to in all settings said they were happy to attend activities anywhere.

Venues should be neutral spaces, such as pubs, cafes, the park, libraries or individuals' homes, and not a location which may be perceived to be specifically for older people. The Outreach Team reported a specific barrier to men accessing activities within community centres. If men have never visited a community centre before they appear to hold preconceptions about who will be there and who it is for, which they do not see applicable to themselves or their situations. Preconceptions include that:

- they are for much older less active people in need of support – “that’s not me”
- that staff and volunteers are likely to be ‘do-gooders’ – “I don’t need help”
- they might not “fit in”
- they may not culturally identify with the other people there in terms of education and interests.

Informal drop-in type sessions are more attractive than scheduled formal activities. Men want to retain autonomy over their participation, to be able to come and go within sessions as they currently do during activities such as the gym, visiting pubs, walks etc. Men wanted opportunities to socialise that do not require a commitment, or regular attendance. The majority (60%) indicated not wanting a regular commitment, wanting to take part “whenever I feel like it”. Men would like to be able to attend when they feel like it, and for the experience to feel natural “like meeting with friends”. Drop-in type sessions may allow men to socialise in this way. This was supported by the housing scheme manager who reported that the men actively resist “being organised.”

The type of people in an activity is less important than men’s ability to participate on their own terms. Men were not specific about the type of people they would feel comfortable socialising with; some said anybody, several mentioned male friends, or people who are similar to themselves. There were mixed results on whether events needed to be men only. When asked whom they would like to see at any activities or gatherings they attend, several

²⁷ Participants defined location differently when this was discussed. While local proximity was most commonly identified as key, others discussed types of buildings or businesses e.g. “at church” or in the library.

indicated that it wasn't about who else was in the room (the make-up or demographic of attendees) that was key, but rather the level of autonomy they will have with regards to taking part. Men want to attend under their own agency.

The type of activity and how this is presented to men is key to encouraging them to



participate. For example, the Men's Shed model seemed attractive to some of the men spoken to, who viewed it as an opportunity to use facilities for craft activities, rather than as a formal group for men. Importantly, Men's Sheds are not described to men as an activity, but rather a workshop where they can use tools. Again, this model also allows men to drop in and have some control

over their activity, rather than participate within a set structure:

"I would not go to something called a men's club or group"

Evidence supports this. Men's Sheds are a popular model for engaging men, with nearly 500 sheds operating in the UK and more in the planning. The average membership is 20; and it is estimated that nearly 12,000 men are benefitting²⁸. In Camden, nearly all members of the Camden Town Shed are retired men²⁹.

Connecting men to informal social hubs may be a key strategy to engage men who are reluctant to access formal activities, to establish social connections. Some men in sheltered housing and pubs reported having access to such informal social hubs, and gave examples of informal arrangements where they socialise with others. These included an individual who shares books and reading materials with others in his sheltered housing scheme, men from the pub going fishing together, involvement in church activities with other men, and joining in informal chats in a gym changing room:

"I meet friends in the changing room at the gym. A group of 5 or 6 cab drivers who swim meet up there and sit down for a discussion in the changing room. I join in"

It seems that men's friendships can develop quite naturally from their environments. Those in sheltered housing or regular pub-goers have informal connections that allow them to socialise in other ways with those around them. Responses from the men in the pub environment highlight the importance for these men of the pub as a social space or hub. As well as identifying pub visits as their social activity, two men reported attending activities or

²⁸ <https://menssheds.org.uk/>

²⁹ <http://www.camdentownshed.org/about/>

trips organised by their local pub. Research suggests the pubs have become social spaces for many communities³⁰. The experience of the Outreach Team supports this, with anecdotal reports of landlords arranging activities for or facilitating access to support services for their older clientele.

However, men met during street outreach didn't appear to have access to the same type of social hubs. This may suggest a greater level of isolation relating to housing and proximity of



venues allowing more informal social exchange. Discussions also suggested that this may not happen easily or spontaneously because of the limitations of potential venues or locations:

“Cafes too expensive”

“I come to the library but you can't talk”

This suggests that identifying and/or creating opportunities for more informal social hubs may be an important incentive for men's participation. These would necessarily be unstructured and informal spaces which men could access on their own terms.

³⁰ Dunbar, R (2016) *'Friends on Tap' the role of pubs at the heart of the community*. Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford. Report commissioned by CAMRA.

Conclusion

While the number of men contributing to this research was relatively small (38 men), and not a random sample, this group was nevertheless a cross-section of those who are not engaging in community or social care activities. The research has allowed the team to gain valuable insight into how men feel about the types of things they get involved in or may do in the future.

It appears that many men do things which mirror some of the activities on offer from delivery partners. However, the majority are not interested in our offer in part because the activities are arranged or described as structured events or groups. Men want opportunities to socialise that are unstructured, do not involve a regular commitment or membership of a group, and are local.

The research points to the need for us to reframe or plan our offer for men differently. Men like the idea of 'Men's Sheds' because they are seen not as an activity, but an opportunity to use skills or facilities, in a less structured environment. Reframing activities or developing others along these lines, beyond a focus on DIY, may provide opportunities for men to meet which are more flexible.

In addition, the research points to the importance of informal connections. Some men develop natural friendship groups, either through places they frequent or where they live, appearing to undertake activities with others under their own agency, dipping in and out as they wish. However, many men do not seem to have those informal opportunities to socialise with others.

For further information about this research or outreach with older men please contact Jo Stapleton, Outreach Manager, Ageing Better in Camden, joanne.stapleton@ageukcamden.org.uk