



Outreach during Covid-19

How to set up walking groups to foster social connections between older people

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Contents

Introduction	2
1. Identify neighbourhoods for walking groups	3
2. Publicise the walks and register interest.....	4
3. Identify potential group members and make inclusive invitations.....	5
4. Plan specific walks with social interaction, comfort and safety in mind.....	7
5. The day before: confirm arrangements and encourage attendance	9
6. On the walk: be flexible, encourage interactions and ensure safety	9
7. Reflect after walks	12
8. Encourage walkers to organise themselves and sustain their own relationships	13
Walks so far and into the future	14

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 (ABC) is part of Age UK Camden and 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

This guide documents the Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) Outreach Team's approach to establishing walking groups to foster neighbourhood relationships between older people during the Covid-19 pandemic. We



have written the guide for practitioners working to address social isolation and loneliness among older people who may want to set up similar groups.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the ABC Outreach Team had to find new ways to proactively find and engage with the socially isolated older people who 'no one knows' and to help them make social connections¹. This group includes individuals who may be reluctant to access formal activities, help and support. In normal times, a key part of the Team's work is to signpost people they meet to free, welcoming activities for older people in Camden. They had also begun to organise local social activities (a restaurant lunch, a tea club, a library meet-up) which might, over time, have become regular fixtures organised by older people themselves.

From October 2020, when restrictions have allowed, the Team have instead been inviting older people to join small, supported, socially distanced group walks. The walks fill a gap left by a substantial reduction in other community activities on offer. As such, they provide a very necessary social opportunity for older people who are experiencing social isolation and, indeed, fear of socialising because of the pandemic or other reasons. The following explains how the Team establishes local groups, organises walks to encourage social interaction, and helps groups to meet independently once relationships between walkers begin to develop. Anonymous feedback from seven older people is also included to illustrate their experience of the walks.

¹ See ABC's guides and reports on Street Outreach, Doorstep Outreach and Outreach in Sheltered Housing at <http://www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/outreach>

1. Identify neighbourhoods for walking groups

The Team 'build' a walking group for a specific area of Camden. As of April 2021, walks have been organised in 10 neighbourhoods.

- Walks are **planned locally** so that they will be easily accessible for those who come along and there is no need use public transport which may risk Covid-19 infection.
- It also means that those who join a group will be **meeting others from their own neighbourhood** making it possible for them to bump into each other or perhaps even to plan to meet outside the walks if they would like to. In some cases, walkers have known each other by sight from the area but the walk is the first time they have properly spoken.
- Coming from the same area also provides walkers with some **instant common ground** for conversation.



Robert said, *'I live on my own and it gets me out of the flat – it's good to meet other people. The walks mean you can meet people from your own area, people that you've probably passed on the street a thousand times.'*

On her walk, Dayana met a woman who lives nearby but they had not seen each other before. They *'got on extremely well together'* and then a few days ago they met in the street and stopped and had a chat.

2. Publicise the walks and register interest

The first stage in putting together a group is to identify a pool of people from an area who are interested and collect their contact details. To do this, the Team:

- **Put up flyers around the area** where they are planning to do walks including on park railings, noticeboards and at bus stops. These invite local 60+ residents to call the team if they are interested in coming on a free, local walk. The flyers are designed carefully to make it clear that the walks are informal and accessible to all and to reassure that they are planned with Covid safety in mind. For example, they:
 - Offer options to join longer or shorter walks.
 - Make it clear that the walks will be local so that no public transport is needed and that they will be socially distanced.
 - Give an additional reason to attend by offering a free, re-usable face mask and information on other social activities in Camden.Tear off strips with the Team's number at the bottom of the flyer make it easy for people to take the contact information and call later.
- **Organise socially distanced pop-up events** in parks and open spaces around Camden when regulations have allowed². This has been a main



² See our report on the ABC Outreach Team's 'Face-mask pop-ups' at <http://www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/latestnews/2021/3/8/new-report-outreach-during-covid-19>

method used by the Team to meet older people ‘no one knows’. When they get into conversation with someone, they offer joining a local walking group as one social opportunity on offer.

- **Telephone people known from previous outreach activity** and who live in the relevant area to ask if they would be interested in the walks. Other **Age UK Camden staff** have also sometimes referred interested people to the Team so they can be invited.

Of interest: At certain times during the pandemic, there has been a high level of interest in the walks as well as in other Outreach activity. This was very noticeable as the third lockdown was lifting at the end of March 2021³. The Team started receiving calls as soon as they got back from putting up flyers. They see this as a sign that many people have a significant need for social contact after the long period of isolation and a reflection of a lack of other possibilities for joining groups or activities.

They also received a number of calls from younger people who have seen the flyers and who, perhaps isolated from their own families, have expressed an interest in joining with the walks. In response, the Team have set up some intergenerational walking groups.

3. Identify potential group members and make inclusive invitations

The Team aim make the walks as **inclusive as possible, responding to need** so that everyone who wants to can join them. During an initial chat, the Team collect information from potential walkers which will help them to assemble a group for a suitable walk.

They ask each person whether they have ever been shielding⁴ due to Covid-19. If they have, the Team recommends they discuss any concerns with their GP before joining a walk. They **find out about mobility, stamina and confidence for walking** by asking:

³ Full Covid-19 ‘stay at home’ lockdowns were in place in England from 23 March to 10 May 2020, 5 November to 2 December 2020 and 5 January to 29 March 2021. A variety of restrictions on meeting others, short of a lockdown, were in place in London between these dates.

⁴ From March 2020 until April 2021, people identified as ‘extremely clinically vulnerable’ were advised to shield by not leaving their homes and minimising all face to face contact.

- Have you been managing to get out to walk during/since lockdown?
- If so, how far are you comfortable walking at the moment? And where do you usually walk?

If answers to these questions indicate that person has mobility issues, the Team may also ask if they use a walking stick or aid.

Responding to need can mean that the Team:

- **Invite people to join a longer or shorter walk** in a given area.
- **Organise for people to join at a different point of the walk** which may be closer to home and more convenient for them.

- **Adapt the invitation.**

For example, one man

who was a carer with limited time joined just for the tea stop at the end of the walk.



When a call is made to invite someone on a specific walk, the Team give the time, meeting place and area for the walk. They **ask if that person has any Covid-19 symptoms** and, if so, ask people not to attend and to arrange a test. They also **make the walkers aware of Covid safety measures**, specifically that the Team:

- Stick to the 'Rule of Six'⁵ for the walk (one staff member and a maximum of five older people).
- Do not ask people if they are vaccinated as there are reasons why some people may not be. As such, they should not assume everyone in the group will be vaccinated.
- Ask the walkers to wear masks unless they are exempt.
- Ask them to observe social distancing.

⁵ The 'Rule of Six' was a Covid-19 regulation introduced on 14 September 2020 limiting numbers of people from different households who could meet to six. The 'Rule of Six' was also in place when the Outreach Team began organising walks again after the third Covid-19 lockdown ended on 29 March 2021.

This is designed to encourage safe behaviour but also to reassure anyone who is concerned about safety.

Sofia was '*dubious*' about going out of the house because she has asthma and COPD but said she feels safe going out in this kind of small group.

Of interest: The maximum number of walkers has so far been five so that, with a Team member, the walk is run in accordance with the Covid-19 'Rule of Six' which has been in place. This groups size works well anyway because it gives everyone time to talk to each other person.

4. Plan specific walks with social interaction, comfort and safety in mind

The Team plan walks carefully so that they are safe, manageable and conducive to social interaction. There are some **key things** to consider:

- **Plan a route that is manageable** for the walker with least stamina in the group. The main purpose of the walk is to encourage social interaction between group members, not to provide exercise. This means the walks must be a reasonable distance and avoid challenging terrain and hills. It is also important to include options for shortening a route in case the full length turns out to be too much. And it is important to test the route in advance: Google maps have been found to underestimate the time needed for these walks.
- **Include some places of interest.** It may not be necessary to point them out if talk flows. If not, they may kick-start conversations by giving the walkers something concrete to talk about. It could involve passing by local landmarks such as the ponds on Hampstead Heath or London Zoo. The Team have also done research so they can tell the group about the history of places they pass.



Dayana said they stopped at the RSPCA building and found out about their work during the war. And they learned about a local pub which people had campaigned to keep open and restore to its original state. She found it really interesting and liked the way AnneMarie involved them by asking what they knew about the buildings. She said it really gave them something to chat about and it brought back memories.

- **Include sitting and toilet stops.** Sometimes walkers have needed to pause for a rest along the way and there have been instances where people have dropped out because they were concerned about needing the loo.
- **Plan to end with tea and a chat.** When permitted, sitting together for an outdoor, socially distanced cup of tea at the end of the walk provides an additional, relaxed opportunity for group members to socialise and get to know one another. Some tea stops have been at a park café. On other walks, the Team have found a pub with a suitable outdoor seating area and arranged in advance with staff for the group to have tea or coffee and to use the toilets.



‘You get a cup of tea. Although I’d rather go for a pint!’ (Robert)

Liz mentioned having a ‘lovely cup of tea’ at the end of her walk outside a pub ‘with proper teapots and cups – none of these paper cups’.

- **Carry out a risk assessment including for Covid-19 safety** in line with your organisation's policy and plan accordingly. For example, adequate social distancing must be possible at the final tea stop; if the Team carry drinks over to the group, they must use a tray so they do not handle them.

5. The day before: confirm arrangements and encourage attendance

The day before, the Team member leading the walk **sends a text** to group members **or calls them** if they do not have a mobile phone, confirming the meeting time and place for the walk. This:

- Acts as a reminder and provides reassurance that the walk is going ahead, so encouraging people to come.
- Ensures the walkers have the relevant number to call or message if they want to check anything or if there are last minute problems.
- Provides a prompt for them to let the Team know if they have decided not to come. It may then be possible to invite someone else instead.

Esme said that she does not go out much and it is an effort to do so. If she has arranged to go for a walk with someone she knows well she's more likely to cancel than if it is a formal arrangement with someone she knows less well like the Outreach Team. And in fact she 'thrives better' in a group activity than if she is on her own or one to one.

6. On the walk: be flexible, encourage interactions and ensure safety

- **Expect and adapt to last minute changes.** Bad weather has meant that walks have occasionally been cancelled. Equally, sometimes group members have unexpectedly insisted that a walk should go ahead despite persistent rain. Sometimes people have called at the last minute to say they are not coming. For a couple of walks, there has only been one person and the Team member on the walk. While not ideal, the older person has said they particularly enjoyed the walk.

- **Encourage interaction.** The main aim of the walk is to get people talking to each other so that they will enjoy a relaxed social experience, increase their social confidence and, hopefully, begin to develop relationships. The intention is that everyone should talk to everyone else during their time together and the Team have found this usually works by people forming pairs which switch over the course of the walk. To break the ice and get conversations going, the Team:
 - **Make introductions.**
 - **Broker conversations** by taking it in turns to talk to each group member and, when they find out two people have something in common, point it out and encourage them to chat.
 - **Leave a social space** for the walkers to talk by avoiding spending too long interacting with anyone.
 - **Introduce topics of conversation** but only where necessary. This can include pointing out places of interest along the route and asking the walkers for their own local knowledge and memories.
 - **Keep the conversation positive.** The aim is to make the walk an enjoyable social experience and at times there is a need to guide the conversation to ensure it does not become too negative.

Proactive use of these strategies can help to address the tendency of some walkers to focus only on the Team member leading the walk.



Camille said that the second lockdown had been really difficult, causing her to feel socially isolated and lonely. Asked about the walks she said the Team were *'good in the way that they deal with people: they introduce everyone, help us to have a chat, get everyone a coffee: then it's easy for us to talk to each other...It's therapeutic for me.'*

- **Ensure that everyone is comfortable with the walk and adapt accordingly.** Even though the Team tries to assemble walkers with similar stamina and mobility, there has often been some difference within the group. To make sure the walk is relaxed and enjoyable for everyone, the Team makes sure that everyone moves at the pace of the slowest walker. They check regularly if anyone is tiring and are ready to change the route or to organise a break where needed. Stopping to look at something is a way of providing a break without drawing attention to an someone's need to rest.
- **Gently implement Covid-19 safety measures.** In line with the objective of keeping the walks informal, the Team take a gentle approach to ensuring adherence to Covid safety measures. For example, they can offer spare masks if anyone needs one; if someone suggests going into a covered area along the route, they will explain that Covid guidance means they are not allowed to; and, at a tea or bench stop they will guide walkers to sit at a safe distance from one another.

Of interest: Walkers themselves have often been very sensitive and kind to members of the group who are having difficulty. For example, they have been happy to slow down and take breaks when one of the group has limited mobility; they have been patient and attentive when an individual has been very anxious. The Team suggests that this reflects people being highly attuned to the difficulties being faced by others during the pandemic.

7. Reflect after walks

The Team meet regularly to discuss walks they have organised and the social mix of the groups. This has helped them to:

- **Develop the organisation of subsequent walks.** A recent example is recognition that it is important to make clear to a group from the outset that, after organising initial walks, the Outreach Team will step back with the intention that the group becomes self-organising. Explaining this later on has led to some walkers to feel that that their walking 'service' is being withdrawn.
- **Think about the social mix for repeat walks.** After first walks, some people have really hit it off and it has been clear it would be a good idea to invite them to walk together again. And, once the Team gets to know walkers, they have had ideas about people who may get on well and so have invited slightly different groups of people to walk together. In some cases, individuals have been very socially anxious on a walk. Where appropriate, they might be offered a referral to a service such as Community Connectors who can provide them with more one-to-one support.

8. Encourage walkers to organise themselves and sustain their own relationships

The ultimate intention is that walkers form relationships and organise themselves to meet independently of the Outreach Team. This might happen naturally with people who get on well making informal arrangements to meet, whether to walk or not. Or it could be that all members of a group meet for independent walks. To encourage this independence, the Team:

- **Make the aim of self-organised walks clear from the start.** Talking about how the group may begin to meet independently after a couple of outings with the Team avoids a sense of dependence setting in. It can be useful to explain that this will allow the Team to set up similar groups for as many other local people as possible.
- **Invite groups or individuals who get on well to walk together again** so that they can get to know each other better and begin to feel comfortable about meeting independently.
- **Encourage group members to take an active role in walks** by asking them to contribute their own local knowledge as the walk proceeds or to suggest a route for the next walk and perhaps even lead it.

Pierre liked the fact that they were given a choice about which route to take. *'It was just perfection. A joy. Letting people decide where to go – it was tailor made.'*

- **Make direct suggestions about a group or individuals meeting** after the first couple of Team-led walks and encourage them to make their own arrangements.
- **Provide ongoing, background help with organisation but no more than necessary.** As the walkers begin to meet independently, the Team will still help with organisation when needed, for example, checking availability of group members and sending reminder messages. And they remain available to help with any problems the group may have. However, they will stay in the background to give the groups the best chance of becoming self-sustaining.

Walks so far and into the future



The Outreach Team organised 17 walks during Autumn 2020 and a total of 29 people (11 men and 18 women) joined them. Fourteen of them came on more than one walk. Since the most recent lockdown lifted on 29 March until mid-April, there have been another eight walks involving 23 people (10 men and 13 women). Eleven of them had also been on at least one of the Autumn walks. And in the second week of April, the Team have helped to organise five independent walks involving 12 people who have previously walked together.

These figures provide encouraging signs that this work provides an effective means of developing social connections that may be sustained beyond the initial walks led by the Team. Building such walking groups seems likely to be a useful way of addressing social isolation and loneliness even after the pandemic is over.