



Outreach during Covid-19

Encouraging older people's social connection using outdoor 'Face mask pop-ups'

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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 (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

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) Outreach Team had to find new ways to proactively find and engage with the socially isolated older people who ‘no one knows’. This group includes individuals who may be reluctant to access formal activities, help and support.

In normal times, the Team connects with older people by approaching them on the street, or by calling door to door in sheltered or general housing and inviting them to pop up events¹. Since August 2020, when regulations have allowed, they have instead been meeting older people at pop-up events in parks and other outdoor spaces. As popular destinations during the pandemic², such spaces provide good opportunities for the Team to make contact while ensuring social distancing and maintaining safety.

Between August and October, the Team held 18 pop-ups in 13 different locations around Camden and met 234 older people (109 men and 125 women)³. The Team plan their pop-up events to help meet both the practical and emotional needs of older people, including the need for social connection, which may have been brought about or exacerbated by the pandemic.

The report:

- Documents this adapted outreach practice.
- Sets out what the Outreach Team learnt at these events about some of the main challenges faced by older people as a result of Covid-19.

(See Appendixⁱ for methods used to collect information for the report.)

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

² Natural England (2012) The People and Nature Survey for England: Monthly interim indicators for October 2020 (Experimental Statistics). [Accessed 4 February 2021]. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-monthly-interim-indicators-for-october-2020-experimental-statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-monthly-interim-indicators-for-october-2020-experimental-statistics#experimental-statistics>

³ The Outreach Team estimate that they are meeting at least 80% of these older people for the first time.

Using 'Face mask pop-ups' to reach people in need

At the outreach pop-up events, the Outreach Team give out:

- **Reusable, washable face masks.** At the outset of the pandemic, many older people were observed without face masks or reusing disposable ones. Some did not know about reusable masks or where to get them; or perhaps could not get hold of them because they were not online, not going to shops or could not afford them.
- **Large print contact cards for the Age UK Camden Information Advice and Guidance service** who offer help to older people to access support (e.g. help with internet shopping, counselling).
- **Printed information about free virtual and face-to-face groups and activities** for over-60s currently being run by local organisations.

This offer (advertised on flyers) can give people an incentive to come to the pop-up when they might otherwise not do so. Some need social contact and additional social-emotional support but, as explained below, this may only become apparent some way into conversation with a member of the Team. Through pop-up encounters, the Team built up a picture of the substantial challenges faced by some older people as a result of Covid-19 including:

- **A need for social contact.** 'Everyday' conversations (e.g. about a pet, or what they have been doing today) might be long and repeated with several staff members. Some people explicitly stated that this outreach conversation was the first time they had spoken 'properly' to someone for a long time.
- **Going out as an act of courage.** Some were aware that staying at home too much was damaging their mental and physical health. At the same time, they could be reluctant to go out because of loss of confidence in their social or physical abilities or even fear of becoming ill and dying. Staff saw some older people as engaging in 'acts of courage' when they made a daily outing or forcing themselves to interact with others.
- **Barriers to interaction once out.** Some felt face masks hindered communication by hiding facial expression and making it difficult to hear

what was being said. Some felt other people did not want to interact anyway because of virus fears and were reluctant to initiate casual social contact as they had done in the past. A number expressed relief that they could have some 'everyday chat' at the pop-up.

- **Disruption to social networks and support.** Some had not had contact with even local friends throughout the lockdowns. It might be that in normal times they met friends or acquaintances at activities or when out in the neighbourhood, without necessarily having other means of keeping in contact. In other cases, friends lived further away and, even when lockdown restrictions relaxed, they did not want to meet up because using public transport was risky. Others severely missed seeing family members who were a main source of support.
- **Exacerbation of trauma.** For those who had undergone trauma, such as bereavement, there was a risk of suffering doubly through lack of contact with people who usually help them through difficult times.
- **Loss of normal life and identity.** Some who usually saw themselves as independent, outgoing and supportive of others were shaken or angered at being made helpless by the requirement to stay at home. Some felt guilty for being unable to help friends, family or acquaintances through difficulties. Others expressed a sense of loss because their identity was closely tied to particular activities that were no longer running.
- **Difficulty accessing services.** Some older people were having difficulty accessing medical, council or other services which had paused or moved online (a problem for those without digital access).
- **Fear and loss of hope.** Having faced the challenges of earlier lockdowns, some people expressed fear of next ones which might be more restrictive and made worse by winter weather. Some appeared to have lost hope that they would ever be going back their normal lives.

These difficulties are substantial and underline the importance of maintaining outreach activity despite the difficult circumstances. In the first instance, the Team can provide a sympathetic ear. If wanted, they can also offer or signpost support which might be much needed.

Planning for meeting people with safety in mind

When and where

The Outreach Team carry out their face mask pop-ups in Camden parks, squares or other outdoor spaces (open areas on housing estates, for example). The hour and a half events are scheduled for times (usually late morning) when older residents are likely to be out and about. The Team scout a location in advance:

- Checking that it is easily accessible for older people. For example, there should be plenty of nearby housing and the route to the meeting point should not be too hilly.
- Choosing a meeting point within a park which is easy to find such as a seating area near a café or near a particular entrance.



Of interest: There has been a big variation in the number of older people who have attended or passed by at different locations.

Some places are simply busier than others and sometimes this was Covid-related. For example, there was high attendance at two pop-ups soon after the

'rule of six' was announced⁴ and the Team reported that people were coming to get information about sources of support because they were worried about an imminent second lockdown⁵. At the same time, people came and went quite quickly rather than staying to chat as at earlier events.

In one square, an older man came out to stream music at lunchtime every day, taking requests and chatting to people from a distance. In this way he had created an informal social hub which was popular with other local residents.

Weather inevitably impacted on turnout at pop-ups. However, even on some very wet, windy days people came along. The Team believe this was a sign of a significant need for social contact.

Publicising events

As before Covid-19, the Outreach Team use flyers to invite people to their pop-ups. These state time, date, location, purpose, Team names and mobile phone number. They are worded carefully in order to avoid putting people off e.g. not using the term 'older people'; inviting people to 'drop by' and 'meet the Age UK Camden Outreach Team' rather than to attend 'an event' which might be intimidating. To provide reassurance, flyers now also:

- Explain that face masks and local/non-face-to-face activity information will be on offer.
- Stress that the event will be socially distanced and asking those who are unwell not to attend.

Since the Team are not able to approach people or go into housing blocks to give out these flyers, they only put them on public display:

- Flyers are put up close to the pop-up location (on railings, on noticeboards at park entrances, at nearby bus stops).
- The amount and timing of publicity has varied in response to Covid restrictions. At the end of summer 2020, when larger groups were still permitted to gather outdoors, events were promoted several days in advance. When the rule of six was introduced, flyers were sometimes only put up on the day of the event shortly before it started so not too

⁴ The 'rule of six' was a Covid-19 regulation introduced on 14 September 2020 limiting numbers of people from different households who could meet outdoors (and indoors) to six people. Immediately prior to that, 20 people were allowed to meet in Camden parks without seeking formal permission.

⁵ A second Covid-19 lockdown was in place in England between 5 November and 2 December 2020. Strict restrictions short of a lockdown and then (from January 5 2021) a third lockdown have been implemented.

many people would come along. The emphasis was more on meeting people who were already in the park or passing by at the time of the event. However, the flyers were still important to reassure that this was a legitimate Age UK Camden event.



Of interest: Few flyers are used compared to normal times, perhaps only 15. Even so, numbers who have come to meet the Team have been high at some events: at two pop-ups they met over 30 people over the hour and a half. The proportion of men who have attended (47%) is exceptionally high. The Outreach Team see this as a reflection of a significant need for social contact, for activities and information at a time when they are lacking.

Contact details on the flyers offered another avenue for people to contact the Team including those too worried to attend the pop-up in-person. Family members have also used the phone number to get in touch and one policeman called to ask if he could pass on Outreach information to older people in the neighbourhood.

Lizzy went to a pop-up with her two friends after seeing a poster. They went because everything they normally do was shut and they were looking for *'things they could get out to do'*.

Covid-context safety

The Team are careful to organise events so that they are 'Covid-secure'.

Measures include:

- Always wearing masks.
- Putting information/mask packs together and 'quarantining' them for 72 hours before a pop-up.
- Using hand sanitiser just before handing out masks and leaflets at an event.
- Limiting publicity (see above) and maintaining a low-key presence to avoid attracting too many people at one time.
- Having three or four staff at an event so that they can spread out and ensure social distancing of those attending. This became more structured when 'the rule of six' was introduced: two of the team were stationed separately near the meeting spot; others stayed next to park entrances or approaches to the meeting point so that, if necessary, they could guide people to a staff member who did not have many others congregating around them.



Engaging with people at 'face mask pop-ups'

Initiating conversation inclusively

Some older people see event flyers and actively come to meet the Outreach Team or come over when they see something is going on. However, staff will also often initiate conversation with an older person who is passing or nearby, taking care to maintain physical distance. When doing so:

- They aim to be inclusive by avoiding assumptions about who needs to talk and so chat to all those they encounter.

- They identify as Age UK Camden staff and show AUC identity badges at the start of a conversation to reassure.
- Their approach is tentative and they will not continue if the older person does not seem keen to engage.
- If the designated meeting place is quiet, they will spend more time 'roaming' the space to identify busier passing points to which they can relocate.

Encouraging engagement: a person-centred conversation

As in pre-Covid street outreach, only some of those approached – just over one in ten – will stop for longer conversations. These do not happen by accident. A careful, person-centred approach can increase the chance of an individual engaging. This includes using a warm, chatty, informal manner to explain the pop-up activity while avoiding being pushy or intrusive.

When delivered in this way, the initial offer of a mask and information can act as a conversational ice breaker. The Team member might ask the older person in a low-key way how they have been during lockdowns and other restrictions. This gives the person an option to talk about difficulties they might be experiencing but without pressure to do so.

'When you start talking to someone, you don't know what reaction you are going to get. They perhaps stop and listen because they have nothing else to do. You start explaining what you are doing then there's a moment when they decide they can chat... Once they've relaxed, they seem to want to talk; they get into a flow and you can have a proper conversation. Sometime there's a sense that they want to talk more – otherwise they'd be halfway up the path by now. The conversation can be quite light-hearted but it can go in a deeper, depressing direction.' Member of the Outreach Team

Different kinds of conversation

The Outreach Team report having conversations with older people at the face mask pop-ups which vary in terms of time, content and emotional intensity.

- **Brief practical interactions.** Interactions can be quite minimal with the older person accepting or refusing a face mask and information. In some cases, people come along with a specific practical query (e.g. about support getting online or internet shopping). People often express gratitude for this offer even if the conversation goes no further.

Joyce heard about the pop-up from her friend. She went along and got information about a befriending scheme and about help with shopping. These things are *'good to know as during lockdown a lot of things have changed'*.

- **Longer 'everyday' interactions.** In some cases, this first contact sparks a longer exchange. This might be 'everyday' in feel (e.g. about the pop-up location or about a pet). Or it might involve more in-depth conversation about various aspects of life (past jobs, interests, family, for example).
- **Pandemic life.** Other conversations relate to life during the pandemic. Some say they are fine, have everything they need and good social contact/support. Occasionally, people say they have quite enjoyed a simpler life under lockdown. Other chats consist of straightforward discussion of what is in the news or about what is coming next.
- **Significant difficulty and distress.** Other people explicitly discuss the difficulties they have experienced as a result of Covid-19 (see challenges faced by older people on page 4).



Of interest: Some Outreach staff thought that the peaceful space often afforded by parks and squares may encourage older people to talk. They may, therefore, offer a useful additional location for outreach with older people even after the pandemic.

At early pop-ups, when restrictions were more relaxed, older people also spent time chatting to each other. After the 'rule of six' was introduced, engagement was almost always a chat with a staff member who provided the face mask and information about other opportunities to socialise with peers.

Next steps: Providing Covid-context options and stepping stones to social connection

As in other outreach settings, these face mask pop-up conversations have intrinsic value, meeting a basic need for social connection and offering people a chance to be listened to and acknowledged. Conversations also provide an opportunity for the Outreach Team to respond to individual needs, gently explaining options for social activity and support which could improve quality of life. This might mean pointing out activities which are still running despite Covid-19 restrictions (socially distanced, online, by telephone, email or post). It might mean highlighting contact details for support services such as

counselling. It will always mean telling them that they can call the Outreach Team directly if they want further information or support.

In response to limits on the number of available local activities compared to normal times, the Outreach Team have also begun to run small, socially distanced walking groups. At face mask pop-ups, they ask people if they would like to sign up for these walks. And as new lockdowns have come into effect, some members of walking groups have joined Outreach telephone quizzes and chats. By giving these new options, the Outreach Team have continued to create channels for the people 'no one knows' to develop social connections beyond conversations at pop-up events and potentially beyond the pandemic as well.

Paulina was just walking past and noticed that there were some ladies and 'being nose-y' decided to have a look. She found out this was Age UK Camden and all about things that were going on. They sent her information and she has been on the walk and recently joined a telephone quiz.

Alan met the Team on Hampstead Heath. They gave him a mask and leaflets and had a chat. As a carer with little time and also some difficulty with his leg, he could not join outreach walks. However, the Team invited him to come at the end of a walk for a chat. He has done this several times. *'It's really nice that they invite me – they really care. It makes a difference, you know.'*

ⁱ Appendix: Information used for this report.

ABC's Research and Learning Officer collected information for this report in using direct observations at two face mask pop-up events and 'debrief' telephone interviews with Outreach Team members very soon after eight events in September and October 2020. Feedback from older people was taken from calls made to nine older people who had attended a pop-up and/or subsequent outreach activities to ask why they had attended and whether or not they had found the event helpful.