

Key messages: Connecting older men to their communities

A research project by the Ageing Better in Camden Outreach Team

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The Ageing Better in Camden Outreach Team uses a range of outreach techniques 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'. In working with older men in Camden, they have noticed that the vast majority they meet are very willing to talk and show a need for conversation, yet are not interested in the Ageing Better in Camden activity offer.

Research identifies that older men are lonelier than women and less likely to engage in activities¹. Evidence from Wave 6 of the English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing² indicates a higher proportion of older men (14%) experienced moderate to high social isolation compared to 11% of women³. Older men also have less contact with their children, family and friends than women and are less likely to take part in activities⁴. However there is little research exploring the reasons for their lower levels of engagement, or what sort of activities or groups men would like to attend.

¹ 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); Jopling, K (2017) *Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time A call to action*. Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness; VAS <https://www.vas.org.uk/research-shows-men-are-more-lonely-than-women/> Accessed 13 March 2019

² ELSA collects longitudinal multidisciplinary data from a representative sample of the English population aged over 50. See www.elsa-project.ac.uk

³ Beach, B and Bamford, SM (2014)

⁴ Age UK (2018) *All the lonely people*; 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 Outreach Team therefore undertook a small research project, speaking with a total of 38 men, to find out what they are currently doing and what an attractive social activity might look like for them. These men were not engaged in community activities with delivery agencies or others. Conversations took place in sheltered housing schemes, pubs and during street outreach. This summary presents the key findings from conversations with older men. For further detail see ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/what-we-are-learning

What did we learn?

Older men are taking part in a range of activities or ways of socialising, even though they are not engaging in formal groups. Most men reported doing something: this includes socialising with neighbours, family or friends, and a range of physical pastimes including walking, specific sports and exercising at home.

Married men rely on their wives or partners to organise their social activities. Several men said they didn't need to find ways to socialise as their wives arranged their social lives. There was some recognition that men would find this difficult if their wives were no longer around.

Men are interested in taking part in social activities. Over a fifth of men (22%) were interested in the activities on offer, but the vast majority felt they were "not for me". When asked how they would like to socialise men gave a wide range of suggestions of ways to socialise that they would find appealing, including fitness related activities, going out for meals/coffee, watching TV (especially sports), learning IT skills, walks and going to the pub.

Activities should be local. While this is particularly important for those with mobility or health needs, the majority of men indicated that any meeting place or social event should be local. Most of the men spoken to in sheltered housing would like activities to take place within their scheme.

Venues should be neutral spaces, such as pubs, libraries, cafes, the park, in individuals' homes or housing schemes, and not a location which may be perceived to be specifically for older people. There was particular reluctance to use community centres: men did not seem to see themselves fitting in, revealing some preconceptions about who community centres may provide services for.

Informal drop-in type sessions ('as and when') are more attractive to men than scheduled formal activities. Men want to retain autonomy over their participation. Many of the activities that men currently undertake are done so under their own agency; they are able to arrive and leave when they like, and take part when they wish to. Men want opportunities to socialise that do not require a commitment, or regular attendance. They want their participation to feel natural "like meeting with friends".

Men gave mixed views on who should be at any activity. Some felt it should be men only, while others thought "anyone", and others wanted to meet with people similar to them. However, the type of people in an activity is less important than men's ability to participate on their own terms.

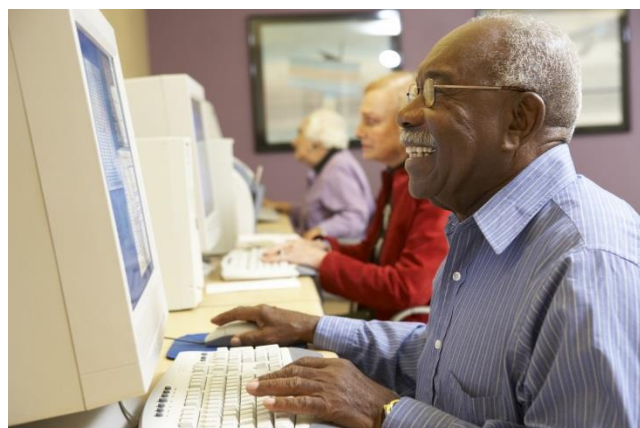
How activities are described or presented to men determines their level of interest. Men don't want to participate in 'men's groups' or anything that appears to be a structured activity. A model

where opportunities to socialise are created around something practical, e.g. 'Men's Sheds', are more attractive to men who see these as a chance to use tools.

Some men have informal 'social hubs', or places where friendships develop naturally where men congregate, e.g. in housing schemes, pubs, gym changing rooms. Other men do not appear to have these types of opportunities: this was particularly the case for men the outreach team met on the street. They also identified that the cost of some social spaces and restrictions on their use are barriers to meeting up with friends e.g. the cost of cafes and gym membership, or not being able to talk in libraries.

A model which connects men to social hubs may increase social engagement, especially for those who are reluctant to access formal activities. These should be informal spaces which men could access on their own terms.

Conclusion



While many men do things which mirror activities on offer from delivery partners, most are not interested in structured activities or events. 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. Presenting, or developing, activities as opportunities to use skills may provide more

flexible opportunities for men to meet. In addition, a model of informal social hubs would reflect men's wish for connections which are more natural, flexible and autonomous.

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