



## Ageing Better in Camden

Mid-point evaluation report:

Review of participant contributions in later life

November 2019



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## Executive summary

The Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) programme is a six-year programme that aims to address social isolation and loneliness in older people living in Camden. The programme is investing £4.5m from the National Lottery Community Fund, and is intended to produce the following outcomes:

- Older people at risk from or experiencing social isolation will be more involved in their communities and provide stronger support to each other.
- Older people will experience less social isolation as a result of participation in programme activities.
- Services which address the social isolation of older people (SIOP) in Camden are more relevant and better co-ordinated, with increased numbers of older people engaged in their design and delivery.

ABC is funding and supporting a range of projects for older people in Camden to form a body of evidence that increases awareness and knowledge in relation to SIOP, both locally and more widely.

This is the second of two interim reports which explores the theme of **participant contributions** to the design and delivery of ABC funded projects. Specifically, this report explores:

- how contributions to projects are understood and realised by participants.
- the motivations and pathways into contributing in different ways.
- the factors that help and hinder making different types of contributions.
- how the ABC programme supports and encourages project contributions.

It draws on interviews with **36 participants** from across nine ABC funded projects (as listed in Table 1); and on interviews with project leads and the ABC programme managers.

## Key findings

### ***How contributions are understood and realised by participants***

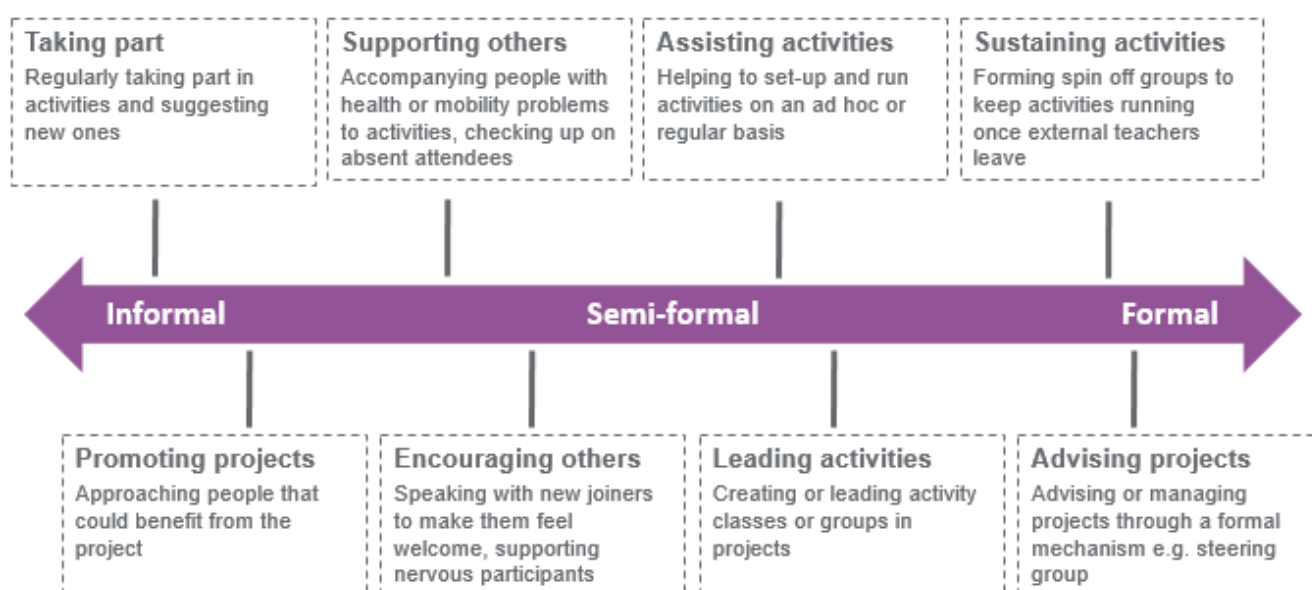
Across the programme, we saw many examples of participant contributions, including where older people are leading group activities and sitting on advisory groups alongside taking part. The ways in which participants contributed varied across the projects. This was influenced by a range of factors, including:

- The needs and interests of participants and communities, which can change over time.
- The skills and interests of the staff.

- The structure and focus of the project.
- The maturity and priorities of the organisations and groups.
- The extent to which contributions help participants meet wider social outcomes.

In the figure below we describe the range of contributions to projects that were identified by participants and project leads. Where they are on the spectrum of informal to formal reflects what was observed across the ABC projects (e.g. advising tended to be more formal, while promoting projects more informal).

**Figure 1. Spectrum of participant contributions**



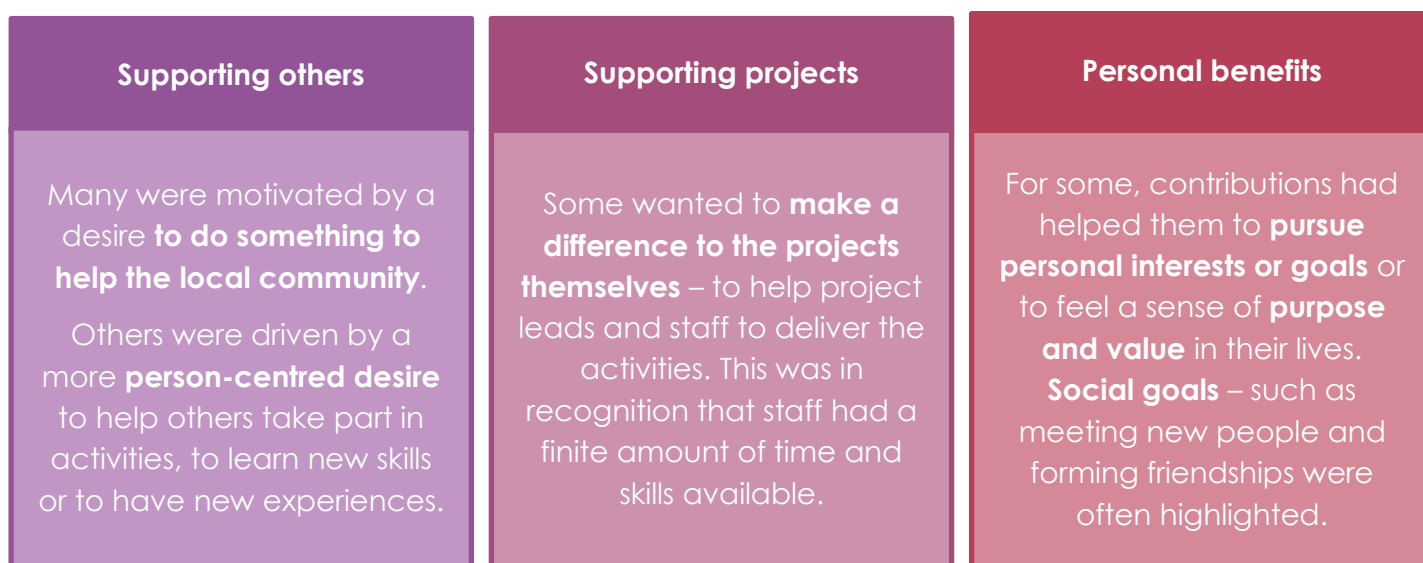
Project leads emphasised that participants are not necessarily aware of the valuable ways in which they contribute to activities. The importance of positive behaviours like welcoming newcomers, offering to collect them or travel with them, and taking part in the organising and setting up of activities can be under-estimated.

The informal, spontaneous and 'under the radar' nature of these contributions makes it difficult to capture the extent and value of participant involvement across the projects. It also highlights what it means to contribute in the success of an activity beyond merely attending but below the level of leading, coordinating or in some other way taking on a formal or official role.

### ***Motivations and pathways into contributing in different ways***

Participants' reasons for contributing were broadly similar across the projects. These can be grouped under three themes, which are described below.

Figure 2. Participants' motivations for making contributions

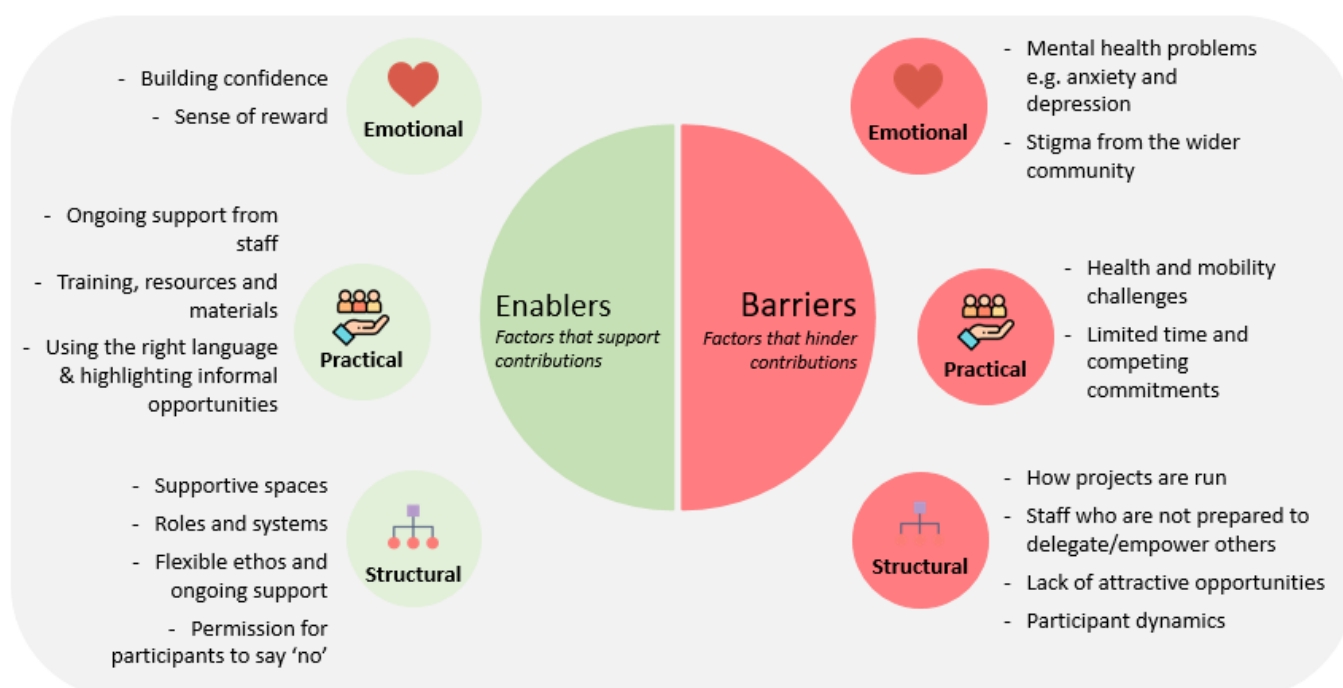


### Enablers and barriers to making contributions

While a few participants contributed to projects as soon as they joined – often driven by high levels of confidence and a desire to help others – most went through a period of 'settling in' before looking to contribute.

The insights gathered from project leads and participants brought out three broad categories of factors that helped and hindered people to start contributing, or to increase their contribution, to the delivery of projects: **emotional; practical and structural**. These three categories align with the Centre for Ageing Better's review of community contributions in later life<sup>3</sup>.

Figure 3. Summary of enablers and barriers to project contributions



## **How the programme supports project contributions**

Project leads praised the fact that supporting participant contributions has been an ongoing priority for the programme. This has been supported by:

- Requiring each project to report back in their quarterly reporting about what they have been doing to consult and involve older people in the design and delivery of their projects.
- Making progress 'supporting contributions' a standing item for discussion when ABC programme managers conduct quarterly catch-ups with leads. Where necessary they will identify 'improvement points' so that the project leads make it more of a priority.
- Holding delivery agency meetings and learning workshops where project leads can come together to share experiences and best practice on the theme of contributions.

The ABC programme managers stressed that whilst individual participants should not all be expected to move up a ladder of participation or across a spectrum, each project should have a range of ways in which people can contribute, and project leads should be conscious that some participants benefit from support and encouragement to contribute in new ways.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

**1) Participants' contributions to projects can be valuable but may often 'go under the radar' because they are ad hoc, informal and unrecorded. Project leads should be mindful of this and look for ways to capture and acknowledge examples of this value.**

This would help to illuminate the 'unseen' behaviours and actions that can support a successful project, which in turn would support better learning about what keeps projects moving, keeps participants engaged and builds rapport, relationships and good group dynamics. If that value was fed back by project leads, it would also help those contributors to realise their own value and be recognised for it. That recognition could simply be a quiet 'thank you', or where appropriate something more public.

**2) Even if projects are not structurally set up to enable older people to play more leading roles in activities, project leads should continually be identifying opportunities for people to stretch their involvement along the spectrum – if only in small ways.**

The evaluation has seen numerous examples of participant contributions, including where older people are leading group activities and sitting on advisory groups alongside taking part. With that said, the funded projects vary in their expectations about participants and in their readiness to delegate and empower others. In some, participants are encouraged to play a more prominent role in shaping and leading activities, whereas in others there is a clearer distinction between the staff/volunteers who organise and deliver and the participants who come along to enjoy the

results. In all projects, however, there will be opportunities for participants to play valuable roles above and beyond being an attendee.

This does not necessarily mean inviting them to lead or to take on formal volunteering roles, but to identify ways in which those with interest/energy/ideas to share are able to do so. This can come through prompting certain kinds of conversations with participants, setting up activities in certain ways, or using practical tools and techniques that encourage participants to think about the 'assets' they bring. Where projects find this difficult, they will benefit from support from ABC programme managers to test out those different approaches.

The case for maximising how projects encourage and support participant contributions is supported by our latest analysis of the CMF survey data which found that the more ways in which participants help others, the lower their loneliness score becomes<sup>1</sup>.

### **3) Encourage and enable projects to retain contact with beneficiaries even when they are no longer able to attend project activities**

We often heard in the interviews that declining health and fitness was a barrier for project attendees' greater involvement in project delivery or in some cases just attending. We also heard in some interviews that attendees maintain connections with those who reduce their attendance at project activities or stop attending altogether. In other words, the social connections fostered within projects can extend 'out there' into communities and exist beyond people's involvement with the project itself. The value of maintaining these connections is worth exploring, bearing in mind the risk of sudden isolation and loneliness when health becomes a barrier to out-of-home activities. We should therefore see maintaining links with former project attendees as a valued aspect of 'project contributions' and another way for older people to play a leadership role beyond that of project beneficiary.

As such, can more be done to encourage and enable projects to retain contact with beneficiaries even when they are no longer able to attend project activities? This may be a tall order for projects to enshrine in the way they operate, but could be something that projects actively promote amongst participants, nurturing a culture of 'keeping in touch' with those individuals no longer visible at group activities and at greater risk of isolation as health declines and frailty increases. This might involve writing to people, telephone and online communication or drop-in days where project participants arrange to visit those who no longer get involved in project activities. This raises a fundamental question about the aims of the programme, including what the appropriate balance is between recruiting new people (which has been incentivised by the targets) alongside investing resource in maintaining involvement and following up where people have dropped out.

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<sup>1</sup> See Traverse's second CMF analysis of data report, covering up to Sept '19



## 1. Introduction

The Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) programme is a six-year programme that aims to address social isolation and loneliness in older people living in Camden. The programme is investing £4.5m from the National Lottery Community Fund, and is intended to produce the following outcomes:

- Older people at risk from or experiencing social isolation will be more involved in their communities and provide stronger support to each other.
- Older people will experience less social isolation as a result of participation in programme activities.
- Services which address the social isolation of older people (SIOP) in Camden are more relevant and better co-ordinated, with increased numbers of older people engaged in their design and delivery.

ABC is funding and supporting a range of projects for older people in Camden to form a body of evidence that increases awareness and knowledge in relation to SIOP, both locally and more widely. The following projects supported by ABC have had various start dates from July 2015 and are developing at unique rates:

**Table 1 Projects highlighted within this report**

Project	Delivery agency	Date started
<b>Digital Inclusion</b>	Mary Ward Centre	July 2015
<b>Intergenerational activities</b>	North London Cares (NLC)	July 2015
<b>Kilburn Community Action Project (CAP)</b>	Kilburn Older Voices Exchange (KOVE)	July 2015
<b>LGBT+ Connect</b>	Opening Doors London/Age UK Camden	December 2015
<b>St. Pancras and Somers Town Community Action Project (CAP) (We are Ageing Better St Pancras and Somers Town)</b>	Origin Housing	April 2016
<b>Regent's Park Community Action Project (CAP)</b>	Third Age Project	October 2017
<b>Bangladeshi Community Action Project (CAP)</b>	Hopscotch Asian Women's Centre led partnership with Bengali Works Association and Kings Cross Brunswick Community Association	October 2017
<b>Gospel Oak and Haverstock Community</b>	Kentish Town City Farm led partnership with Queens Crescent	October 2017

<b>Action Project (CAP) (Our Three Points)</b>	Community Association and Castlehaven Community Association	
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Since then, the following additional projects have received support from ABC: Abbey Community Centre, Akash Residents Association, Community Association for West Hampstead, Community Connectors, Covent Garden Dragon Hall, Fitzrovia Centre, Henna Asian Women's Centre, Highgate Newton Community Centre, Holborn Community Association, Kentish Town Community Centre, Kosmos Centre, Outreach Service, SeeThrough Theatre West Hampstead Women's Centre, London School of Mosaic and Akademi South Asian Dance UK.

## Aims and objectives

This is the second of two interim reports that aims to explore and analyse the outcomes that ABC funded projects are having and to draw out wider learning about the programme.

This report explores the theme of participant contributions across ABC funded projects. It draws on depth interviews with participants, project leads and the ABC programme managers to explore:

- how contributions to projects are understood and realised by participants;
- the motivations and pathways into contributing in different ways, and
- the factors that support and hinder making different types of contributions;
- how the programme supports and encourages project contributions.

In talking about **contributions** rather than 'volunteering' or 'social action', this research report aligns and builds on the Centre for Ageing Better's research in this area which has found that:

- **There is also a large and growing body of evidence on the benefits that people derive from voluntarily helping others.** Those in later life who make voluntary contributions report an increase in wellbeing, self-esteem and social connections.
- **Contributions exist on a continuum from the more ad hoc and informal to the formal.** This can include simple acts of kindness to roles and activities that are effectively unpaid jobs<sup>2</sup>.

This report has the following sections:

- **Participant contributions:** describes how contributions are understood by participants and what contributing looks like in practice.
- **Reasons for contributing:** describes the motivations and factors that led

<sup>2</sup> Here we draw on the Centre for Ageing Better's review of community contributions in later life (Jopling, K. & Jones, D. 2018. [Age-friendly and inclusive volunteering: review of community contributions in later life](#). London: Centre for Ageing Better.)



to participants contributing in different ways.

- **Enablers to contributing:** describes the factors that support contributions which have been grouped under three themes: emotional, practical and structural.
- **Barriers to contributing:** describes the different types of barriers to contributions which have again been grouped under three themes: emotional, practical and structural.
- **Support from ABC:** describes reflections on whether and how the programme has supported projects to embed and enable different forms of contribution.
- **Conclusion and recommendations:** summarises what the research has shown and draws out key recommendations for the programme to consider.
- **Overview of project contributions (see Appendix):** a summary of each project, describing the project's overall aims, how contribution is defined, and the enablers and barriers to contributing.

This report can be read alongside our second analysis report of the Ageing Better in Camden participant survey. The survey used to capture the data is a Common Measurement Framework questionnaire, which is used across all national Ageing Better projects and contains questions to measure loneliness, as well as health, wellbeing and levels of social contact.

## Methodology

A total of **36** project participants were interviewed face-to-face over September - November 2019. Alongside these, we conducted telephone interviews with each of the project leads and with the two ABC programme managers.

### Sampling approach

The Traverse evaluation team worked with ABC project leads to identify 4-6 participants from each of their projects to explore the research questions. We began by reviewing the programme database that contains information about participants to identify a list of possible interviewees. We took this list to project leads to agree on who to invite to take part. Interviews were setup by Traverse and lasted between 30 minutes and an hour.

For each sub sample of 4-6 participants, we aimed for a mix of participants, with the following characteristics:

- 'Super participants', who do lots of things within a project or who go to lots of different projects
- Long-standing participants
- New joiners
- Participants with high loneliness scores



- A mix in terms of demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity)

### **Format of the interviews**

All of the interviews were semi-structured and supported by a topic guide to ensure consistency of approach. Interviewers took notes during the interviews and made digital recordings. The interviews were written up and the data was transferred into an analysis spreadsheet. The team used a framework approach to analyse the data. Analysis meetings attended by the whole team supported the identification of themes and the conclusions and recommendations.

## 2. Participant contributions

This chapter describes the various ways in which participants feel that they are contributing to projects and why they define 'contributions' in the way that they do.

In the appendix, we provide a project-by-project summary, describing the aims of the project, how contributions are defined and the key enablers and barriers to making contributions to projects identified by participants and project leads.

### *Mutual support and encouragement*

Most participants across projects try to be welcoming and friendly to new participants, having appreciated this when they were new joiners. It was very common for participants to say that they actively approach and speak to new joiners to make them feel welcomed. Some also said they would make extra efforts to welcome participants who looked nervous.

In some cases, participants will accompany each other to activities, for example if they have health or mobility problems. Participants also actively promote activities to one another. For example, one North London Cares participant explained that they will approach people on the bus that she suspects could benefit from the activities offered.

*I go up and have a chat and say: 'you should ring up North London Cares, there will be something for you, I can assure you.' – North London Cares, Participant*

As well as encouraging others to take part, participants tended to check-in on each other if they have missed a class. For example, one participant who delivers some knitting classes at the Regent's Park CAP will call up any participants if they do not show up. She explained that this works both ways, if she is not there, people check in on her.

Project leads were able to comment on participants who were crucial to rallying people to activities, but who may not have been aware of the valuable contribution they were making. The project lead from Digital Inclusion gave the following example:

**Case study Jane:** "She had been to a few courses and she had come to a few classes here and where she has grown in confidence. She could then support other students for example one student who found it such a mission to get there. She was saying 'come on we can do this' – she kept encouraging this woman...she supported this woman and made her feel that she was a real important member of the class." Digital inclusion project lead



## **Formal volunteering**

Some individuals contribute to the projects in more formal and structured ways. This can look different depending on the type of project. For example,

- At LGBT+ Connect, participants are encouraged to identify gaps and to fill them by leading new activities. This included a participant who was already a befriender who saw an unmet need and created a Bridge and Scrabble group.
- As part of the Bangladeshi CAP, the project leads encourage participants to form a small group of recognised volunteers who assist with the setup and running of activities.

Other projects, such as Digital Inclusion, have different structures and outcomes they are working towards, and do not have more formal volunteering roles or opportunities to lead an activity.

## **Continuing and extending activities**

Some participants have attended activities and organically, through forming relationships, have formed 'spin-off' groups. For example, one participant from Our Three Points attended a group that was created by members of the tapestry class, to continue practicing tapestry making without a teacher. This was enabled by the project lead who offered them a venue in which to meet. Similarly, a group of participants who have attended the Friday coffee morning at LGBT+ Connect have set up their own quieter coffee group on another day.

## **Steering and informing projects**

Across all projects, especially the CAPs, there is some sort of advisory function that allows older people to steer the project and identify what they want to do. Some projects use more structured and formal approaches, while others do this more informally (e.g. discussions at tea and coffee mornings).

## **Actively taking part**

Many feel that actively taking part in activities – engaging in activities, completing tasks, asking questions and committing to regular attendance – are in themselves important types of contributions.

**Case study Hannah:** Hannah was referred to Gospel Oak and Haverstock CAP by her GP for exercise but has got involved with more activities including tapestry. Hannah initially dropped out of the tapestry class following a loss of confidence however the project lead called her to encourage her to return. Without this encouragement, she says she would not have re-joined the group. She has since made friends through attending a bi-weekly tapestry group which has arranged to meet without a teacher on the weeks where there are no classes scheduled.



Project leads emphasised that participants are not necessarily aware of the valuable ways in which they contribute to activities. The importance of positive behaviours like welcoming newcomers, offering to collect them or travel with them, and taking part in the organising and setting up of activities can be under-estimated.

The informal, spontaneous and 'under the radar' nature of these contributions makes it difficult to capture the extent and value of participant involvement across the projects. It also highlights what it means to contribute in the success of an activity beyond merely attending but below the level of leading, coordinating or in some other way taking on a formal or official role.

This raises questions for projects, firstly about how they seek to identify and record these positive behaviours and informal contributions – bearing in mind the participants themselves will often fail to recognise their value – and, secondly, about how they can promote and encourage these contributions by creating opportunities for participants to play these valuable informal roles.

### 3. Reasons for contributing

Participants' reasons for contributing were broadly similar across the projects. These can be grouped under the following three themes which are described below:

- supporting others;
- supporting and improving projects;
- personal benefits.

#### **Supporting others**

Many of the participants who were contributing to projects talked about wanting to do something to help the local community. Sometimes they were driven by a broad notion of community spirit and a desire to help people, this was especially the case with the Bangladeshi CAP.

Other participants were driven by a more person-centred desire to help others take part in activities, learn new skills and to have new experiences:

*Some people wanted to learn how to knit, they saw my knitting – I think [a project coordinator] was talking about people who wanted to learn – so I volunteered. – Regent's Park CAP, Participant*

#### **Supporting and improving projects**

Some were motivated by a desire to make a difference to the projects themselves – to help project leads and staff to deliver the activities well. They recognised that project leads had a finite amount of time and skills available, and that as participants they could provide some additional time and skill – as well as, perhaps, relevant experience – which could help projects to deliver a quality offer. This could mean helping existing activities run more easily or extending the range of activities on offer. Participants were also motivated to contribute and help make individual activities successful:

*If you put on a talk and have a question and answer, and people sit there in silence [then] it's a failure, but if you ask a question and get a debate going you are contributing to that hour. – North London Cares, Participant*

A few were motivated by a desire to simply keep activities alive for people like themselves, so that attending and keeping momentum behind a project or a specific activity could itself be a contribution that benefitted others.

#### **Personal benefits**

Some participants were motivated to contribute to projects to help fulfil personal needs, interests or goals. Social goals – such as meeting new people and forming new friendships – were the ones most often talked about:



*I enjoy meeting people, especially the younger kids visiting the farm. – Gospel Oak and Haverstock CAP, Participants*

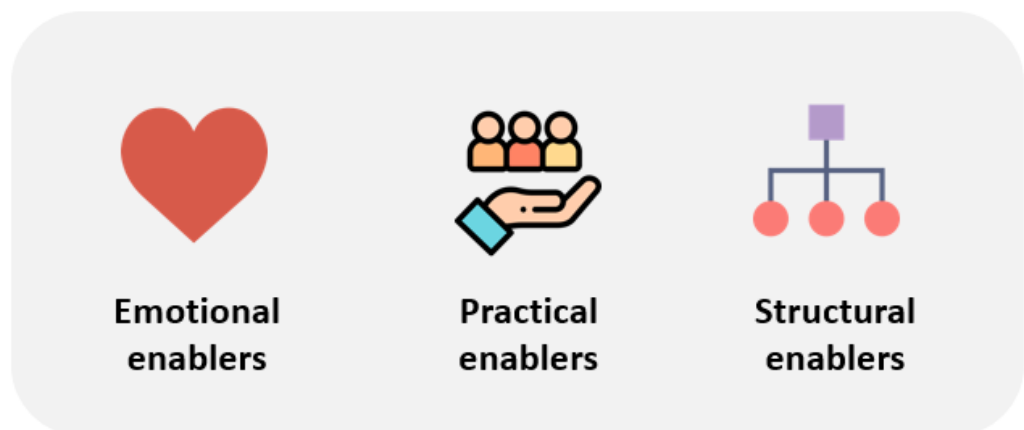
There were also examples of where participants had been motivated by a desire to create a sense of value in their life, for example feeling needed by others or creating a sense of purpose (such as after retirement).

In some cases, participants were motivated to contribute by their own active outlook. These participants tended to seek out volunteer opportunities and to have a history of volunteering. These participants sometimes acknowledged that the more active they were and the more often they challenged themselves, the better they felt.

## 4. Enablers to contributing

While a small number of participants contributed to projects as soon as they joined, often driven by high levels of confidence and a desire to help others, most participants went through a period of 'settling in' before looking to contribute.

The insights gathered from project leads and participants brought out three broad categories of factors that helped people to start contributing, or increase their contribution, to the delivery of projects: emotional; practical and structural enablers.<sup>3</sup>



Graphic icons made by [Smashicons](#) and [Freepik](#) from [www.flaticon.com](http://www.flaticon.com)

### *Emotional enablers*

Emotional enablers refer to how people feel and how this influences them to contribute to projects or increase their contributions to projects.

#### **Building confidence**

Some projects observed that participants could be quiet, shy and lacking in confidence when they first joined, with participants often sitting in the corner and/or not directly contributing to project activities.

While participant confidence was often observed to increase as participants became more familiar with their peers and more engaged in activities, project leads, other staff and longstanding participants were also reported to have a critical role in this process.

Project leads had a key role to play in coaxing people to attend activities in the first instance, and then encouraging them to attend more activities and begin to contribute in different ways. This is a finding which is consistent with the recently published ABC learning report focused on how groups are

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<sup>3</sup> This framework aligns with the Centre for Ageing Better's review of community contributions in later life, which identified emotional, practical and structural enablers and barriers (Jopling, K. & Jones, D. 2018. [Age-friendly and inclusive volunteering: review of community contributions in later life](#). London: Centre for Ageing Better.)

made welcoming for older people<sup>4</sup>.

Several participants reported that this encouragement had inspired them to start to contribute or contribute more to projects. Reassurance from project leads helped build confidence in participants that they could contribute, while guidance helped them find the right ways for them to contribute in line with their interests.

Acknowledgement of participants' efforts was a key part of this process, not just for more substantive contributions (e.g. leading a session), but for more informal, everyday contributions by less confident participants.

*[We have] lots of examples of people who sit in the corner when they first arrive, but who are now... engaging with other people, going on activities and offering to do things. People are coming in on a daily basis asking if they can help. – Regent's Park CAP, Project Lead*

These improvements, in turn, could help motivate others to contribute:

*Those not volunteering see that the volunteers are getting a lot out of it; this grows their interest in taking part. – Bangladeshi CAP, Project lead*

### **Sense of reward**

Participants who contributed to projects often felt personal satisfaction and a sense of reward from supporting others, such as helping others to learn a new skill or giving them a new experience. This, in turn, was reported to encourage further contributions.

Participants who made more formal contributions such as leading specific activities also reported that they enjoyed the responsibility, which encouraged them to keep doing it.

*It has been very rewarding with one of the ladies... she couldn't knit a stitch when she started. Now she can do a Plain and Pearl and I can leave her to it...it's quite rewarding. – Regent's Park CAP, participant*

### **Practical enablers**

Project leads and participants agreed that practical support should always be in place to enable someone to contribute to a project or to contribute more.

### **Ongoing support from staff**

Participants wanted sufficient time to talk with project leads, share their ideas and feel they were being listened to. Project leads also highlighted the need to support contributors with coping strategies for different situations they may

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<sup>4</sup> "Like a whole big family" What makes groups welcoming for older people and why does it matter? A Research Report (Amanda Mainey) 2019.  
<http://www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/warm-welcome-approach>

face – e.g. when other participants have challenging behaviours.

### **Training, resources and materials**

Project leads talked about the importance of providing the right training, resources and materials, such as in the case of Kilburn CAP, funding places on a walking group leader training course.

### **Using the right language and highlighting informal opportunities**

In a few of the projects, staff emphasised that the language used to describe and invite people to contribute is important to get right. At the Regent's Park CAP for example, the project lead was conscious that for some participants inviting them to become “volunteers” could be off-putting because it implied too much of an ongoing commitment. Instead, staff have tended to use softer language and have highlighted the more informal and flexible nature of contributing.

### **Structural enablers**

Structural enablers are the systems and processes created by projects – and the infrastructure they operate within – which help to support people to contribute or increase their contributions to projects.

### **Supportive spaces**

Some projects highlighted the importance of having relaxed and inclusive communal spaces in which participants can gather and socialise, alongside taking part in scheduled activities. Open, flexible spaces such as The Living Centre in Somers Town helped projects to run a wide variety of activities, and made it easier for participants to move from one to another and to take a greater involvement in the project, e.g. by suggesting what activities they would like to see run.

*The project space can be adapted to what it is we're doing, the programme isn't set and that's the good thing about it... participants can suggest what they want to do, people [expect this] and know each quarter will be different. – St. Pancras and Somers Town CAP, Project Lead*

Similarly, an informal gathering space at one of the Bangladeshi CAP community centres where the tea and coffee mornings took place helped to create an environment and culture that supported project leads to casually approach participants on a regular basis and gradually build their interest in contributing in different ways to the project.

### **Roles and systems**

Some projects had created roles and systems that placed contributions at the heart of how they operated on a day-to-day basis and encouraged people to talk about them. This varied between projects, but included: creating formal volunteer groups to steer, develop and contribute to activities, and recognising participant contributions.

Regent's Park CAP has placed contributions at the heart of their activities through asking participants to complete a 'registration form' on arrival to identify participants' interests, skills and knowledge that they can offer to help others, and update these on an annual basis to ensure participants were encouraged and adequately supported.

*[We] try to ensure that people know when there are [participants] running a project and helping out, so that they can see for themselves how they could potentially do the same. – Gospel Oak and Haverstock CAP, Project Lead*

### **Flexible ethos**

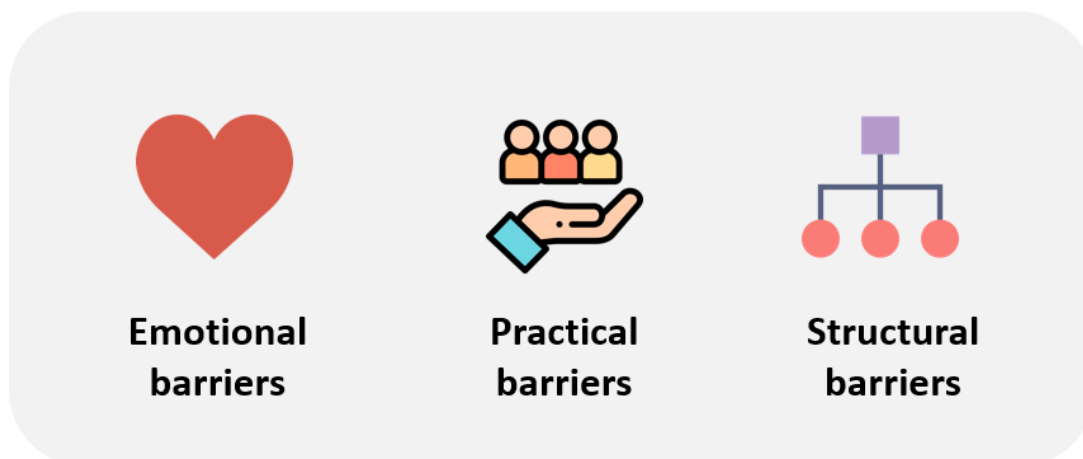
The importance of flexible, non-burdensome opportunities to contribute to projects was highlighted as essential by both project leads and participants. This was often a delicate balancing act where project leads felt that it was necessary to maintain a presence to actively encourage participants to contribute, but, at the same time create a culture where there were no expectations and participants were able to say 'no' if they were not comfortable.

Where participants made contributions such as delivering a class, it was also important to ensure that they could fit them around their time and did not feel relied upon or obliged to keep to their commitments if their circumstances changed, as this could create pressure. Short breaks from contributions, rather than continually contributing to projects, were also felt to sustain long-term contribution towards projects.

*The ethos of our organisation is an important factor – our organisation allows participants to be flexible in terms of how much they choose to contribute. Participants appreciate that they can attend with no strings attached. – Kilburn and West Hampstead CAP, Project Lead*

## 5. Barriers to contributing

Drawing on the insights gathered from participants and project leads, we found three broad categories of barriers to either starting to contribute, or increasing their contributions: emotional; practical and structural.<sup>5</sup>



Graphic icons made by [Smashicons](https://www.smashicons.com/) and [Freepik](https://www.freepik.com/) from [www.flaticon.com](https://www.flaticon.com/)

We found that the above three categories of barriers were sometimes interlocking. For example, being in poor health (practical barrier) could have a negative impact on a participant's self-confidence (emotional barrier).

### *Emotional barriers*

#### **Mental health problems**

For some participants, who joined a project suffering from anxiety and depression, just continuing to turn up was understood as an achievement, and further involvement beyond this was often seen as unlikely.

Sometimes the lines between practical and emotional barriers were blurred. Across the projects, a few participants with poor health in the 'older old' age group expressed a sense of fatalism that expanding their contribution was no longer a realistic goal at this stage in their life. This could be seen as a barrier created by poor health or infirmity, or as a barrier created – or at least reinforced – by the way they felt about their situation. In these instances, project leads emphasised the importance of offering extra support to participants to ensure that regular attendance could be sustained. The need to set realistic expectations with these participants and show patience about what they could achieve and by when was also important.

*[One of my participants] lives with fear and anxiety, that will take time to reduce. She is also not very confident, as for a long time she did not go out much or do many things outside of family life.*

<sup>5</sup> This framework aligns with the Centre for Ageing Better's review of community contributions in later life, which identified emotional, practical and structural barriers (Jopling, K. & Jones, D. 2018. [Age-friendly and inclusive volunteering: review of community contributions in later life](#). London: Centre for Ageing Better.)

*You have to show patience and persistence to help them grow. –  
Bangladeshi CAP, Project Lead*

### **Fear of stigma from the wider community**

Another emotional barrier identified at the Bangladeshi CAP was the fact that participants sometimes feared stigma from their wider community about participation in the project. This is because it had the potential to send a message that their families were not looking after them.

### **Practical barriers**

#### **Health and mobility challenges**

Across the projects, mobility challenges and health problems were commonly identified as barriers to participating and contributing to projects. Participants with the most serious health and mobility challenges – often the 'older old' in terms of age profile – stressed a few times that just getting to the project venue and participating at a basic level were achievements, and they said that they would struggle to do much more.

*Some are just too tired. They only just about have the energy to  
come along to a group; they'd struggle to do anything else. –  
Bangladeshi CAP, Project Lead*

Some participants described how in recent months or years, deteriorating health or mobility had started to limit the ways that they could participate and contribute. For example, one participant explained that as their arthritis had worsened, preparing and bringing food to the sessions was no longer possible. Another explained that poor mobility had made contributing to Christmas lunches more difficult.

*I did offer to help at [the centre's Christmas lunch] some time ago,  
but I wouldn't be able to do it now as it involves some walking  
around. (LGBT+ Connect)*

With worsening health and mobility a few participants across the projects reported that they had started to avoid making commitments, because they feared letting others down.

*I am beginning to get [health] problems; I don't want to  
overcommit and find I can't do any of it. I don't want to let  
people down. – Regent's Park CAP, participant*

#### **Limited time and competing commitments**

As has been reported previously, participants said that forms of contribution which involved a regular time commitment and positions of responsibility were not always possible or appealing. For some this was because they had existing volunteering commitments and did not want to take more on.

*I'm content with the ways I'm taking part. I've got enough to do...  
I do four of eight days sometimes on the railway and it's a long  
day. – Regent's Park CAP, participant*

Others cited concerns that things like medical appointments would hinder their ability to play a bigger role in a project.

*I always see offers to volunteer, but because I have lots of hospital appointments I cannot commit to those things. If you volunteer, you always have to be available to do it. My appointments cause me to miss activities sometimes... it's annoying. So, I help out when I have the time... but there is always something. I'll be at the hospital once a week... they don't tell you which days so it's hard for me to plan. – Regent's Park CAP, participant*

In a few cases, participants explained that they had family and caring responsibilities which limited their time and energy. This led to some wanting to avoid positions of responsibility in favour of simply 'taking part'.

*I am not able to get involved because I am a carer, my time is limited. My husband is disabled. I just relish the time when I can go and be myself, I don't have money to pay for a carer. – Kilburn and West Hampstead CAP, participant*

## **Structural barriers**

### **How projects are run**

In one project, a participant explained that the new coordinator running the project seemed less committed to involving participants in co-delivering activities compared with previous staff. In another, participants reported that they would be happy to contribute, but only if staff told them what needed doing.

*'I'd be willing to help out more, but I'd like to be told what to do. – Kilburn and West Hampstead CAP, participant*

The ABC programme managers recognised this trend identified the following reasons why staff may not want to give up power and support others to undertake tasks:

*This might be because [project staff] like doing those particular jobs; because they think that it will be harder to support someone to do it, so it's easier to do it themselves; or because they have doubts over participant's capacity to do the task.*

In the Bangladeshi CAP one of the longer-term goals is to encourage participants, particularly those who are female, to have more agency and independence in their lives. However, as staff provide a lot of ongoing support to participants, it was noted that they also need to withdraw and see the potential of people who might continue to present as needing intense support even though they do not anymore and so underestimate what they are able to do.

When it came to North London Cares, project leads commented that whilst increased contributions were welcome, they did not encourage any one individual to have too much ownership or leadership of an activity. A few

participants from this project also had the view that activities were so well planned and resourced that there was no need for them to contribute.

*I don't need to [contribute] because it's all organised. They organise it so well at Castlehaven, I just go as a guest, I don't help or anything. – North London Care, participant*

In the case of digital inclusion contributing more substantially (e.g. leading a session) was not felt to be possible, as participants did not feel that they had the technical skills to do this.

### **Lack of attractive opportunities**

A few participants said they would consider contributing if they could find tasks and activities that were more flexible and or more suited to their skills and interests.

**Case study Digital Inclusion:** Grace was referred to Age UK Camden by her GP when she began to suffer from mobility issues. She was assigned a community connector who has recommended many activities, but she is not interested in attending 'social' activities, as she says that she is busy, with lots of friends and does not see herself as old. But she does wish to learn practical skills. She has been attending activities for exercise and the Digital Inclusion project to learn how to use computers and her smart phone. She would like to contribute more, but in a way that is meaningful to her and utilises her skills:

*'With any luck, I will stumble across something that I'm capable of offering – that could be an internal battle that I'm having as I feel increasingly useless. The books I edited were academic reference books. I cut my teeth on a 20-volume encyclopaedia of music. But how does one share that to be useful?'*

### **Participant dynamics**

At one project participants reported that not everyone felt welcomed at some activities. They went on to say that knowing people and feeling welcome were the foundations to contributing further. In another, the project lead referred to personality clashes in groups as something that could discourage people from getting more involved.

*There's some very strong characters, you try so much to smooth things over, but that's difficult when there's a personality clash, and I'm very aware of someone being scared off by a loud member. – LGBT+ Connect*

The challenge of managing difficult group dynamics also meant that the project lead did not feel entirely comfortable with handing over more responsibility to participants who wanted to run an activity.



### ***Lack of specific resources***

There were a small number of cases reported where participants could not run activities because materials or equipment was not available. For example, one participant talked about wanting to lead a sewing group but the organisation did not have the budget to purchase the materials.

## 6. Support from ABC

In this section, we explored how and to what extent the programme has encouraged and facilitated participant contributions, drawing on the interviews with project leads and the two ABC programme managers.

Project leads praised the fact that supporting participant contributions has been a key feature of the programme right from the start and that it has remained an ongoing priority.

Each project is required to report back in their quarterly reporting about what they have been doing to consult and involve older people in the design and delivery of their projects. It is also a standing item for discussion when ABC programme managers conduct quarterly catch-ups with leads.

*It's about having a lot of little conversations, have you thought about doing this? Is there no one else who can do that in the group? – ABC Programme Manager*

Because supporting contributions is not always an easy thing to bring about, it was felt that project staff have benefited from having spaces to critically reflect on their practice in this area and to identify new strategies.

*Sometimes the monitoring meetings are more like practice development rather than monitoring, encouraging staff to work through difficult situations. – ABC Programme Manager*

Alongside the one-to-one catch ups, projects also felt that there was value in attending the delivery agency meetings, which take place three times per year, and the annual learning events which are facilitated by the evaluation team. Some suggested that some small and focused group work at the delivery agency meetings, could make them still more productive when it comes to improving one's coproduction practice.

*I think the sharing of success stories and focus on co-production has been really inspiring for everyone involved. And going to those meetings and listening to KOVE which fought for a bench through members coming together proving what they want to be active about and how they can change their local environment – that sparked something in another group which is maybe we can do something in the same way in our group. There are many ways to do co-production. Project lead, Digital Inclusion*

The ABC programme managers stressed that having spaces to reflect on practice was important because in the community development sector due to limited budgets, staff often have to work alone or in small teams, and may lack access to supervision and ongoing support.

The ABC programme managers noted that where a project seems to be lacking ambition, they will identify 'improvement points' so that the project leads make it more of a priority. The programme managers also reported that in some instances they had adjusted project targets to encourage more

action in this area.

*ABC pushed for us to recruit volunteers and this has been more successful than we thought it would be. They have been an asset and are leading by example, the non-volunteers are showing interest in what the volunteers are doing. – Bangladeshi CAP, Project Lead*

With that said, programme managers emphasised that it was important not to be overly prescriptive about what a project should be doing and to be mindful that a whole range of factors can constrain the type and extent of participant contributions that are possible within each project. It was also recognised that there will always be a proportion of older people attending the projects simply to relax and focus on the activities themselves, who would rather not take on increasing amounts of responsibility.

When ABC was initially launched, the ABC programme managers noted the Asset Based Community Development approach was a very explicit focus in the tendering documents used to recruit the projects. This was particularly seen in the area based Community Action Projects, where the best-case scenario would see the project lead taking a 'bottom-up' approach – working with a small community of older people to design and deliver activities themselves and to use the project as a springboard for helping them to achieve wider influence and change in their local areas.

Whilst some of the project have always worked in this way, all have had to focus on setting up activities (not necessarily older person-led) which will help them to attract the sufficient volume of new participants.

Project leads and the ABC programme managers felt that once people settled into activities and gained confidence they could then be encouraged to increase their contributions.

*'The idea was that, once you get people in the door, you can start having those exploratory discussions with them and you can funnel them towards different types of contributions, whilst accepting that it's not everyone.' – ABC Programme Manager*

The ABC programme managers stressed that whilst individual participants should not all be expected to move up a ladder of participation or across a spectrum, each project should have a range of ways in which people can contribute, and project leads should be conscious that some participants will benefit from support and encouragement to contribute in new ways.

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

This report has sought to explore the theme of participant contributions across ABC funded projects. Drawing on depth interview it has detailed:

- how contributions to projects are understood and realised by participants;
- the motivations and pathways into contributing in different ways, and
- the factors that support and hinder making different types of contributions.

Below we set out some recommendations and further questions for the programme to consider.

**1) Participants' contributions to projects can be valuable but may often 'go under the radar' because they are ad hoc, informal and unrecorded. Project leads should be mindful of this and look for ways to capture and acknowledge examples of this value.**

This would help to illuminate the 'unseen' behaviours and actions that can support a successful project, which in turn would support better learning about what keeps projects moving, keeps participants engaged and builds rapport, relationships and good group dynamics. If that value was fed back by project leads, it would also help those contributors to realise their own value and be recognised for it. That recognition could simply be a quiet 'thank you', or where appropriate something more public.

**2) Even if projects are not structurally set up to enable older people to play more leading roles in activities, project leads should continually be identifying opportunities for people to stretch their involvement along the spectrum – if only in small ways.**

The evaluation has seen numerous examples of participant contributions, including where older people are leading group activities and sitting on advisory groups alongside taking part. With that said, the funded projects vary in their expectations about participants and in their readiness to delegate and empower others. In some, participants are encouraged to play a more prominent role in shaping and leading activities, whereas in others there is a clearer distinction between the staff/volunteers who organise and deliver and the participants who come along to enjoy the results. In all projects, however, there will be opportunities for participants to play valuable roles above and beyond being an attendee.

This does not necessarily mean inviting them to lead or to take on formal volunteering roles, but to identify ways in which those with interest/energy/ideas to share are able to do so. This can come through prompting certain kinds of conversations with participants, setting up activities in certain ways, or using practical tools and techniques that encourage participants to think about the 'assets' they bring. Where projects find this difficult, they will benefit from support from ABC programme

managers to test out those different approaches.

The case for maximising how projects encourage and support participant contributions is supported by our latest analysis of the CMF survey data which found that the more ways in which participants help others, the lower their loneliness score becomes<sup>1</sup>.

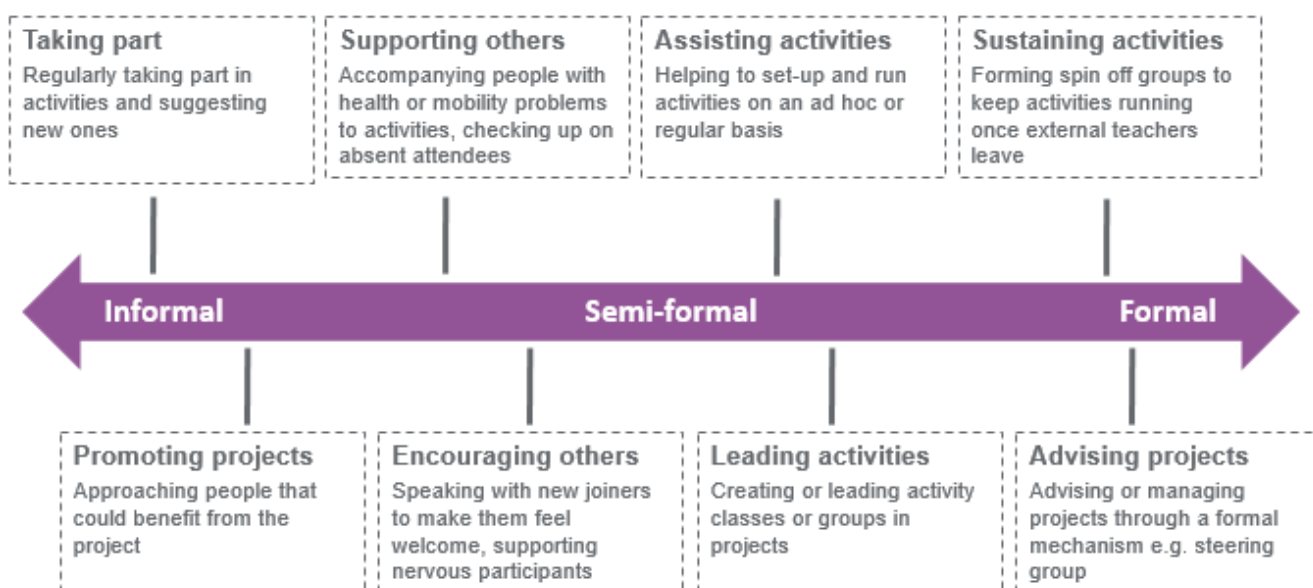
### **3) Encourage and enable projects to retain contact with beneficiaries even when they are no longer able to attend project activities**

We often heard in the interviews that declining health and fitness was a barrier for project attendees' greater involvement in project delivery or in some cases just attending. We also heard in some interviews that attendees maintain connections when those who reduce their attendance at project activities or stop attending altogether. In other words, the social connections fostered within projects can extend 'out there' into communities and exist beyond people's involvement with the project itself. The value of maintaining these connections is worth exploring, particularly bearing in mind the risk of sudden isolation and loneliness when health becomes a barrier to out-of-home activities. We should therefore see maintaining links with former project attendees as a valued aspect of 'project contributions' and another way for older people to play an important leadership role beyond that of project beneficiary.

As such, can more be done to encourage and enable projects to retain contact with beneficiaries even when they are no longer able to attend project activities? This may be a tall order for projects to enshrine in the way they operate, but could be something that projects actively promote amongst participants, nurturing a culture of 'keeping in touch' with those individuals no longer visible at group activities and at greater risk of isolation as health declines and frailty increases. This might involve writing to people, telephone and online communication or drop-in days where project participants arrange to visit those who no longer get involved in project activities. This raises a fundamental question about the aims of the programme, including what the appropriate balance is between recruiting new people (which has been incentivised by the targets) alongside investing resource in maintaining involvement and following up where people have dropped out.

### **4) Modify reference to the 'ladder of participation' when describing the ABC programme, and move to a horizontal spectrum of participation as set out below.**

In the figure below, we have described the range of contributions to projects that were identified by participants and project leads. Where they are on the spectrum of informal to formal reflects what was observed across the projects (e.g. advising tended to be more formal, while promoting projects more informal).



The rationale for this recommendation is as follows:

- First, the original ladder of involvement implies that people 'work their way up' from informal/ad hoc contributions to more substantive contributions over time. Yet the evaluation has found examples of new participants making substantive contributions to projects early in their involvement.
- Second, the ladder implies that people 'accrue' contributions as they move 'up' the ladder i.e. they are contributing/have contributed all actions beneath one rung on the ladder in order to move to the next, but it isn't clear that this is always the case.
- Third, the ladder implies a judgement about what is more and less important. It could be argued that this is unhelpful, and encourages us to overlook the value of informal, ad hoc actions that support others to attend and enjoy activities.
- Finally, we found that people's needs and ability to contribute can fluctuate or – eventually – deteriorate over time, thereby presenting a further challenge to the premise that level of contribution increases – or that we should aspire for them to increase – over time.

Additionally, use of a horizontal spectrum of participation, from informal to formal aligns with Centre for Ageing Better's findings in relation to recent research into people in later life and contributions to communities<sup>3</sup>.

## Appendix – Overview of project contributions

The evaluation found that the extent, culture and language associated with supporting participant contributions varied across the projects. This could change over time and was influenced by a range of factors, including:

- The needs and interests of participants, communities, which may change over time
- The skills and interests of the staff
- The structure and focus of the project
- The maturity and priorities of the organisations and groups
- The extent to which contributions help participants meet wider social outcomes

Below we provide project-by-project summaries – introducing its overall aims, how contributions are defined and the key enablers and barriers that were identified by participants and project leads.

### Gospel Oak CAP

- **Project outline:** This project is split between three community centres across the Kentish Town/Camden area: Kentish Town City Farm, Queens Crescent and Castlehaven. Queens Crescent and Castle Haven offer different range of activities and outings, while Kentish Town City Farm does not have such an extensive programme.
- **Definition of contributions:** Most participants will understand contribution as turning up to different sessions and classes. However, they are sometimes contributing more than they realise - from helping to set the table ahead of lunches and coffee mornings to arranging group activities outside those offered by the community centre.
- **Key enablers:** Encouragement from the project lead, and an openness to giving people positions of responsibility where they show an interest; a supportive culture among participants where contributions are encouraged and welcomed.
- **Key barriers:** Health and the time commitment was mentioned by participants as key barriers. The city farm site was also felt to lack sufficient indoor spaces to host activities.

### Kilburn KAP

- **Project outline:** This project aims to empower older people to participate in campaigning and local influencing, including through three area-based older people's forums. It also delivers various activities, including 'bench to bench walks', a film club, a Stroke Freedom Support Group and an arthritis group which are advertised in a quarterly newsletter.
- **Definition of contributions:** Older people sit on the project's steering group and are trustees. Those attending activities are encouraged to deliver (e.g. room setup, refreshments) and give ongoing feedback. There is a culture of participants helping each other to attend activities.
- **Key enablers:** Encouragement from the project lead, and an openness to giving people positions of responsibility where they show an interest; a supportive culture amongst participants where contributions are routine/ encouraged.
- **Key barriers:** Participants with fluctuating/ deteriorating health, which can make regular attendance and contributions hard to sustain.

### Bangladeshi CAP

- **Project outline:** Delivered by a partnership of three well established organisations based in the Kings Cross/ Euston area. Project leads across the three organisations manage and deliver a rolling schedule of activities aimed primarily at older Bangladeshi people.
- **Definition of contributions:** Participants are invited to become volunteers who help to setup and support activities. Participant feedback groups help to steer choice of activities. Forms of informal contribution such as bringing food, helping to clear up and encouraging attendance are embedded in the project's culture. During outings and trips service users who need a bit more support to take part in the activity are paired with a befriender.
- **Key enablers:** Close support and encouragement from projects leads focus initially on meeting basic needs (benefits advice, English classes), centres that are very local to participant's homes, warm and cohesive environment, culture of reciprocity.
- **Key barriers:** Deteriorating health and mobility limiting what people can do, new participants joining with low confidence and self-efficacy.

### St Pancras and Somers Town CAP

- **Project outline:** Offers a range of activities and outings. Send out newsletter with information on what's on.
- **Definition of contributions:** Varies between individuals. Some participants contribute through attending, while others are leading classes with the support from project lead.
- **Key enablers:** Project lead is very supportive of increased contributions from participants. Participants mentioned the building (The Living Centre) as a key enabler as it provides a good location and modern facilities. Project lead is also very involved and encourages new ideas and changes to the programme.
- **Key barriers:** Project lead referred to personality clashes in groups as something that can discourage participants from getting more involved, this can also make it difficult to handover responsibility to specific participants. Participants based in the local area have been resistant to some forms of contribution because of the history being overconsulted but ignored by developers and infrastructure projects.

### Regents Park CAP

- **Project outline:** Offers a range of project and participant-led activities. Participation is supported by a core group of formal volunteers and dedicated outreach and men's workers.
- **Definition of contributions:** Participants see contributions as ranging from ensuring that others feel included or completing ad hoc tasks to supporting the delivery of activities, through to leading activities or specific classes such as walking groups or knitting classes.
- **Key enablers:** Volunteering cultures and practices are embedded throughout the project. Participants are expected and encouraged to contribute from the start in some form: new joiners complete a registration form that identifies their interests, support needs and how they could contribute, which is then revisited every 12 months. This has helped to foster a 'family culture' where participants regularly provide support to each other which, in turn, inspires and motivates others to contribute. The project uses a co-production model to support contributions, which has the categories of engagement, accountability, evaluation and decision-making to support putting older people in the driving seat.
- **Key barriers:** Poverty, language, culture, poor/deteriorating physical and mental health, low levels of literacy and formal education, lack of awareness of how to access statutory and alternative facilities and services, having other volunteering commitments outside of the project, needing to attend health appointments.

### Intergenerational Project

- **Project outline:** A rolling schedule of activities advertised through a newsletter. Some activities have limited space and are oversubscribed, requiring participants to register to take part through a lottery system.
- **Definition of contributions:** Project leads have commented that they have a more staff-led model where overall leadership of an activity is not often a goal. Many of the activities themselves by nature involve older people contributing and challenging themselves in ways that achieve personal growth and greater confidence (e.g. participation in stand-up comedy, running a podcast, curating a film festival).
- **Enabler to contributions:** The lottery system ensures that at oversubscribed events there are a mix of different participants, including first timers, and more established participants. This helps avoid cliques forming and encourages a welcoming atmosphere. Over time, as the project has become more established, user involvement and consultation have become more prominent.
- **Key barriers:** Participants have commented that the activities are so well planned and run that they have not felt a need to contribute any further.

### LGBT+ Connect

- **Project outline:** Hosts a variety of activities every month. Some are weekly, such as the Friday coffee morning, and other are more ad hoc, e.g. gallery visits. Participants are encouraged to start their own activities if they think there is a gap. Responding to feedback, the project is focused on expanding its offers in order to attract more people from underrepresented sections of the LGBT+ communities, e.g. women, trans and BAME communities.
- **Definition of contributions:** All of the groups are volunteer-led, however this does require a level of confidence and leadership skills to be able to do this independently. Some participants also see regularly attending an activity as an important form of contributing.
- **Key enablers:** A volunteer programme is in place to help give interested participants the skills they require to lead a group.
- **Key barriers:** A small number of participants felt that activities were not welcoming. They felt that knowing people and feeling welcome was a prerequisite for contributing further.

### Digital Inclusion

- **Project outline:** This project offers digital inclusion classes in community settings and occasionally at the Mary Ward Centre. For this reason, participants are often associated with the community venue, rather than the specific digital inclusion activity, attending several activities within the centre.
- **Definition of contributions:** While participants see contribution as attending activities and being actively engaged in classes, project leads have noted that participants have supported each other to attend, for example helping participants up the stairs, or motivating each other to continue attending.
- **Key enablers:** Project leads were seen as encouraging and supporting to participants who otherwise would not take part in digital inclusion classes.
- **Key barriers:** Participants feel that to contribute more substantively, i.e. to lead a session, would not be possible for digital inclusion classes, as they do not feel that they have the skills to do so. However, they develop confidence and other skills that lead to community cohesion.

TRAVERSE

