The Warm Welcome approach: a practitioner's guide

Creating a gateway for older people to a sense of belonging in the local community

Helen MacIntyre, August 2020

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About Ageing Better in Camden

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

Ageing Better in Camden is part of 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.

Background

Two members have a chat at Age UK Camden

This report presents guidance on how to make community groups and activities as welcoming as possible for older people. It is based on the experience and expertise of practitioners (group leaders or teachers, centre managers, outreach workers) who organise or run these groups in Camden and on the experiences of older people who have attended them.

This guidance complements our earlier learning report 'Like a Whole Big Family' (Mainey, 2019) which presented evidence from older people in Camden on how to make community groups as welcoming as possible and what difference this makes. Our interviews with 65 older people showed that the absence of a 'warm welcome' impacted on participants' well-being. Sometimes the impact of this was short term and put them off attending a particular group but it could also be longer term because it undermined an individual's confidence or willingness to engage in any further community activity. This is notable given that community activities are a central part of current social prescribing policies and provision (e.g. Public Health England, 2019) to decrease loneliness and social isolation and associated negative health outcomes. We therefore concluded that organisations and group leaders need to plan explicitly to create this very necessary warm welcome within groups for older people and that it should not be left to chance. This implies that organisations and their funders will need to factor in the time and resources to do the approach.

Overview: elements of a Warm Welcome

Art class at Dragon Hall

Older people identified a range of factors which are fundamental to creating a welcoming atmosphere within community groups and activities. These included meeting and greeting by staff or volunteers, making introductions, seating arrangements, opportunities for social interaction and relationship building, fostering a sense of community and various communication strategies.

This report provides further detail from practitioners about how they establish and maintain a warm welcome in their own settings, encourage their group members to play their part, and address difficulties in this aspect of their work. It is based on experience and ideas shared at a workshop attended by 25 practitioners in February 2020 as well as on earlier conversations with some of them. Their approaches are divided into:

- Embedding a welcoming ethos at organisational level
- Warm welcome in practice: Proactive development of a welcoming environment
- Addressing unwelcoming behaviour

As also noted below, some elements of this practice are particularly relevant for making individuals feel welcome when they first arrive at a centre or group especially if they are hesitant about joining or vulnerable in other ways, so encouraging them to continue to attend. Others are more relevant for encouraging established members to feel at home and to maintain their participation in the longer term. Some apply equally to both stages of social engagement.

Methods for embedding a welcoming organisational ethos

Hopscotch Asian Women's Centre

Staff play an essential role at an organizational and group level in establishing the kind of warm welcome which is key to developing and maintaining engagement with older people. This not only includes group leaders but also centre managers, reception staff and volunteers. Embedding a welcoming

ethos and culture depends on a combination of formalising the approach through organisational policies and the informal, day-to-day enactment of these policies through interactions between individuals.

More formal approaches include

- **Having written policies and role specifications** which set out what is meant by a warm welcome for a given organisation, expectations for welcoming behaviour on the part of staff, volunteers and group attendees. Policies should also make clear what is considered unacceptable behaviour in that organisation.
- **Training staff with reference to these policies.** In one example, training sessions included staff role playing given situations and then reviewing their approaches in relation to the written policy.
- **Providing written organisational policies to the older people** who attend groups there. In some cases, however, this may not be appropriate. For example, individuals who are very tentative about joining an activity may find this kind of documentation off-putting.

More informal, organic approaches include

- Staff members (including group leaders/facilitators, centre managers, reception staff and volunteers) **building their own positive relationships with older people.**
- **Modelling of the kind of behaviour which constitutes a warm welcome** and **guiding or organising older people and other staff members** to behave accordingly so that they too contribute to a welcoming culture and establish positive connections with others.
- **Explaining the reasons for organisational warm welcome aspects of a group session** to group members and other staff to make them explicit and to **encourage others to reflect on them and to be welcoming** to others in turn.
- Making **time for regular reflection** alone or with colleagues on warm welcome practice to support planning for any changes that may be needed. Meeting with colleagues from other centres can be useful for exchange of ideas and for prompting reflection.

Warm Welcome in practice

1. Meeting, greeting and checking in

The first moment for reception and all other staff members to create a warm welcome is at the point of **meeting and greeting** older people in a friendly manner as they arrive at a venue or group. Where they are already known, older people value being greeted by name. On their first visit to a group within a centre, they also appreciated being accompanied to the room by a reception or other staff member who could introduce them to the group leader by name. Wearing of name badges or lanyards by staff may help with these introductions. For more vulnerable individuals, it may be helpful to check in with a new group member during a break or at the end of the session.

Ageing Better in Camden's Older People's Advisory Group

2. Arrival at a centre and beyond: identifying and responding to interests

One fundamental aspect of creating a warm welcome is to be responsive to the older person by supporting them to identify and attend activities which match their interests. In a community centre setting, this involves devising procedures to identify those interests so that they can be signposted to groups which they find engaging. For many this can be served by

- Providing a list of existing or potential activities or groups for which individuals can indicate their interest. This is sometimes discussed as part of an initial registration process.
- Asking individuals to add any additional areas of interest to this initial list and make efforts to run activities in response to new areas of interest.
- Create opportunities for current centre/ group members to update this information at regular intervals for example via feedback forms or focus groups.

However, for some older people such approaches will not be straightforward. Some may not be fully aware of their own interests not least because there are activities that they have never previously encountered. One solution is to provide quite general and informal 'starter' groups which can be attended by those who are more hesitant about what they want to sign up for or whether they want to attend the centre at all. Such groups can provide an initial context for development of relationships with peers and taster sessions of the more structured activities which are on offer in a centre. Examples of this kind of group were

- A drop-in lunch club: This is followed immediately by an activity taster session for which anyone coming for lunch could choose to stay on.
- An English club run as a social group and not as a lesson with a variety of activities including visits to local shops and around the neighbourhood.

3. Proactive development of a welcoming ethos in groups: *'It's all about the social dynamics'*

Proactive and sensitive implementation of some practical measures can make a big impact on group functioning by ensuring the involvement of everyone, encouraging social interaction across the whole group, and making group members feel included and valued. It can also provide an opportunity for those group members to practise welcoming social behaviours themselves so supporting the development and maintenance of relationships which may act to prevent some of the problems that can arise (see section below).

The role of the group leader is crucial in developing these positive group dynamics. Recommended measures to help them do so include:

- Making sure that **everyone introduces themselves or is introduced** by name at the start of a session. A group leader can also broker introductions between particular individuals who they realise have things in common.

- Using **ice breaker activities** to help attendees to facilitate interaction, find out about one another and to talk to others they do not already know.

- Where appropriate, **using a buddy system** where an established group member is given responsibility for supporting or checking in with a newer arrival.

- **Varying seating arrangements** at different sessions or even within the same session
  and structuring activities to encourage group members to speak to different people. Possible variations include changing seating places every week; using small tables instead of one long one; using circular seating so that people are facing each other; using small group activities to break up larger groups.

- Where relevant, making sure that **everyone has an opportunity to talk** without being interrupted. Turn-taking can be facilitated by using a 'talking stick' (or other object) or a microphone which is handed to the speaker and which may be passed round. It may be placed under the control of a group leader or chair.

- **Encouraging participation of all in ongoing informal conversations**.

- The group leader aiming to **interact with all** - especially quieter – group members within the session; and, also, making time to talk to all before or after a session. Having adequate staff to group member ratios will be necessary for enabling this input. In some cases, practitioners described relationship-building in terms of becoming friends to their group members; others felt that establishing a warm but professional relationship necessitated retaining a certain distance.

- **Explaining activities carefully and modifying them** for individuals where necessary. This could be in response to physical, cognitive, social, emotional

or language needs. Making adaptations in this way can help to ensure that everyone can participate and feel included and acknowledged.

- Building significant **time into a session, aside from the main activity, for group members to socialise** with one another. A minimum of twenty minutes at the end of an activity is recommended. Refreshments organised and offered by staff or fellow group members can add to the sense that the group is friendly and hospitable. In one example, fruit and healthy soft drinks were offered after an exercise class rather than the usual tea or coffee.

Use of these strategies is likely to be particularly important for making a new arrival at a group to feel welcome and for encouraging more hesitant or vulnerable individuals to keep attending.

CHAPS at Abbey Community Centre

4. Developing a deepening sense of group belonging, involvement and ownership

An additional set of proactive practices can be used to strengthen older peoples' ties to a group or organisation over time.

Keeping in touch with group members

Communication with group or organisation members can serve the purposes of both keeping them informed and giving them the sense that they are included and cared for. Some communications are aimed at everyone and others are tailored to the individual. They include

- Providing regular information or reminders for all about an activity or range of activities on offer including what they are, where they will take place and at what time. These communications may take place via telephone, email, text, WhatsApp or paper newsletter.
- Making telephone calls to individual group members to check in with them and to encourage ongoing attendance. This could be particularly important after a first visit but telephoning can be an effective means of maintaining engagement over time.
- Making telephone calls to individual group members when there is a concern about them. For example, if they have unexpectedly failed to attend a group or if it is known that they have been unwell.
- Sending birthday cards to group members.

Valuing group members by acknowledging and highlighting their talents and achievements

Acknowledging or highlighting the talents of individuals and their communities may have a big impact on their sense of connectedness to a group or organisation. As such, it may encourage them to become more permanent and established members of their current group or to join other groups within the organisation.

Showcasing work or skills could be part of day to day activity within a group. It could also be on a larger scale: in one example, members of one minority group were invited to put on a cultural event which showcased their cooking and traditional dances. This brought other members of their community into the centre and raised the profile and status of individuals involved.

Giving a role or responsibility to a group member

This could include asking selected individuals to take on roles as volunteer helpers to look after a new member or someone who needs extra support. Training for volunteers can include work on creating a warm welcome which encourages them to act as additional role models for their peers. Effective use

of volunteers may also lessen the formal divide between leaders and participants as a whole and so increase a sense of ownership of the group by all participants as well as by the volunteers themselves.

Evaluation of older people's participation in community activities funded by Ageing Better in Camden also shows that increases in 'helping' (i.e. volunteering in various ways) were linked to decreases in loneliness (Traverse, 2019). Encouraging individuals to participate in this way may have benefits for their well-being.

Ageing Better in Camden's Older People's Advisory Group

Fostering ownership of group activities or organisation

One approach to fostering a sense of ownership of a group, is to encourage members to input into the activities undertaken or how they are organised. Such consultation can be done to a greater or lesser extent via informal or more formal feedback.

Within activity-based groups, choices of activity given will be within the parameters of the relevant topic (e.g. where to go on walks in the case of a walking group; what to make in the case of a craft group). In some cases, practitioners may want to develop place-based groups or 'communities of identity' by building an entire programme of activities with members from scratch. This can involve additional challenges of managing the collective decision-making process and meeting varied interests and expectations in a

diverse group of people. Indeed, in some cases, individuals may not have many existing interests and lack awareness of the possibilities.

The following approaches can be helpful in facilitating a positive consultation process which results in an engaging set of activities and avoids disengagement:

- Providing an initial set of possible group activities. This will be easier within activity-based groups which already have a broad theme. Examples from the Camden practitioners include a Film Club and a Health Club. Regardless of the group type, possible activities could be generated by a periodic forum or focus group or could be based on a list of activities from other similar groups.
- Organising taster sessions or demonstrations of novel activities. These can be very effective for generating interest.
- Using a decision-making activity to help the group select and prioritise from this initial pool of ideas.
- Making consultations genuine by ensuring that ideas generated really do feed into the group programme.
- Changing identified activities regularly so that together they match the interests of many group members so that all of them feel included and respected.
- Organising for professionals to lead particular group activities where possible so that they are high quality and engaging.
- Organising taster sessions or demonstrations of novel activities. These can be very effective for generating interest.

In terms of group organisation and using a similar consultation approach, the group could, for example, be invited to input into ways of making the group more welcoming. They could then be given a role in trying out and implementing ideas they have collectively decided.

Addressing unwelcoming behaviour

Many potential problems which can lead to alienation and drop-out of group members can be avoided by proactive efforts to create a positive inclusive environment (see above). Nevertheless, difficult situations will inevitably occur and can create obstacles to inclusion and to ongoing participation by individuals. It will often be easier for staff to address problems when

- Time has been invested in building relationships and trust with the individuals involved
- They are dealt with promptly and not allowed to fester over time: it is important to have boundaries and make them clear

1. Examples of unwelcoming behaviour

Some problem situations may take the form of ongoing unwelcoming behaviours on the part of individuals or a section of a group. These may have a big negative impact even if they are low-level in the sense that they do not involve overt hostility or confrontation. Examples which practitioners had encountered include

- **Individuals who are consistently negative or who regularly complain about others.**
  Addressing this behaviour can mean that the individual demands a disproportionate amount of time from the group leader so that other group members are neglected. This negativity may also act as a drain on the enthusiasm of group members.
- **Individuals who dominate the group.**
  This could consist of someone interrupting; talking or shouting over someone else; or talking for too long so that others cannot 'get a word in'. Such behaviour is likely to deter participation by others especially quieter members of the group.
- **Exclusive cliquey behaviour on the part of a sub-section of the group.**
  This can act as a barrier to relationship formation and participation especially by newer or quieter members of a group.

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Some problem situations may be more dramatic and involve serious confrontation or displays of other seriously unacceptable behaviour. Examples which practitioners had encountered include

- An individual policing and confronting another loudly for perceived bad behaviour
- Group members repeatedly taking more than their fair share of food at a lunch club
- One group member filming others without permission

These behaviours can cause distress and anger on the part of others and damage relationships.

2. Approaches to addressing behaviour that challenges

There are many possible actions which can be taken to address problem behaviours before arriving at the most extreme sanction of excluding members from a group. The aim is to be as inclusive as possible. Professional practitioner judgement will ultimately determine the course of action. The following factors are worth considering in arriving at that judgement.

- **Key principles**

Part of the warm welcome will be to support people with their problems as positively as possible. Even when dealing with a difficulty, it will be important to acknowledge the positive contribution of the individual(s) involved (e.g. by thanking them for their input before asking them to allow time for others to speak). It will also always be important to focus on the behaviour and not the person.

Another central principle is that problems should be addressed in a fair and transparent way whereby the group or centre leader avoids 'taking sides' and causing humiliation to any of those involved.

- **Indirect and direct whole-group approaches**

It may be better to pre-empt recurrence of a problem using positive strategies rather than confronting the issue head on. For example, the problem with people taking more than their fair share at the lunch club was addressed in part by providing smaller plates. This could also involve introducing or re-visiting relevant strategies from the 'Proactive development of a welcoming ethos' section above. For example, cliquey behaviour may best be addressed by introducing different seating arrangements rather than announcing an outright ban on seat saving). This can avoid harm to individuals and relationships which may result from a more head on approach.

A man making pottery. Stock image from Pexels

Where it is judged to be appropriate to address a problem more explicitly, encouraging the group themselves to reflect on the problem, develop and enact solutions guided by a group leader may facilitate the development of social skills and behaviours which underpin a warm welcome.

Practitioners also gave examples where they thought it important to address an issue immediately and head on. In one case, where one member had berated another and they had both ended up shouting at each other, the centre leader intervened immediately by speaking firmly to the whole group. She told them that they would not accept bullying, that they wanted to see positive behaviour and for people to have fun, and that they did not want to

have to exclude anyone (i.e. making it clear that if necessary they would do so.)

- **Indirect and direct approaches with an individual**

As in the last example, even if an individual is the cause of a problem it may be preferable to address it with the group to avoid a sense that just one person is being singled out. However, if talking directly to an individual, it is often likely to be appropriate to find a quiet time to do so away from the group. Where a problem is persistent this may need to be done repeatedly.

In cases where an individual is consistently negative about issues, one potentially positive approach is to give them some responsibility for generating solutions and addressing the problem.

Often practitioners found that an individual displays difficult behaviour when they are experiencing unrelated problems or worries. At least part of the solution can, therefore, be spending time with that person to find out about what is happening in their life. Sympathetic listening may be all that is needed. Alternatively, it may be necessary to put relevant extra support in place to address these background problems.

If behaviour remains extremely challenging and disruptive despite best efforts to change the situation, it may ultimately be necessary to exclude an individual from a group.

- **The influence on approach of the practitioner and of relationships with group members**

Approaches chosen to addressing problems will also depend to a certain extent what suits or is possible for the staff member who is dealing with the problem. It may rest on a group leader's style or personality. For example, some practitioners will have an easy humorous manner which might be used to soften an interaction or to defuse an argument. It will also depend on their level of experience or status. For example, a group leader may need considerable presence and confidence to address a problem immediately, in a forthright manner with a room full of people. Some staff members may be prefer taking time to consider how to act and adopting a more indirect approach.

Existing relationships with group members will also be likely to have a bearing on the approach taken. Directly calling out bad behaviour early in a new group

may result in lack of respect for a group leader while having longstanding relationships will often be beneficial in addressing problems. However, sometimes, being new to an organisation or group may make it easier to deal with problems which are caused by past issues.

Final words

Kilburn Older Voices Exchange (KOVE) at the launch of a new bench

We have found that a warm welcome is essential for establishing and maintaining engagement of older people in social activities with their peers. This report shows that creating a warm welcome at the group and organisational level requires considerable thought, time, expertise and perseverance on the part of practitioners. At times, the process will be a challenging one. Managers and funders need to recognise this and ensure that staff receive the support and resources to develop this practice.

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