



## Ageing Better in Camden programme evaluation

Social connectedness and belonging

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Cover image: Kilburn Older Voices Exchange (KOVE) launching a new bench in Kilburn, 2018. Photographer Lydia Shellien-Walker

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## Executive summary

Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) is a partnership of older people and Camden organisations, working together to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people since 2015. The partnership is one of 14 National Lottery Community Fund Ageing Better programmes, working across England.

ABC commissioned Traverse to conduct an independent evaluation of the ABC programme. This is the third and final qualitative report which explores the theme of belonging and social connectedness across ABC projects.

The evaluation research was conducted between mid-August and mid-October 2020. The sample is made up of:

- **14 ABC participants** using depth telephone/video-based interviews with from across four projects (North London Cares; Third Age Project; Origin; and Bangladeshi Community Action Project); alongside
- **18 project leads** using mainly video-based interviews and group discussions.

## Key findings

### 1. Belonging and social connectedness

**The concept of belonging resonates with project leads and their aims, and is implicit – if not explicit – in the positive experiences of participants.** The findings of this report strongly align with existing research and strengthen the evidence base relating to belonging. This is not a framing that we have imposed on the findings – belonging is a concept that strongly resonates with project leads and is something they embed in their work. Participants did not spontaneously talk about 'belonging' but instead spoke about friendship, routine, feeling 'at home' and feeling part of something, as well as feeling responsibility to others – all of which can be seen as important jigsaw pieces that make up a sense of belonging.

**Whilst relationships and social connections have been centre-stage for ABC projects, the findings demonstrate that belonging is rooted not only in the people, but the interlinkages between people, places and activities.** The way in which project participants talk about venues for their activities is striking. These are places where people feel welcome and safe – even as extensions of their homes. For younger people regularly going to a place of education or work, having places other than our homes where we feel comfortable is something often taken for granted. That feeling of confidence and ease in a venue can then in turn provide confidence for project participants to branch out – to make new social connections within that space, or to try out new activities located there.

**The emphasis on providing a “Warm Welcome” is seen by project leads as an essential first step towards generating a sense of belonging.** A Warm Welcome is about being actively acknowledged and feeling welcomed into a place and a group, enabling people to feel comfortable and at ease. This can be seen as the starting point on a journey towards establishing belonging in a specific venue or with a group of people, and even deepening people's sense of belonging to the wider community in which they live but may otherwise feel largely unknown or disconnected. The findings show how people who connect through a project or venue may develop that connection beyond the group to a greater or lesser extent. This in turn helps to build stronger social networks – and sense of belonging – within those communities.

**Contributing in different ways and giving and receiving is an important element of participation in ABC.** Inherent in some of the projects, or at least the social connections they generate, is reciprocity. Participants like being productive and sharing the results of that productivity – cooking, food growing. This is in contrast to more traditional approaches to addressing the ‘needs’ of older people and doing things for them.

**Participation is beneficial to wellbeing whether people are very involved or less involved.** ABC enables participation without obligation, with participants forming attachment to places, people and activities at their own pace and in their own way. That participation can foster a sense of belonging even for those whose participation is less frequent or whose social connections within groups are smaller – all still value ‘being a part’ of something, and the thought of this can be beneficial to their general wellbeing, not just when they are taking part in an activity.

It is also important to recognise that for some participants, the element of social interaction is not what is most valued as they may get that elsewhere. What can matter more is the pleasure of the activity itself – of being active, productive, continuing long-standing interests or developing new ones, sustaining or acquiring skills or learning about topics that interest them. Participation also offers opportunities for people to take leadership roles and thus to be especially engaged in shaping how a group functions.

## **2. Maintaining social connectedness and belonging during the COVID-19 period**

**Support channels and networks established in ‘normal times’ come into their own during a crisis:** The pandemic has created obvious challenges for ABC projects. It has also revealed how – in extreme circumstances – these projects, the principles that underpin them and the capacity they provide within communities are so valuable. Project staff went above and beyond to respond to the circumstances, which saw the mobilisation of volunteer capacity to ease pressures. ABC has also created conditions where older people have been able to help one another, working best where it built on pre-existing relationships formed through projects. In some cases, the



presence of this peer support has eased the high workload for project staff – reflecting a wider point about the value of peer networks to organisations with limited resources.

**Digital inclusion and resilience were important before but feel essential now:**

The pandemic has forced groups and participants to adapt quickly to new models of digital participation. Most projects now think that digital literacy among older people is key to resilience and intend to continue working online in the short term, as the crisis continues, and to some extent longer term as well, recognising it can aid inclusivity – e.g. for those with mobility problems, anxiety and first time participation, and because it means staff can reach more people. This also emphasises the need to address the digital exclusion that many older people still experience, with those who are not online or who lack confidence online unable to benefit from new ways of delivering projects.

A new world of 'blended' project delivery – digital and face-to-face – raises questions for what 'community' means. The findings demonstrate the value of the place element in fostering a sense of belonging and the knock-on benefits of being comfortable in a specific physical space. How can that be sustained in the context of project delivery which may not be rooted in a physical space?

## **Recommendations**

**Policy makers might want to consider:**

- Conducting research to understand whether the experiences and outcomes of participants with digital-only project engagement are different to those with prior face-to-face engagement. Do 'digital only' participants feel the same sense of connection to projects, host organisations and to each other, for instance? This will help to inform the sorts of hybrid (digital/f2f) models that projects could consider going forward, and the types of participation pathways they are supporting and encouraging digital-only users to make.
- That project delivery organisation's responses to the pandemic represents a period of accelerated innovation. The changes they made to get people through Covid-19 should be reflected on and learnt from (through commissioned research) well beyond the end of the pandemic, in order to maximise the potential learning opportunities.

**Delivery organisations might want to consider:**

- How and to what extent project delivery models have embedded the three pillars of belonging (people, place and activities) and the related elements of belonging (e.g. friendship, routine, feeling at home and sense of responsibility), as these offer a useful framework for planning and evaluating what they do.



- Reflecting on how and in what ways project's warm welcome approaches are helping to nurture feelings of belonging.
- The development of peer support channels to help nurture belonging and as a means of offsetting demand on project resource.
- Consulting with participants to help determine the most appropriate blend of face-to-face and digital provision that they will offer going forward – exploring what might be gained or lost if they change the balance significantly. For those not digitally connected, the telephone enables project continuity from a distance.
- The need to offer flexibility, where the blend of face-to-face and digital provision shifts, to enable participants to take part and contribute at a frequency and level of involvement that suits their circumstances.

### **Commissioners/Funders might want to consider**

- The importance of funding high quality, inclusive activities which consider the pillars of belonging and which can reach older people with different needs and levels of confidence.
- The provision of contingency funds and allowing for flexibility, which will enable projects to adapt delivery during unprecedented times like a public health emergency.
- That as projects attempt to tackle digital inequality amongst older people, there is a need for models/mechanisms for covering the ongoing costs of sustaining digital connectivity, which is currently seen as a barrier by the community and voluntary sector.



## Introduction

### Ageing Better in Camden

[Ageing Better in Camden](#) (ABC) is a partnership of older people and Camden organisations, working together to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people since 2015.

The partnership is one of 14 [National Lottery Community Fund Ageing Better programmes](#), working across England to ensure:

- 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 in Camden are more relevant and better co-ordinated, with increased numbers of older people engaged in their design and delivery.

The programme draws on existing skills and resources in the local community through funding and supporting a range of projects working with older people in Camden. It is also building a body of evidence to increase awareness and knowledge in relation to addressing the social isolation of older people, both locally and more widely. The programme has been embedding a [Warm Welcome](#) approach across participating projects, to make the funded groups and activities as welcoming as possible for older people.

### ABC during COVID-19

ABC temporarily halted face-to-face activities in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but continued to support ABC funded delivery partners and work closely with Age UK Camden to make sure older people in Camden were supported and stayed connected.

### ABC programme evaluation

ABC commissioned [Traverse](#) to conduct an independent evaluation of the ABC programme. The evaluation has produced two reports prior to this publication:

- **Interim evaluation report, Jul 2018.** This report provided emerging impacts for older people as a result of ABC-supported activities and lessons learned, illustrated by participant case studies.
- **Midpoint evaluation report: review of participant contributions in later life, November 2019.** This report explored how participants had contributed to the design and delivery of ABC-supported projects, what challenges they faced and how they can be best supported.





## About this report

This report explores the theme of belonging and social connectedness across ABC projects. It has the following sections:

- **Loneliness, social connectedness and belonging:** providing wider context around the growing challenge of loneliness and social isolation and introducing the concepts.
- **Belonging and ABC:** exploring how forms of belonging and social connectedness are experienced by participants and were fostered by ABC projects prior to the outbreak of COVID-19.
- **Supporting belonging during COVID-19:** capturing how projects helped to maintain social connectedness and belonging during the COVID-19 period, including what worked well about their approaches and the lessons learned.
- **Conclusions and recommendations:** drawing together the key overall findings, and setting recommendations.

Throughout the report, there are a number of participant case studies. To protect anonymity, we have used fictional names for participants and, where we provide participant quotes, we have not identified the project they are taking part in.

## Methodology

The evaluation research was conducted between mid-August and mid-October 2020. The sample is made up of:

- **14 ABC participants** using depth telephone/video-based interviews with from across four projects (North London Cares; Third Age Project; Origin; and Bangladeshi Community Action Project); alongside
- **18 project leads** using mainly video-based interviews and group discussions.

See the **Appendix** for a more detailed breakdown of who participated.

We worked with project leads to identify suitable participants to be interviewed, avoiding those who had had particularly difficult or traumatic experiences (e.g. bereavement) during the Covid-19 period. Participants' informed consent was sought in each case. For each sub sample of 3-4 participants we aimed for a mix in terms of whether they live alone or with spouses/families; and levels of comfort with the use of internet/smartphones.

All of the interviews and group discussions were semi-structured and supported by a topic guide to ensure consistency of approach. Interviewers sought participants informed consent to take part. The research team took notes during the interviews/group discussions and made digital recordings. The interviews were written up and the data was transferred into an analysis spreadsheet to support a framework analysis approach. Analysis meetings supported the identification of themes, conclusions and recommendations.

# 1. Loneliness, social connectedness and belonging

Loneliness and social isolation are growing public health concerns across all of society but especially amongst older people. Age UK estimates that over a million older people are lonely and chronic loneliness is affecting a growing number of older people, in line with the increase in the older population.<sup>1</sup> It is also estimated that the number of over-50s experiencing loneliness is set to reach two million by 2025/6 which is an increase of 49% in 10 years.<sup>2</sup>

Older people face issues that are more common amongst their age group than others. Retirement, bereavement, ill health and complex long-term health conditions can make it harder for older people to stay connected.<sup>3</sup> It has been estimated that as many as half a million older people go at least five or six days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone at all.<sup>4</sup>

There is a wealth of evidence that 'social connectedness' – a subjective state where people feel that they have close, constructive relationships with others – can have a positive influence on older people's health and wellbeing. Indicators of social connectedness include feelings of caring about others and feeling cared about by others, such as love, companionship or affection and feeling of belonging to a group or community.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely there is a wealth of evidence that shows loneliness carries risks for physical and mental health and wellbeing<sup>6</sup>, including poor life satisfaction, low self-esteem and depression<sup>7</sup>, and increased risk of cognitive decline and dementia.<sup>8</sup>

However, the evidence base of how 'social connectedness' and a sense of belonging is fostered through interventions is more limited. Available evidence to date suggests that these states can be fostered through:

- **Regular social contact** where older people can talk, listen and share information with a trusted person.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> TNS survey for Age UK, April 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Age UK. 2018. *All The Lonely People*.

<sup>3</sup> Age UK. 2016. *No-one should have no one*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> O'Rourke, H.M., Collins, L. & Sidani, S. 2018. 'Interventions to address social connectedness and loneliness for older adults: a scoping review'. *BMC Geriatrics* 18, 214.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Courtin, E., & Knapp, M. (2017). Social isolation, loneliness and health in old age: a scoping review. *Health & social care in the community*, 25(3), 799-812

<sup>8</sup> Cacioppo, J.T. and Cacioppo, S., 2014. Older adults reporting social isolation or loneliness show poorer cognitive function 4 years later. *Evidence-based nursing*, 17(2), pp.59-60.

<sup>9</sup> Cattan, M, Kime, N., and Bagnall, A-M. 2009. *Low-level support for socially isolated older people: an evaluation of telephone befriending*. London: Help the Aged



- **Feeling part of a 'neighbourhood' and 'community'** within specific places that act as a source of emotional, informational and non-technical support, as well as a source of everyday social interaction.<sup>10</sup>
- **Social activities** that facilitate learning new skills, using/improving acquired skills and sharing knowledge with peers<sup>11</sup>, especially among older men.<sup>12</sup>

This report seeks to add to this evidence base and contribute to understanding of how social connectedness and a sense of belonging are fostered through community projects, the significance of this, how this differs between different groups of older people and what lessons have been learned to inform future practice.

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<sup>10</sup> Phillipson, C., Bernard, M., Phillips, J., and Ogg, J. 2001. *The Family and Community Life of Older People*. Routledge

<sup>11</sup> Murray M, Crummett, A. 'I don't think they knew we could do these sorts of things': social representations of community and participation in community arts by older people. *J HEALTH PSYCHOL* 2010; 15(5):777-785.

<sup>12</sup> Milligan, c., Dowrick, C., Payne, S, et al. 2013. 'Men's Sheds and other gendered interventions for older men: improving health and well-being through social activity. A systematic review and scoping of the evidence base'. Unpublished report for the Liverpool-Lancaster Collaborative (LiLaC) and Age UK



## 2. Belonging and ABC

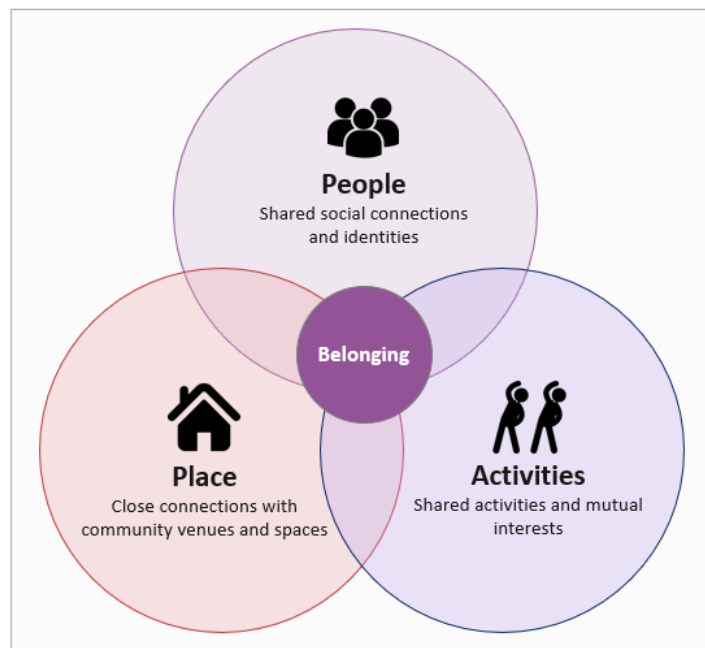
### What does belonging look like?

Drawing on what we found during the interviews and group discussions with ABC participants and project leads, we identified three 'pillars' of belonging:

- **People:** Most participants focused on how feelings of belonging arose from social connections of different numbers and strengths that they developed over time; and the sense that they felt part of a wider community or sub-culture.
- **Places:** Participants often formed close connections with community venues and spaces where ABC activities took place, valuing the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere created by other participants and staff as well as the physical features of the spaces that helped to make them comfortable and accommodating. Having positive experiences in their local areas could also help participants to strengthen their attachment to their neighbourhood and help them to feel more positive about where they lived.
- **Activities:** The specific mix of activities offered by projects was often seen as less important than the wider social and community outcomes that they brought about. However, particular activities, such as cooking and gardening, could have a role in fostering social connectedness and forms of giving and receiving which enhanced their sense of belonging.

Rather than being separate or discrete, these three pillars of belonging are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. For example, taking part in a local gardening project might enable a participant to form friendships and cooperate with others (people), to feel closer and more positive about their local area (place) and support reciprocity and self-esteem as they share things they have learnt and things they have grown with others (activities). This is illustrated in **Figure 1** below.

**Figure 1: Dimensions of belonging**



During the group discussions, project leads strongly supported the notion that their projects were fundamentally about helping participants to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to people, places and activities. Several also felt that the emphasis on providing a “Warm Welcome” which has been expected by ABC Camden, was an essential first step towards generating a sense of belonging.

It is important to note that participants did not spontaneously talk about ‘belonging’ during the interviews, but instead spoke about friendship, regular routines, feeling ‘at home’ and feeling part of something, as well as feeling responsibility to others – all of which can be seen as important jigsaw pieces that make up a sense of belonging. Project leads spoke in similar terms about what constitutes or makes up belonging.

## **People**

We found that involvement in ABC has given participants opportunities to develop different types of social connections. When exploring themes relating to belonging, it was the social connections which ABC projects fostered that participants focused on the most.

### **Familiar faces and loose ties**

While it was common for the depth and number of connections participants had with each other to increase over time, some took great value from just saying ‘hello’, having a quick chat or simply sharing a space with other familiar faces and being recognised. As noted by one project lead:

*"People want to make connections. Even if they don't become buddies, being able to see a familiar face on the street - that brings a sense of belonging, to know that you are part of a group."*

*- Project lead, Origin*



Some participants were content to sustain these looser and lighter connections. This included a few participants who had limited opportunities for social interaction in their day-to-day lives outside of the project:

*"It was nice because I don't go out very much - maybe once a week, twice tops; so, it was nice to go out and meet with others and chat... You see new faces, and old faces come along."*

*- Participant, Project 1*

While project leads encouraged participants to become more involved in the life of the project and more connected to the group, they felt that it was also important to allow participants to connect in the ways that suited them and to build connection at their own pace. Project leads noted that in some cases participants could spend several years gradually growing the number of connections they had and the level of closeness they felt:

*"Participants get great pleasure from feeling part of something and participating in the way that they want to. Some of our ladies are carers who have only limited time out, so being more reserved may suit them."*

*- Project lead, Bangladeshi CAP*

Participants emphasised that lighter connections and interactions could have a significant positive impact on their mental wellbeing. Having a quick chat or 'having a laugh' helped them feel less lonely and better able to put aside their worries and problems for a short time. This was also echoed by project leads, who emphasised that participants who might live alone and have long term health conditions were using the time interacting with others as a source of respite and a chance to take their mind off things:

*"No matter what the topic is on the day, or what the club is, that's secondary to people coming out to have a chat... It's about having a consistent thing in their diary that is not a hospital appointment; for lots of people it's just nice to have a space to forget their troubles."*

*- Project lead, North London Cares*

### **Friendships and close bonds**

Many examples emerged of participants building close friendships and connections with each other and with project staff through regular attendance at ABC activities. Staff across the projects felt that this process began with making sure that new participants received a warm welcome from other members of the group. Beyond actively acknowledging participants when they arrived, this might include staff attempting to spark conversations between participants with similar interests or by encouraging new participants to sit next to the most talkative and outgoing participants.





*"I think the participants who form friendships in the group are the ones who are most likely to return, they feel accepted and part of something, which is always a nice feeling!"*

*- Project lead, Holborn Community Association*

Project leads mentioned that they were also careful to ensure that participants were not forming exclusive cliques that could make new participants feel less welcome.

Project leads reported that as friendships formed between participants it was common for them to keep in touch and to spend time together outside of scheduled activities.

*"Our activities like cooking have helped our women who come from diverse backgrounds to start talking to one another and to form friendships. As friendships have formed, they will start to go to activities together, and then we found that they had started to do their own outings completely outside of the project, including picnics in Regent's Park."*

*- Project lead, Henna Asian Women's Group*

In the case of LGBT+ Connect, it was pointed out that participants often formed 'core groups' who regularly attended particular sessions together. In some cases, these participants would meet up in pairs or small groups before activities or socialise outside of them. Bangladeshi CAP participants frequently talked about going on local shopping trips together, attending weddings, or having chats in the evening by telephone or on each other's doorsteps. Project leads from this project said that they actively encouraged interactions between participants outside of activities, for example, by suggesting that participants share their telephone numbers with each other.

#### **Case study: Sam, Project 2**

***"With some people, you get so friendly with them and you can go out for coffee with them, you meet up for meals, and then you might say 'oh put my name down for that, I'm coming' "***

When Sam retired, he suddenly found himself with more time on his hands. He got introduced to Project 2 and has been taking part in activities on an almost daily basis ever since. Sam lives alone but has quite a few longstanding friends. However, he increasingly feels that they can be a bit stuck in the past; whereas he has always felt a bit more open to learning new things and having new experiences. Attending activities at Project 2 gives him the opportunity to meet like-minded people who are equally excited to try new things. He finds sharing stories and listening to others' perspectives really rewarding. Over time, Sam has made several close friendships with other participants. Once in a while he meets up with them for a coffee or a meal. And when he receives the monthly programme, he

will immediately note down which sessions he wants to attend and will encourage the participants he knows to attend them.

Participants also frequently formed close bonds with project staff. This was especially the case where staff had initially supported and encouraged them to take part, and where they had helped them with housing, health or benefits related challenges, as was common in the Bangladeshi CAP.

### **Feeling part of a broader community**

Belonging could also be about feeling that you were part of a network or community who were regularly crossing paths and participating in a web of activities. Project leads described how participants often came to identify with some of the core values and aspirations of the organisations or project. For example, in the case of KOVE, project leads pointed out that participants often became committed to the goals of empowerment and inclusion of older people in society. In practical terms, this might involve participants leading activities for themselves or exerting an influence locally on the things that mattered to them. In North London Cares, participants often became passionate and vocal about the value of creating stronger intergenerational and neighbourly connections. While in TAP, an important value was the project's commitment to bringing together residents from diverse backgrounds, in a context where most of the time people from similar backgrounds stayed within their own 'bubbles'.

For other participants, 'feeling part of something' could be as simple as receiving the monthly or weekly activity schedules by post or email, or a feeling that they were one of the 'regulars' who would be recognised by members of the wider group and perhaps asked about if they were not there.

### **Case study: Adrian, Project 1**

*"As I started to go a bit more, you see faces you recognise, some people go to things on a very regular basis so it's nice to feel part of that. I think it's important to feel part of something."*

Adrian lives alone. He suffers from arthritis and struggles to walk longer distances which means he does not normally go out much. He tries to attend activities at Project 1 at least once a week, as it gives him an opportunity to get out of the house and interact with others. As Adrian became more involved and started to attend activities more regularly at the centre, he began to recognise people and slowly started to build social relationships. To greet the same people every week made him feel part of a group of regulars. People in the group were not necessarily close friends but the simple thing of being in the same room with the same people every week created a sense of comradery.



## Place

Many participants and project leads highlighted the connections they had formed to the project spaces as contributing to or reinforcing a sense of belonging. Reflections on place often encompassed the welcoming, friendly and relaxed atmosphere created by the people who were in these spaces; with several likening them to extensions of their homes.

*"The atmosphere is very, very, very nice; it feels like an extension of your house here."*

*- Participant, Project 2*

In most projects, a specific community centre or network of centres became focal points or hubs around which community life took place. For example, this was apparent in Origin, TAP and Bangladeshi CAP, where it was common for participants to visit the centres almost every day, either to take part in scheduled activities or to just spend half an hour catching up with neighbours, project staff or reading the newspapers. The fact that the centres were typically located near to participants' homes was also mentioned as a factor encouraging frequent visits, particularly for those who were less confident and connected and those who were less mobile.

*"It's a lot like going home. You go down there you have a cup of tea. You go to the shop and you pop by the living centre and you can always pop in and say hello."*

*- Participant, Project 1*

Several also said that they valued the fact that there were no obligations about how much and in what ways they participated. Project leads talked about the importance of having spacious and comfortable communal areas, and of offering hot drinks and snacks to encourage regular use and a sense of ownership over the spaces.

*"All of our participants are made to feel at home, they are encouraged to use the space as if it's their own, they're welcome to make a tea, pop out, move to a different table etc if they want to. I think this has given them a sense of ownership over the space which means people return happily."*

*- Project lead, Holborn Community Association*

There is some evidence from project leads that as participants formed closer connections to the community centres and got to know more of their neighbours, this could lead them to build a more positive attachment to their neighbourhood or wider area. In the case of the London School of Mosaic, the project's focus on creating public art with local older residents and hosting activities in previously vacant garages was helping them to define a more positive relationship with their area and shifting how they felt about these garages which had previously been associated with crime and neglect. In the case of Bangladeshi CAP, project leads described how trips

and certain activities aimed to broaden participants' worlds – beyond the hyper local – fostering new connections and habits. For example, Hopscotch (one of the three centres that make up Bangladeshi CAP) took on a Story Garden which is a temporary community gardening project funded by and located near the British Library. While the project has been popular with many of their older members, one participant in particular has taken on a leading role, regularly visiting the plot in their own time to grow vegetables which they give to other participants.

Participants' sense of attachment to their local area could also be strengthened by seeing more familiar faces when they were out and about. For example, several projects noted that they often attracted very local catchments of older residents, who would then say 'Hi' or stop and chat with participants they knew or recognised from attending ABC.

### Activities

When it came to increasing sense of belonging, project leads observed that the exact mix of activities could often be less important than the overall social and community benefits that were brought about through regular participation.

*"The social side of the activities is incredibly important... I've developed some close friendships over the years."*

*- Participant, Project 3*

*"When people have made the activity part of their routine that is when you know they belong."*

*- Project lead, Holborn Community Association*

However, participants also highlighted the different ways in which specific activities contributed to a sense of belonging and social connectedness. For example:

- Activities such as cooking, gardening and carpentry; which were supporting giving and receiving between participants, confidence building and improved understanding between cultures as participants gave, received and benefited from things they had grown or prepared.
- Participation in educational and skills building activities, which focused on topics that all older people cared about, helped to build a sense of community and common ground, including between participants from different backgrounds.
- Activities which gave participants a chance to take on leadership roles and positions of responsibility, such as leading a walking group or laying out and tidying the mats before and after a yoga session; which deepened their commitment to the wider project and contributed to participants' sense of being needed and relied upon.



It was also felt that being able to invite potential participants to a specific activity that was relevant and appropriate to them was important when it came to getting people 'through the door'. This was especially important for recruiting harder-to-reach participants.

*"I think the activities can often be the 'hook' that brings people in, but once they join a group and get settled it's probably 30% to do the activity and 70% to have a chat and a tea. This varies over participants, but I definitely have a 'core' of people who I know want to come regardless of activity! Saying that, being able to learn something new in a safe and encouraging way really boosts the confidence of participants."*

*- Project lead, Holborn Community Association*

## Supporting Belonging during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic reached the UK in late January 2020. As of early March, the UK government imposed a 'stay-at-home' order banning all non-essential travel and contact with people outside one's home, and shutting most public venues, amenities, and businesses. For all projects, this included the closure of the community centres out of which they worked.

The ABC-supported projects subsequently paused or quickly made major changes to the delivery of face-to-face activities with the older people they supported.

Across projects, the closure of community centres, end of face-to-face activities and social distancing created a clear set of risks to all three of the pillars of belonging identified in the previous chapter. This included:

- **Limited opportunities for social contact with other older people**, which had been some participants' main and/or most important source of social interaction and how they supported friends and others.
- **A lack of planned activities**, which had provided participants with a sense of routine, something to look forward to and a consequent sense of belonging.
- **Lack of access to a safe place to go**, which had provided people with a common space within which to pursue mutual interests, especially where projects' sense of community rested on being in the same place at the same time.

Project leads and participants reported that, even in the first few weeks of lockdown, there were emerging signs that these consequences of the pandemic had started to have a negative impact on older people's mental and physical wellbeing as they became less active. This focused on reports of increased social isolation and loneliness.

ABC-supported projects responded to these risk factors through three distinct sets of activities:

- **Project check-in calls and e-newsletters**: regular calls and other forms of communication with participants to update them on project news and check if they needed support, which helped participants feel valued and less isolated.
- **Peer support networks**: project-organised networks, often built on existing relationships, that linked people together to regularly check-in and chat with each other, which helped people to feel connected and provided a space for sharing experiences and emotions, in some cases using WhatsApp; and
- **Online activities and classes**: digital activity sessions, often using the video conferencing platform Zoom, brought people together to continue to pursue mutual interests, share experiences and informally chat with friends and others.





The rest of this chapter explores each of these approaches in turn and examines how they helped maintain belonging and social connectedness and within projects, what worked well, and the lessons learned.

### **Project check-in calls and e-newsletters**

Most ABC-supported projects established systems where they rang project participants on a weekly basis, prioritised people who lived alone, and made several thousand phone calls during lockdown.

These calls tended to include a general chat with participants, checking on their health, seeing if they needed any help, keeping them updated about the latest government guidance during the pandemic and signposting them towards online activities if they had access. Check-in calls also served as a useful 'information gathering' tool for projects, enabling them to prioritise and quickly respond to participants with higher or escalating needs. When sharing information about people in need, efforts were made where it was possible to only pass on information where people gave their permission.

Some projects also accompanied these calls with other forms of project lead-to-participant contact, such as sending weekly e-newsletters about news and upcoming activities by projects and other organisations, daily activity packs or small gifts such as bunches of flowers. For example, KOVE started sending an e-bulletin that signposted to a calendar of external virtual activities and events. Weekly updates and newsletters (both emailed and sent out by post) provided a space for participants to make their own contributions, such as sharing gardening tips or photos with other members.

### **How this supported social connectedness and belonging**

Participants reported that they felt 'special' and 'valued' when project staff took the time to call or contact them, supporting a feeling of belonging:

*"It helped me to still feel part of something, [that I] wasn't on my own, that there was someone there thinking of you, asking you about food... or if you'd had a bad day or a bad week, there was someone there asking you."*

*- Participant, Project 3*

Similarly, participants that contributed to and/or received weekly emails or updates about what was happening at the project also said that this form of communication made them feel 'more connected' to the project and 'less isolated' from others and the world.

For participants with smaller social networks, weekly check-in calls from project staff also supported belonging through providing them with social contact and a rare opportunity to talk with someone.

Regular telephone check-ins with some less engaged participants also had the unexpected benefit of fostering a greater sense of belonging to projects:



*“Some people who I have spoken to weekly probably feel closer to the project than before...”*

*- Project lead, Origin*

This, in turn, helped participants feel more comfortable with the project and get more involved.

### **What worked, challenges and lessons learned**

Project leads and participants reported that telephone check-ins were essential to helping digitally excluded participants, or those who chose not to take part in online activities, feel connected to and involved with projects.

However, maintaining this level of contact was challenging for overstretched projects. Check-in calls worked particularly well when made by staff members known to participants, but making regular telephone calls to large numbers of participants was time-consuming, and some projects relied on volunteers to help. Several projects were concerned about how they would maintain this service in the future if volunteers had returned to work yet older people still needed support. Similarly, running a regular weekly newsletter required a significant amount of administration in terms of obtaining people's addresses and resolving any problems with its receipt (for example, it being filtered into junk).



### Case Study: Barbara\*

*“I haven’t got a computer... that’s why the phone is so important. [Keeping in touch with friends has been] incredibly important over this period.”*

Barbara lives alone without any family in Camden and does not know any of her neighbours. Barbara used to go to Project 3 three times a week to take part in bingo, drama and knitting, but it was the social side of these activities – seeing her friends and sharing stories with people who understand her experiences – that was most important to her.

When lockdown hit, Project 3 closed, and these activities were cancelled or shifted online. However, Barbara could not access any of them with her friends, because she decided not to have a computer in her house after she retired. This meant that the lockdown restrictions deprived Barbara of her only source of regular social support.

Without any access to online activities, Barbara was prioritised on the Project 3 telephone support list. A member of the team called her on a weekly basis to chat and ask if she needed any support. This not only gave her someone to talk to but was also crucial to her being able to get food delivered during the first few weeks of lockdown. This telephone support has meant a lot to Barbara, who would not otherwise have had anyone to chat to regularly or to help her with problems at the start of lockdown.

Since then, Barbara has started regular phone chats with several of her close friends and other people she knows at the centre. Sometimes these are to have a laugh and forget about everything, but they have also been an incredibly important source of emotional support during a difficult time in Barbara’s life.

The experience of the pandemic also highlighted the importance of projects keeping a well maintained, up-to-date contact list, which enabled them to quickly reach out to their members at the start of the pandemic.

### Peer support networks

Some ABC-supported projects organised peer networks that linked people to each other to enhance their social connectedness.

These groups took different forms across projects, but included creating groups of people to call each other, small WhatsApp discussion groups and conference sessions on Zoom where people could come and chat with each other on their own accord:

*“Our ladies are contacting each other regularly, keeping tabs on each other, and they are calling each other more too. The number of WhatsApp messages have increased, even late at night some are sending messages. Participants have become*



*even more responsive and more empathic towards each other than they were before."*

*- Project Lead, Bangladeshi CAP*

There were also examples of participants who started to regularly share information with each other via WhatsApp groups newsletters, such as where to go shopping to get food or other tips and tricks. This was felt to have increased the sense of connection and support between people.

Peer support networks also grew naturally from where participants had already formed close friendships within projects. People continued to call and regularly check-up on each other or, in some cases, were more proactive and contacted people they knew more regularly than before.

*"I got to know someone a couple of months before through [the project], and we met up socially distanced; we've had our little bubbles."*

*- Participant, Project 2*

As social restrictions eased in summer, projects were also able to organise outdoor activities such as outdoor walking groups, cycling groups and visits to local gardens and parks that brought small groups of people together.

*"We went out as a walking group on Fridays fairly soon after the start of the lockdown... we went out in pairs, staying two metres apart. You would get paired up with anyone... it was nice to have someone talk to, to have someone different to have a chat with each week."*

*- Participant, Project 3*

### **How this supported social connectedness and belonging**

Regular social contact with their peers and friends helped people to still feel connected to others that they knew from the project. This, in turn, also helped to reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

Participants reported that a sense of belonging was also fostered through peer support networks which provided spaces to share feelings and experiences and lessons from life during lockdown. Participants talked about the value of giving and receiving emotional support, as well as sharing their health concerns or practical challenges such as difficulties around online shopping:

*"It really gave us a lot of positivity – to be able to talk to other members and learn from them... I live alone so apart from going shopping I didn't really see any other members... Being able to share worries and advice with others strengthens the feeling of being 'in it together'."*

*- Participant, Project 1*



Where friends or groups of friends (who already knew each other) continued to keep in touch and pass on their news, this also helped to make people feel less isolated and lonely.

### **What worked, challenges and lessons learned**

Small, self-sufficient peer support networks lessened the pressure on project staff by reducing the number of calls that project staff had to make each week. The development of self-supporting networks was seen by ABC staff as in line with goals of the programme.

Peer support networks worked particularly well where they built on existing relationships, friendships and social networks in projects, as these people were already familiar and used to talking with each other. Indeed, projects found some activities within peer support networks were reliant on this pre-condition. For example, some participants would only share stories and photos via WhatsApp with people they already knew.

As peer support networks moved outside, this brought back the benefits of face-to-face social interaction. However, these groups were not without their challenges. Socially distanced outdoors activities could only support small groups of people and participants did not feel they had the same atmosphere as being at projects prior to lockdown.

A potential challenge of both peer support networks and small outdoor activities is that they have the potential to reinforce 'cliques' of the type that can exclude others. Project leads reported that they tried to be vigilant about this risk where they were able to have an influence.

### **Online activities and classes**

All ABC-supported projects shifted some or most of their activities to be delivered online over platforms such as Zoom by project staff and participants. Participation in these online activities had helped people to gain digital skills and become more confident using digital technology in general, which in turn enabled more social contact between friends, family and/or other participants.

Online activities included: exercise classes, singing classes, dance sessions, arts and craft sessions and quizzes. Some projects also created brand new activities during lockdown, such as Origin's online historical talks led by members, or Holborn Community Association's online creative writing email groups where participants completed fortnightly challenges.

Projects also provided various forms of digital support to participants, from giving or loaning out technology such as smartphones, tablets or IT equipment (often purchased through COVID-19 grants), to teaching or answering people's questions on how to use digital technology and/or access online platforms.

## How this supported social connectedness and belonging

Online activities and classes enabled people to continue to feel involved and pursue the mutual interests that they shared with others and underpinned their sense of belonging within projects. Doing these activities also provided people with something to look forward to and keep busy with. In some cases, the sense of belonging that was manifest through a shared activity also helped to keep people motivated:

*"It was lovely to do [the exercise] with a group still...when I'm on my own, I don't want to do exercise, I just put it off... with the group it was different... I wouldn't have done any exercise if it wasn't for the group."*

*- Participant, Project 3*

Online activities also helped to support a sense of belonging through recreating the informal social contact that people would normally experience at the start and end of activities (in contrast to more formal, organised social activities such as peer support conversations). For example, TAP found that participants benefited from ringfencing the first and last ten minutes of sessions to informal chat among participants. Online activities provided an easy opportunity for people to stay in touch and check on friends, as well as meet new people that they might not have seen before at project centres.

*"[I am] more involved now, it's odd, in the two catch-up sessions we're meeting people we've never seen before. So suddenly we've got these new friends that I've never seen, so we're hoping to arrange a meet up with them."*

*- Participant, Project 1*

## What worked, challenges and lessons learned

Most projects reported that volunteers were essential to helping people become digitally connected. Several participants reported that getting online and/or using platforms such as Zoom had been an extremely steep learning curve and credited their involvement to the support received from project leads, volunteers and friends early on.

In helping older people to access online activities, some projects felt that they had become more inclusive as participation was easier and less stressful for participants who had previously been less confident about trying or attending activities. For example, Holborn Community Association reported that more people participated in the creative writing group when they could submit their piece to a blog, rather than stand up and read it to the group. Projects such as TAP and Origin also reported that more people could also participate in an online class compared to face-to-face delivery. Projects plan to continue a mixture of online and face-to-face activities as a result.





However, some participants felt that, while digital activities created a feeling of togetherness, it was not as strong as during face-to-face activities, although ringfenced time in activities for chatting helped in this regard.

Overall, projects reported that their experience of providing digital support during lockdown had highlighted the importance of improving digital literacy among older people in order to increase their resilience. Most projects now intend to focus on improving digital tech availability and literacy even after the pandemic.

#### **Case study: Shama, Project 4**

Shama is 64 years old and originally from Bangladesh. She has two grown up children who were brought up in the UK. She suffers from health problems, and recently had a minor heart attack. Although her son still lives at home, he does not always provide her with the support she needs, and she relies on the help she receives from the centre to, for example, book an appointment with the GP or call the hospital.

Prior to COVID-19, Shama participated in meetings at the centre and enjoyed organised activities such as the cooking classes and day trips. Some of the day trips, like going on a boat trip and visiting the zoo, were highlights in her otherwise very family oriented every-day life. When COVID-19 hit, Shama found it difficult to stay connected. To combat this, project leads at the centre taught her how to use WhatsApp, which became a lifeline. She and her friends used voice notes to communicate and record songs to entertain themselves and each other throughout lockdown. Some of them now speak daily and much more frequently than they used to before lockdown.

While it helped her to stay connected to the centre and her friends, Shama also started to use WhatsApp to organise and receive health care: through confidentially sending health related photos or prescriptions to project leads at Project 4 they could continue to support her in getting the medical help she needed.

## Conclusions and recommendations

### Conclusions

#### Belonging

**The concept of belonging resonates with project leads and their aims, and is implicit – if not explicit – in the positive experiences of participants.** The findings of this report strongly align with existing research and strengthen the evidence base relating to belonging. This is not a framing that we have imposed on the findings – belonging is a concept that strongly resonates with project leads and is something they embed in their work. Participants did not spontaneously talk about ‘belonging’ but instead spoke about friendship, routine, feeling ‘at home’ and feeling part of something, as well as feeling responsibility to others – all of which can be seen as important jigsaw pieces that make up a sense of belonging.

**Whilst relationships and social connections have been centre-stage for ABC projects, the findings demonstrate that belonging is rooted not only in the people, but the interlinkages between people, places and activities.** The way in which project participants talk about venues for their activities is striking. These are places where people feel welcome and safe – even as extensions of their homes. For younger people regularly going to a place of education or work, having places other than our homes where we feel comfortable is something often taken for granted. That feeling of confidence and ease in a venue can then in turn provide confidence for project participants to branch out – to make new social connections within that space, or to try out new activities located there.

**The emphasis on providing a “Warm Welcome” is seen by project leads as an essential first step towards generating a sense of belonging.** A Warm Welcome is about being actively acknowledged and feeling welcomed into a place and a group, enabling people to feel comfortable and at ease. This can be seen as the starting point on a journey towards establishing belonging in a specific venue or with a group of people, and even deepening people’s sense of belonging to the wider community in which they live but may otherwise feel largely unknown or disconnected. The findings show how people who connect through a project or venue may develop that connection beyond the group to a greater or lesser extent. This in turn helps to build stronger social networks – and sense of belonging – within those communities.

**Contributing in different ways and giving and receiving is an important element of participation in ABC.** Inherent in some of the projects, or at least the social connections they generate, is reciprocity. Participants like being productive and sharing the results of that productivity – cooking, food growing. This is in contrast to more traditional approaches to addressing the ‘needs’ of older people and doing things for them.



**Participation is beneficial to wellbeing whether people are very involved or less involved.** ABC enables participation without obligation, with participants forming attachment to places, people and activities at their own pace and in their own way. That participation can foster a sense of belonging even for those whose participation is less frequent or whose social connections within groups are smaller – all still value ‘being a part’ of something, and the thought of this can be beneficial to their general wellbeing, not just when they are taking part in an activity.

It is also important to recognise that for some participants, the element of social interaction is not what is most valued as they may get that elsewhere. What can matter more is the pleasure of the activity itself – of being active, productive, continuing long-standing interests or developing new ones, sustaining or acquiring skills or learning about topics that interest them. Participation also offers opportunities for people to take leadership roles and thus to be especially engaged in shaping how a group functions.

### **The impact and implications of COVID-19**

**Support channels and networks established in ‘normal times’ come into their own during a crisis:** The pandemic has created obvious challenges for ABC projects. It has also revealed how – in extreme circumstances – these projects, the principles that underpin them and the capacity they provide within communities are so valuable. Project staff went above and beyond to respond to the circumstances, which saw the mobilisation of volunteer capacity to ease pressures. ABC has also created conditions where older people have been able to help one another, working best where it built on pre-existing relationships formed through projects. In some cases, the presence of this peer support has eased the high workload for project staff – reflecting a wider point about the value of peer networks to organisations with limited resources.

**Digital inclusion and resilience were important before but feel essential now:** The pandemic has forced groups and participants to adapt quickly to new models of digital participation. Most projects now think that digital literacy among older people is key to resilience and intend to continue working online in the short term, as the crisis continues, and to some extent longer term as well, recognising it can aid inclusivity – e.g. for those with mobility problems, anxiety and first time participation, and because it means staff can reach more people. This also emphasises the need to address the digital exclusion that many older people still experience, with those who are not online or who lack confidence online unable to benefit from new models of project delivery.

A new world of ‘blended’ project delivery combining digital and face-to-face – raises questions for what ‘community’ means. The findings demonstrate the value of the place element in fostering a sense of belonging and the knock-on benefits of being comfortable in a specific



physical space. How can that be sustained in the context of project delivery which may not be rooted in a physical space?

## Recommendations

### Policy makers might want to consider:

- Conducting research to understand whether the experiences and outcomes of participants with digital-only project engagement are different to those with prior face-to-face engagement. Do 'digital only' participants feel the same sense of connection to projects, host organisations and to each other, for instance? This will help to inform the sorts of hybrid (digital/f2f) models that projects could consider going forward, and the types of participation pathways they are supporting and encouraging digital-only users to make.
- That project delivery organisation's responses to the pandemic represents a period of accelerated innovation. The changes they made to get people through Covid-19 should be reflected on and learnt from (through commissioned research) well beyond the end of the pandemic, in order to maximise the potential learning opportunities.

### Delivery organisations might want to consider:

- How and to what extent project delivery models have embedded the three pillars of belonging (people, place and activities) and the related elements of belonging (e.g. friendship, routine, feeling at home and sense of responsibility), as these offer a useful framework for planning and evaluating what they do.
- Reflecting on how and in what ways project's warm welcome approaches are helping to nurture feelings of belonging.
- The development of peer support channels to help nurture belonging and as a means of offsetting demand on project resource.
- Consulting with participants to help determine the most appropriate blend of face-to-face and digital provision that they will offer going forward – exploring what might be gained or lost if they change the balance significantly. For those not digitally connected, the telephone enables project continuity from a distance.
- The need to offer flexibility, where the blend of face-to-face and digital provision shifts, to enable participants to take part and contribute at a frequency and level of involvement that suits their circumstances.

### Commissioners/Funders might want to consider

- The importance of funding high quality, inclusive activities which consider the pillars of belonging and which can reach older people with different needs and levels of confidence.



- The provision of contingency funds and allowing for flexibility, which will enable projects to adapt delivery during unprecedented times like a public health emergency.
- That as projects attempt to tackle digital inequality amongst older people, there is a need for models/mechanisms for covering the ongoing costs of sustaining digital connectivity, which is currently seen as a barrier by the community and voluntary sector.

## Appendix: Participation in the evaluation summary

We selected four projects where we sought feedback from both project leads and participants. In addition, we ran a number of project lead focus groups and interviews to capture wider perspectives.

	Project	Participation
Main sample	North London Cares	Project lead interview (n=1) Participant interview (n=3)
	Third Age Project	Project lead interview (n=1) Participant interview (n=4)
	Origin	Project lead interview (n=1) Participant interview (n=3)
	Bangladeshi Community Action Project	Project lead interviews (n=4) Participant interview (n=4)
Project lead focus group participants	KOVE	Project lead focus group (n=3)
	London School of Mosaic	Project lead focus groups (n=2)
	Community Association for West Hampstead	Project lead focus group (n=1)
	Henna Asian Women's Centre	Project lead interview (n=1)
	LGBT+ Connect	Project lead focus group (n=1)
	Abbey Community Centre	Project lead focus group (n=1)
	Highgate Newton Community Centre	Project lead focus group (n=1)
	Holborn Community Association	Email submission by project lead (n=1)





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