Ageing Better
Dissemination Events Series

Supporting Connection - The Importance of Groups
3 December 2020

Insights Pack

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Contents of this insights pack

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On the day: Purpose

On Thursday 3rd December 2020, partnerships from the Ageing Better programme and a range of practitioners from around the UK convened at this digital event. Around 98 people attended, and the event aimed to meet the following objectives:

- Explore what the Ageing Better partnerships have learned about the importance of staying connected through community groups, including why groups are so important in tackling loneliness and social isolation, and how to create groups which are really effective.

- Share how the groups model is being adapted during this time of Covid-19.

- Help connect organisations with each other, allowing them to compare and contrast their learning.

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On the day: Who joined us?

We first asked participants:

How would you primarily describe your organisation?

A. VCS, civil society, community support or volunteering organisation working directly to tackle loneliness

B. Government e.g. local authorities, MPs

C. Health and social care organisation e.g. CCGs, GPs, social prescribing

D. Private sector organisation

E. Other

As shown in the graph on the right, the majority of participants (79.4%) were from VCS, civil society, community support or volunteering organisation working directly to tackle loneliness.

How participants described their organisations

- VCS, civil society, community support or volunteering organisation working directly to tackle loneliness
- Health and social care organisation
- Private sector organisation
- Other

12.7%
4.8%
79.4%

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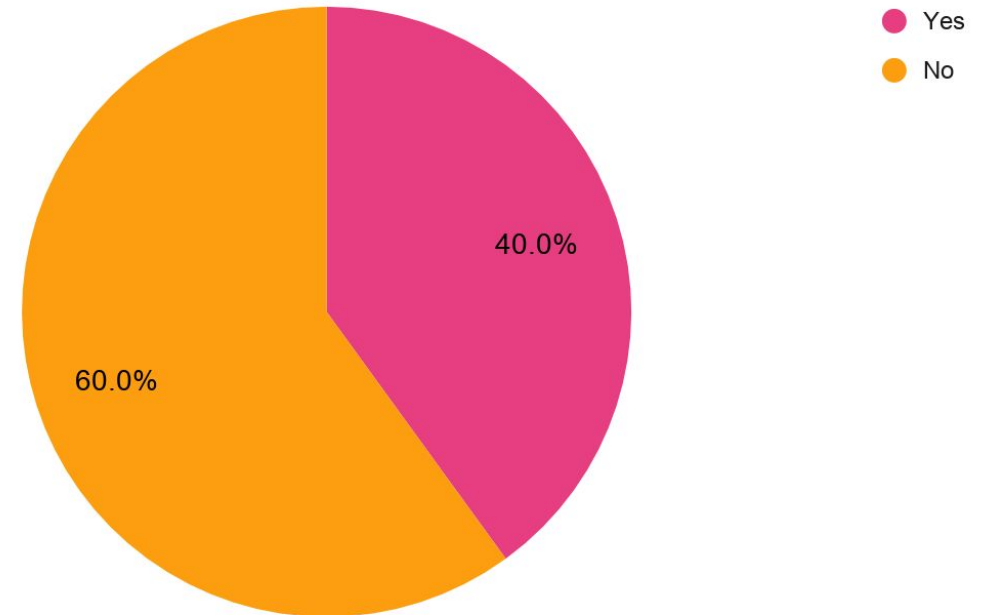COMMUNITY FUND
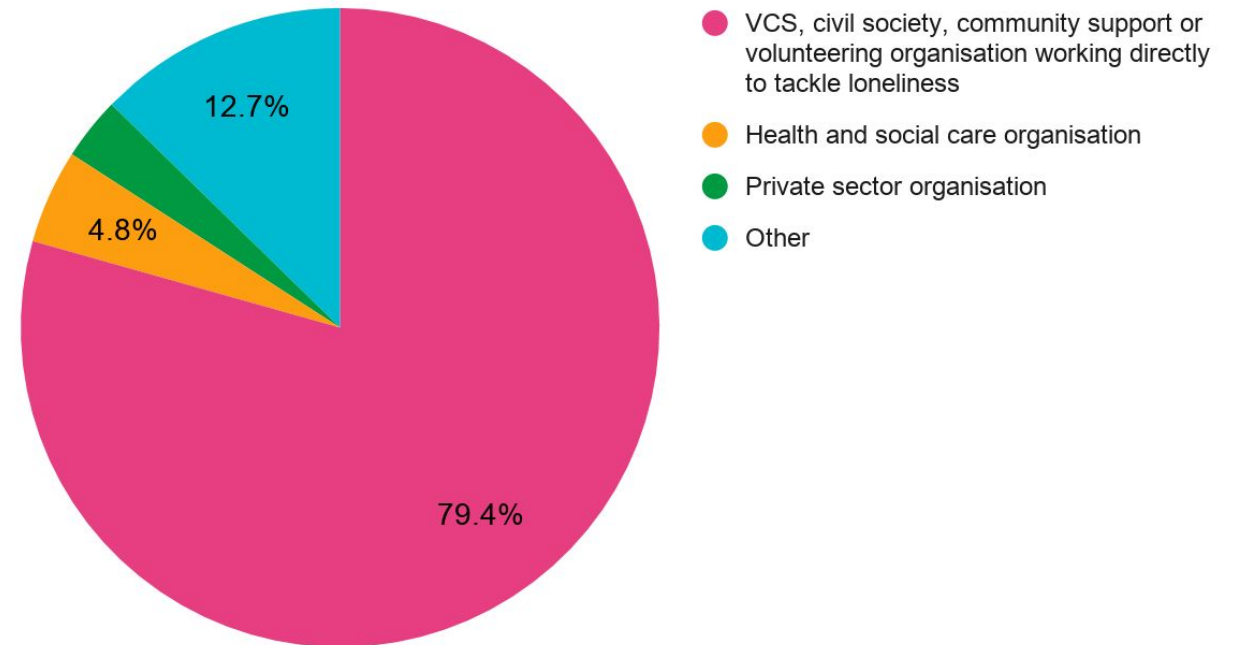
On the day: Who joined us?

We then asked participants:

Have you been to an Ageing Better event before?

A. No

B. Yes

As shown in the graph on the right, for the majority of participants (60%), this was their first event.

Have you been to an Ageing Better event before?

Legend: Yes (pink), No (orange)

40.0%

60.0%

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- Ageing Better is 6 year old programme aimed at learning how to reduce loneliness and social isolation in people aged over 50

- Programme of 14 partnerships throughout England who have worked with over 134,000 people. 215 projects involve groups.

- 3 national learnings:
  - ➢ The reasons for social isolation are many and varied. Understanding a person's context (the macro and micro issues impacting on them) is key to supporting them well.
  - ➢ Where social isolation is entrenched and embedded, people need some level of one-to-one support; we call this connections.
  - ➢ The ecosystem is the space where individuals connect with the community. It's the services, routes, responses, people and touchpoints that help prevent social isolation.

- Ageing better focuses on groups because:
  - ➢ Groups offer active participation in some form of shared social experience. The evidence suggests that this can reduce social isolation and loneliness and "buffer" against some of the associated risk factors such as bereavement and ill health.
  - ➢ Group activities can deliver regular social connection, purpose and structure.
  - ➢ Groups are an important exit route and connector into other things, particularly for people being supported to manage their own social isolation and loneliness.

Ruth Bamford
Funding & Relationship Manager

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Speaker perspectives

Speaker perspectives: the overarching narrative

We heard perspectives from three representatives of programmes that have had useful learnings around how to use groups to reduce loneliness and isolation.

Common themes included:
- Making sure to understand what people want
- The importance of a warm welcome to help introduce individuals to groups
- Ensuring that groups are broad - both in terms of geography and the interests they cover
- The need to be flexible and adaptable
- How groups can be open to new members
- Exploring how to move online given physical distancing restrictions

You can find more resources on groups on page 21 of this pack.

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Speaker perspectives: Annabel Collins

- Annabel spoke about the "Warm Welcome" an approach being delivered by over 25 community organisations in Camden
- Warm Welcome promotes good practice in understanding that while all old people deserve a warm welcome, many need it to engage with and remain connected in community activities
- This is especially true of those who are socially isolated have higher mental health needs. They often require the community organisation to "pull them in" to help them on the first step to joining a group and create a sense of belonging.
- 2 aspects to Warm Welcome:
    - **Service design:** e.g. meeters and greeters, regular communications such as reminder calls and follow up when people are missing
    - **Staff skills**: to manage difficult group dynamics e.g. seating arrangements, ensuring all are invited to contribute but some don't dominate
- Covid and need to reduce and restrict face-to-face gatherings created new challenges and barriers to inclusivity. Annabel shared some tips to mitigate which include:
    - Calling people before zoom calls
    - Welcoming everyone by name
    - Making time for smaller groups
    - Having socially distance walks end at an outdoor cafe
    - Creating whatsapp groups
- More info and guide on warm welcome available here: ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/warm-welcome-approach

Annabel Collins

Programme Lead, Ageing Better in Camden

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Speaker perspectives: Claire Chivers

- Claire gave an overview of Bristol Ageing Better's learning about groups
- Important to have **variety** - both in terms of geography and interests
- Don't make assumptions about what people want - ask them and find out
- Don't restrict attendance (e.g. 50 +) but be open to all and focus on shared interests
- Venues are important - try to get a wide range as some might be put-off by certain types of venue (e.g. religious venues).
- Many won't feel comfortable attending a group for a first time and some might prefer to be accompanied to the group for the first time
- Groups need to build in sustainability from the beginning. Ideas on how this can achieved include sharing roles and responsibility, keeping costs low, charging a small fee, building up membership or holding a fundraising event
- Groups should be consistent and flexible. Meet (ideally at least fortnightly) at the same date and time but also adapt and experiment with non face-to-face mediums
- Community workers should: work in a person centred way, work in an asset based way, build in sustainability from the start
- Commissioners should: invest in longer funding cycles, not only fund new things and utilise microfunding

Claire Chivers

Learning & Monitoring Officer, Bristol Ageing Better

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Speaker perspectives: Jessica Duffy

- Time to Shine works with many delivery partners and has reached over 10,000 people. Jessica shared some of their learnings around the importance of groups.
- Key features of successful groups include:
  - Foster relationships and friendships
  - Offer a variety of locations and interests
  - Are responsive to members wishes
  - Open to new members
- Jessica shared about a very successful project called Shared Tables
  - Where older people go to a local pub or cafe to have dinner together and talk
  - Based on the reported desires of people who were not attending traditional events but were isolated and / or lonely
  - Volunteers host the meals at tables and are supported by the delivery partner who runs regular planning sessions
  - Tables are 4-6 people each and a volunteer 'hosts' the table to help conversation flow
- Due to Covid, many organisations are now meeting via Zoom. This hasn't worked for everyone and the same success factors apply. For some meeting via zoom has been liberating as activities can take place at night

Jessica Duffy

Learning Facilitator, Time to Shine

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After hearing from our speakers, we had a chance for reflection and questions. We asked participants **"Reflect on what the speakers said. What particularly resonated with you and your experience of supporting connection through groups?"**

Here is a selection of the reflections from participants:

There was a discussion about if there will be lasting benefits of online and remote delivery. Many agreed that there will be some:
- "We're seeing on Ageing Better (and across a lot of other work funded by TNLCF) that there is a 'new' cohort of people attending online activity who would not have otherwise taken part, often due to barriers created by transport/lack of confidence/disabilities/need to remain home for caring reasons. Very interesting that running groups can be a way to engage and a good example of how mixed delivery methods can be a strong approach"
- "I agree - mixed delivery models are here to stay I would say and will be a positive approach"

"The importance of maintaining contact, especially members who have dropped out or going through life changes"

The 'Shared Tables' project resonated with many people:
- "I love this shared tables project - I think it's amazing!"
- "Shared tables sounds like a really lovely idea, it's important to note that there is less activity for people at evenings and weekends"
- "I love the shared tables idea! food is meant to bring people together but there is the nutritional aspect too. One for post covid but it could also be done via zoom too. Perhaps not quite as effective though."

Funding was a key theme that was picked up in chat.
- "Don't only fund things that are new: so SO important! Having to constantly re-invent the wheel is counterproductive because (to use another analogy) if it ain't broke, don't fix it!"
- "So agree about continued funding for successful groups. Why always this need to have 'new' groups from funders."

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"Reflect on what the speakers said. What particularly resonated with you and your experience of supporting connection through groups?"

Responses continued:

There was lots of discussion about telephone conference services, especially for those who do not have access to online video calling or who do not have wifi. Participants shared their tips and advice for what works for them. Suggestions included:
- Babl
- Zoom
- WhyPay
- The Phone Coop

"We regularly ask our digital audience.... "Do you know someone who might be... " We consistently encourage our audience to think about the people around them, neighbours, colleagues, customers etc."

Access to wifi was discussed by a number of participants:

- "For the majority of people wifi is a pre-requisite. Sometimes they are worried about using technology, so trying to help them doing new things and always providing support for them in the future"
- "Regarding wi-fi and lack of access to data - we have funded and continue to fund this - sadly of course we can't fund everything! However funders are now aware of this essential requirement for not only equipment but the wifi and data needed. "

"All of this resonates with me as we are learning in our organisation that the whole journey matters in order to maintain engagement. I love the 'warm welcome' approach - thank you for sharing."

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Breakout rooms

Breakout rooms

Next, we divided participants into virtual breakout rooms to discuss their experiences. We asked the following question:

Discuss what you have learned, comparing and contrasting each other's learning.

What are the key principles to take forwards and apply to ensure groups are as effective as possible in tackling loneliness - particularly as we move forward through the pandemic (i.e. in a blended model of delivery)?

The discussions within the breakout rooms are summarised on the following slides.

Joining Breakout Rooms...

Breakout Room 1

It may take a few moments.

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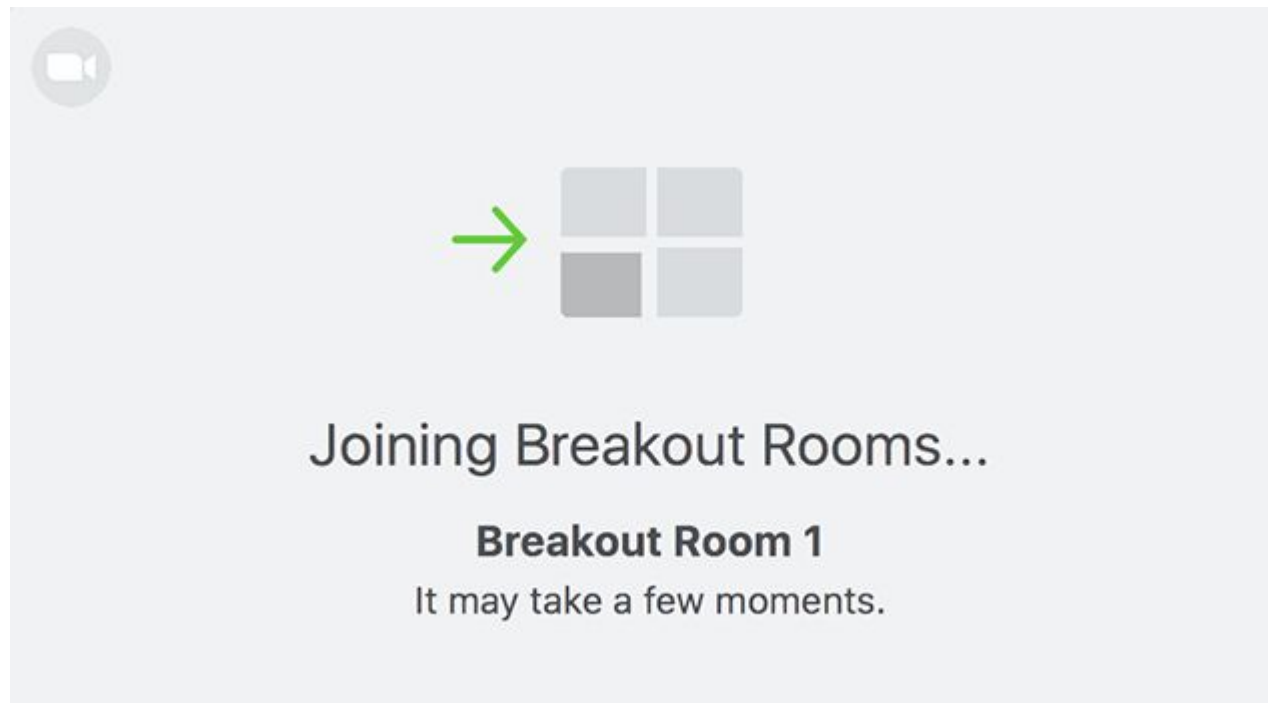
North London Cares is a great model for intergenerational work and the diversity of interests which can bring people of different ages together.

Don't put people in a box

'Intergenerational' is often assumed to mean young/old. Actually 50+ involves a lot of different generations as well.

There's no such a thing as a 'group of older people' or 'group of people with dementia'" – people form groups based on interest, not category. Understanding context of the group and *why* they're getting together is crucial

It's important to recognise the need for an "ecosystem" of support around groups – for example people who have been very lonely, or people who are disabled or who have hearing loss (for example) may need additional support before joining groups

We are trialling a buddying role for volunteers with a view to offering short-term support to access groups where people may be worried about attending alone. Part of this is also starting off with one-to-one support before moving on to a group setting.

Saying "no" is easier to say if you suffer from anxiety

A warm welcome, building trust and continued support

The Warm Welcome tools that have been shared are really helpful and simple ideas like sending reminders before meetings make a real difference, and having a WhatsApp group so people can stay in touch between meetings

Three things create a sense of belonging in groups: 1. Activities, 2. Place and 3. People.

We need a real focus on how to pull people in and how you can help people through social prescribing schemes.

Recruitment is challenging, especially online

GPs can lack awareness of what is available in their areas and don't always make appropriate referrals to the services that could make a difference. Be aware that the roll-out of social prescribing is not complete – there are still gaps people fall down.

Warm Welcome, Community Connectors and Outreach programmes go hand in hand

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What you have learned about groups - some key insights (2/2)

A lot of our groups ran on a very casual, drop-in basis, so we didn't have details of people. These groups have therefore suffered due to Covid.

There are many people who are very worried about getting involved in digital.

We started up 'Tech Befrienders' - who are available for people to show them again and again how to get online. It takes the fear away. We also use 'Team Viewer' to access their device's screen.

Extra support is needed for online groups

Easy to connect people who were already engaged with the programme, more challenging for people with mental health issues and are not engaged. Next step....how do we bring in new connections (telephone befriending has been absolutely essential).

Let's work out if they even need any, and be there if they do have any questions to ask. Need to involve families as well so they can see what is going on, so they understand what the process is.

Working with them on screen is important, just dealing with one specific issue at a time, getting it solved in 10 to 15 mins, and that's it. So it's manageable

A way of doing walking outside - this is good for those who don't want to go online. It's also less intensive as you don't need to engage heavily in conversation when walking.

Keep it positive

The principle could be that we focus on the positive aspects of group memberships, e.g. making new friends, increasing wellbeing. There's also an argument to de-stigmatise loneliness - Covid has given some people 'an excuse' to admit they are lonely.

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Let the group members lead
- Ask people their opinion - it encourages them to be involved
- Build ownership within the group - first by turning up late and seeing if they start the conversation alone, then by not showing up at all
- Not having an agenda, or an abrupt start or finish to online activity is important for replacing natural chats over coffee/walking to the bus stop - helps people form organic connections

Don't put people in a box
- Don't stereotype people or assume what they will like or not like because of their age, gender, etc.
- People like to feel useful - run with that!
- There is power in mixing generations, e.g. scouts, Duke of Edinburgh, etc
- 70+ is different to 50-60, don't think that they will all like the same things just because they're all 'older'
- Know what else is out there - if one group isn't the right fit for someone, then you can refer them to another service

The system can affect whether groups are successful or not
- Groups are only as good as the system around them. The support for inclusion, wider infrastructure, rural/urban, quality of local social prescribing, etc, all play a part in whether groups will work or not.

A warm welcome, building trust and continued support
- A warm welcome really makes a difference (see Ageing Better in Camden's approach here)
- Don't always believe it when someone says, "Yes, I'm fine"
- Recognise the need for additional one-to-one support to enable people to connect with groups, to help them overcome their loss of confidence. Community connectors are really helpful for this
- It takes time to build trust and relationships. Start by listening, then build trust - help people to feel supported.
- A 'drop-in' concept can help engage new people or meeting at post offices, libraries, etc, where they would be anyway. It's less threatening

Keep it positive
- Food is a great way to draw people in - see the [learning paper](#) from the Ageing Better programme
- Get people active
- Someone needs to be the positive, resilient voice saying, "Let's go ahead and meet! We can still do X or Y"

Extra support is needed for online groups
- For online groups, it's important to provide continued support beyond the initial 'linking to internet' step
- There is the barrier of 'cost' to pay for internet, although people don't ask for funding to cover this either!
- Online has been an important tool for keeping groups going, but it's much harder to engage new members online
- We need to think about how to support new people to enter groups not meeting face-to-face
- Trust is crucial when setting up online groups
- Use a blended model, i.e. phone, internet and face-to-face where possible
- Whilst a hybrid model of delivery may be what is anticipated, there is a need to manage double expectations of managing both face-to-face and online services. We must upskill group facilitators in delivering in two mediums concurrently. It is difficult in reality to balance the needs of face-to-face and digitally connected people

Share learning with each other as practitioners
- It can be helpful to bring group facilitators together to support each other as peers and share advice and learning

One key reflection

Regrouping after the breakout sessions, we asked participants:
"What is the one key principle you'll take away from your breakout session?"

Here is a selection of the responses from participants:

"To keep people connected, motivated and involved and include everyone"

"Explore the development of blended group sessions & extending reach to those who are not currently online or confident to be online"

"Trust is key and although not all activities are appropriate to everyone choice is vital"

"Ensuring flexibility around communication and opportunities for involvement."

"It is important to include those who do not wish to go on line to remain included, via telephone conference calls, receiving paper emails and Telefriend calls."

"Listen to people so that your group reflects the views of the participants"

"Use of language, avoid jargon"

"Group events benefit from other brokering and support including one to one and small 'sub groups' - the narrative being togetherness rather than loneliness"

"Needing some people in the group who are 'cheerleaders' for the group -finding ways for it to keep going at the moment"

"Support people to get involved in groups initially - lots of people have lost confidence this year."

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Useful links

During the event, many participants shared a number of resource and links for further information:

- Ageing Better learning paper on the value of food sharing

- Ageing Better in Camden - Warm Welcome approach

- Bristol Aging Better Learning Report

- Bristol Aging Better learning - Online and Telephone Group Activities for Older People

- East London Age UK Activity Schedule

- Ageing Better in Camden - The digital divide

- Ageing Better in Birmingham - Guidance for Ageing Better Groups on Adapting to COVID-19

- Join the 100% Digital Leeds launch event for new collaborative Digital Inclusion Toolkit - sign up here

- Running a Supportive and Welcoming Group Toolkit (Time to Shine, September 2019)

- Setting up a Shared Tables project in your local area (TTS and CGDGNS, March 2020)

- Shared tables: older people eating out together (Age Friendly case study, Centre for Ageing Better, 2018)

- Community Connect (Time to Shine, 2017)

- Leeds Community Connect - case study

Closing reflections

Final reflections

"It was so useful to hear from other organisation about their approach and the ways they are all overcoming the challenges of working with groups this year."

"Good range of participants, effective knowledge sharing."

"No technical hiccups and varied speakers and breakout sessions."

"Good to hear other people's views and learning, there was a variety of people attending from different organisations and with different experiences which was interesting."

Final thoughts from event participants

"Informative and helpful with insight into the 'why' as well as the 'what'!"

"Really useful opportunity for networking and making contacts plus useful info' from speakers."

"Extremely well run, information giving well balanced with group discussion."

"Inspirational and inclusive."

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Evaluation

100	% of participants would recommend an event like this to a colleague
Average Score:	**4.8**
94	% of participants found the event relevant and useful

General reflections on the event

- Good range of participants
- Useful knowledge and best practice sharing - both from speakers, hosts and participants
- Enjoyed the opportunity to share ideas and participate
- Really useful opportunity for networking
- Extremely well run
- Information giving was well balanced with group discussion
- A forward thinking discussion - not settling for the old world ways
- Inspirational, inclusive and informative
- Friendly yet professional environment

Aspects of the event that could be improved:

- Ensure speakers speak slowly
- Quality of microphone in breakout group
- Chat box moves fast and can be distracting when speakers are talking
- Allow time for further discussion after the event for socialising chat

Thank you

Thank you for such constructive input to the session - we really appreciate it.

For more information, please see The National Lottery Community Fund Ageing Better webpage.