Evaluation of Ageing Better in Birmingham

Year two report

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Summary

Ageing Better in Birmingham is a grassroots, asset-based approach that aims to create a new movement of community action on ageing and isolation. By harnessing active citizenship, the programme aims to reduce isolation now and to prevent it happening in the future. Ageing Better in Birmingham has received £6m in funding from the Big Lottery Fund for six years (from April 2015) and is part of a wider programme of 14 Ageing Better projects located across England.

Ageing Better in Birmingham operates across the city of Birmingham, with four priority areas: geographic areas with a higher risk of isolation (Sparkbrook and Tyburn) and groups with higher risk of isolation (older LGBT people and older carers). The programme comprises of seven elements:

- **Ageing Better Networks** – autonomous, self-organising groups of community volunteers supporting people who are isolated or at risk of isolation.
- **Ageing Better Hubs** – that promote, develop and support Ageing Better Networks, led by a Network Enabler. There is a Hub for each of the above priority areas, plus a city-wide Hub.
- **Ageing Better Fund** – providing funding of up to £2,000 to Networks to fund activities.
- **Directory of Services** – to allow older people to find local support and activities.
- **Local Action Plans** – to create longer-term change and improvement in support and services for older people.
- **Supporters Scheme** – where local businesses and organisations can join and show they are age-friendly.
- **Age of Experience Group** – made up of experts-by-experience who help shape the programme.

CFE Research has been commissioned by Birmingham Voluntary Services Council (BVSC) to carry out a local evaluation of the programme. The findings reported here are based on evaluation activities completed between May 2017 and April 2018.

Key messages

Ageing Better in Birmingham has overachieved in meeting the targets agreed with Big Lottery Fund. It is successfully engaging ethnically and age diverse participants and older adults who are the most-lonely. After engagement with the programme, there is a notable reduction in those who say they are most lonely. There has been less change in enhancing participants' social contacts. This is something that should be explored further.

These achievement have been accomplished primarily by working through established voluntary and community sector (VCS) groups. Most funded Networks are either pre-existing community groups or affiliated to such a group.

Working through established organisations provides an efficient way for Enablers to engage with active citizens. However, working through established groups is not always effective in those areas where the VCS is less well developed. There is a risk of creating dependency on the Fund from groups seeking to replace funding from other sources that may have diminished over recent years.

The enthusiasm, personalities and hard work of Network Leads play an important role in making a successful Network. But participants are also crucial in creating the welcoming, personalised and friendly environment that encourages new members to attend and then keeps them coming. Networks that involve physical activity appear to be associated with greater wellbeing gains for participants.

Most participants are women, and women appear to benefit more through increased reductions in loneliness. Far more Networks target women or have a traditional female focus than target men. It is important that Networks effectively engage men to ensure they are able to benefit too. Activity-focused rather than social-focused Networks may be more appealing to men, particularly activities that are not designed or promoted as being targeted at reducing social-isolation among older people.

Changes to the Ageing Better Fund have been positive and the decision-making process more streamlined. Applicants generally find applying for the funding straightforward, although the support of Network Enablers is vital in this – particularly for less experienced Leads. The different success rates between Hubs are becoming less stark.

The Age of Experience group has improved since our last observation. Membership has grown and is more diverse. Members feel more connected to the programme and there is evidence of the positive contribution that they make. Some Enablers find recruitment challenging and were not always able to articulate the benefits of participation.

There has been a small increase in people getting involved in sharing ideas and deciding how activities should be run. But these statistics may underestimate the role of participants, as the small but important contributions to effective Networks outlined above may be overlooked. Many older people do not wish to take on the responsibility of organising Networks, but are often pleased to help out in less demanding, more informal ways.

Ageing Better in Birmingham fits well with the current direction of thinking on the provision of services in Birmingham more broadly. It is seen by stakeholders as timely, innovative and influential. However, it is also questionable whether the programme is achieving its community development ambitions. Output targets combined with the established delivery model do not encourage this approach. As the programme approaches the half-way mark there is value in the programme team and stakeholders considering if and how to reposition the programme with a greater focus on community development.

Recommendations

Recommendation: The evaluation in future years should assess the extent to which the programme helps to inspire more people to take an active role in their communities.

Recommendation: The evaluation should investigate further the impact of the programme on social contact and the reasons why less change is seen on this indicator.

Recommendation: The programme team should encourage Networks to think about how physical activity could be incorporated. Evaluation to carry out further analysis on associations between activity types and outcomes.

Recommendation: Network Enablers should target organisations and places that are popular with men in order to promote the programme. Promising approaches to engaging men should be tested and learning and case studies widely communicated. Enablers and the Fund should also look to support activity-focused Networks offering the skills and activities that appeal to older men.

Recommendation: Ensure that Network Enablers feel empowered and confident to decline applications that do not meet technical requirements. This may require additional support and training.

Recommendation: Network Enablers and the programme team should ensure the requirements for second applications are communicated, and promote ideas for how activities could be developed with a view to encouraging sustainability. An alternative is to only fund Networks once, however, this may further constrain the ability of Networks to become sustainable.

Recommendation: The programme team should consider how they can better support Networks to build sustainability. The programme should also encourage potential Networks to think about how they could make a difference to social isolation without the need for ongoing funding.

Recommendation: The programme team may wish to spend some time with Enablers, particularly those newer in post, communicating the benefits of the Age of Experience group, for both members and the programme. Case studies and testimonials from members should be used to help with recruitment of new members.

Recommendation: The programme team should consider how the role of Network Enablers may need to be adjusted to focus on community development. This is likely to require a different skill-set to deliver asset based community development. Review the measures of success and how they are used so that sustainable community development is incentivised. Reassess the way the programme and in particular the Fund is marketed.

01. Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme and the local evaluation activity carried out this year.

CFE Research has been commissioned by Birmingham Voluntary Services Council (BVSC) to evaluate of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. This report provides our findings from the second year of the evaluation, which covers programme activity from April 2017 up to March 2018.

About Ageing Better in Birmingham

Ageing Better in Birmingham is a grassroots, asset-based approach that aims to create a new movement of community action on ageing and isolation. By harnessing active citizenship, the programme aims to reduce isolation now and to prevent it happening in the future. Ageing Better in Birmingham has received £6m in funding from the Big Lottery Fund for six years (from April 2015) and is part of a wider programme of 14 Ageing Better projects located across England.

Ageing Better in Birmingham operates across the city of Birmingham, with four priority areas: geographic areas with a higher risk of isolation (Sparkbrook and Tyburn) and groups with higher risk of isolation (older LGBT people and older carers). The programme comprises of seven elements:

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Our evaluation

Year one of the evaluation focused on the role of the Hubs (including Mini Hubs) in developing and supporting Networks, the role of the Ageing Better Fund, the Age of

Experience group and early impacts on participants. In year two we explore some of the issues raised in Year one in greater detail. In particular, we sought to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent does working through established voluntary organisations differ from working through new and informal groups?
- What makes different activities successful?
- How effective is the Ageing Better Fund in meeting the needs of the project?
- What are the reasons for differential success rates between Hubs of applications to the Ageing Better Fund?
- How have less experienced groups found the application and funding process?
- What are the different ways in which participants contribute to the programme (through the Age of Experience Group and more informally) and what is the impact of this on both the participants and the programme?

We also investigate the extent to which Ageing Better in Birmingham is embedded within and informing wider Birmingham priorities and initiatives.

The findings reported here are based on the following evaluation activities completed between May 2017 and April 2018.

Secondary data analysis

We have analysed the longitudinal survey data collected from participants as part of the national evaluation of the overall Ageing Better programme. The national evaluation of all 14 Ageing Better projects is being undertaken by Ecorys. It is designed to assess the impact of the programme on outcomes for older people. A common measurement framework (CMF) was created to capture consistent information from project. This includes programme monitoring data, participant characteristics and outcomes. Participant characteristics and outcomes are collected through a questionnaire completed at the start of engagement with Ageing Better in Birmingham and a follow-up questionnaire completed six months later.

Participant outcomes data includes two core validated measures of loneliness and social isolation. The first is the De Jong Gierveld scale. This scale was chosen as the primary outcomes measure for the CMF because it measures overall loneliness as well as differentiating between social and emotional loneliness. On this scale a score of 0 represents the least-lonely and a score of 6 the most-lonely.

The second is the UCLA scale.[1] This measures loneliness as a whole. It is widely used and has been used in recent waves of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing.[2] A score of 3 on the UCLA Scale represents the least-lonely and a score of 9 represents the most-lonely.

To measure wellbeing the national evaluation has adopted the Shortened Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS).[3] This questionnaire measures participant's metal wellbeing across six items to produce a score out of 35.

The analysis of participant characteristics and outcomes reported here is based on data collected up to the end of March 2018. 1,721 participants completed CMF questionnaires on entry to the programme. Of these, 557 participants completed follow up questionnaires. Where we report change over time, analysis has only been conducted on those participants who provided a response to a particular question at both entry and follow-up.

We have also analysed administrative data collected by BVSC, including details of applications to the Ageing Better Fund.

Qualitative interviews

Qualitative, in-depth telephone interviews have been conducted this year with Network Enablers from each of the five Hubs, 16 Network Leads and five stakeholders (people with wider, strategic links to the programme). We also interviewed four BVSC programme team staff members face-to-face.

Formal interviews were also completed with 20 older participants of Network activities, either by telephone or face to face. Ten of these were follow-ups with participants we first interviewed back in 2017. We carried out interviews with eight men and twelve women. The participants ranged in age from early 50s to late 80s, with the majority being in their late 60s to late 70s.

Visits and observation

We visited seven different Networks from the City-wide, LGBT and Tyburn Hubs, where we observed activities and talked informally to participants and volunteers. We also observed Ageing Better Fund panel and Age of Experience meetings.

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[1] Accessible information about the De Jong Gierveld and UCLA scales can be found in the Campaign to End Loneliness's guide Measuring your impact on loneliness in later life: https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Loneliness-Measurement-Guidance1.pdf

[2] https://www.elsa-project.ac.uk/

[3] https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/research/platform/wemwbs/swemwbs_7_item.pdf

This report

The following Chapter (2) provides a picture of programme participants to date and explores the impact of the programme on them. Networks are the focus of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 covers activities supported by Ageing Better in Birmingham and the Ageing Better Fund is explored in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 considers how older people have been engaged in the programme to date, including the role of the Age of Experience group. Chapter 7 looks at the ways in which the Ageing Better Programme is embedded within wider activity taking place across Birmingham. Chapter 8 draws together our conclusions and make a series of recommendations for the programme team and for the evaluation.

02. Outcomes

In this Chapter we report the impact of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. As part of this we set out the profile of participants and assess the extent to which the programme is successfully reaching older people.

Participant profile

As reported previously, most participants in the programme are female (68 per cent) which is almost identical to the national evaluation of the Ageing Better programme (68.5 per cent).
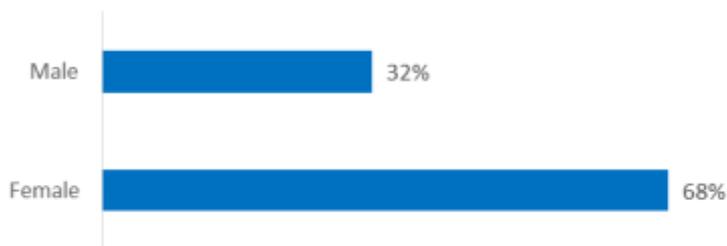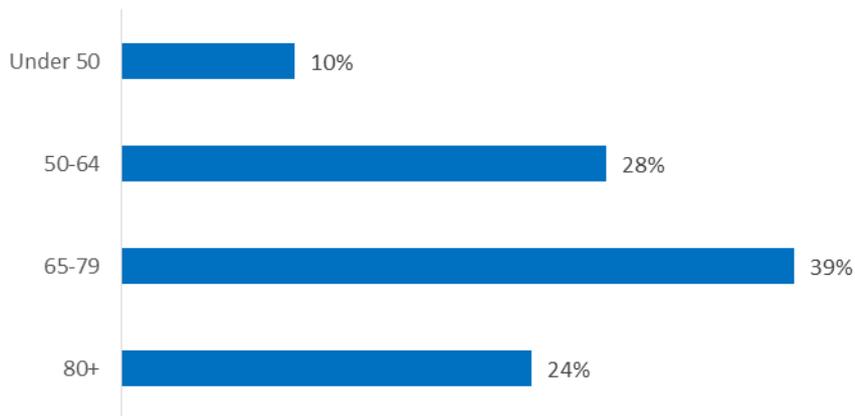

Figure 1 - Gender of CMF questionnaire respondents at entry, n = 1,674

According to the De Jong Gierveld scale[4], there was little different between reported loneliness of males and females at baseline (3.08, n=373 and 3.31, n=838 respectively).

In terms of age group, the largest proportion of participants are between 65 and 79 years making up 39 per cent of participants responding to the questionnaire. This is followed by those aged between 50 and 64 years, with 28 per cent of respondents belonging to this age group. Again this is broadly similar when compared with the national evaluation shows that 43 per cent of respondents (that answered the question) are between 65 and 79 per cent and 29 per cent are aged between 50 and 64. Both the national and local evaluation shows that almost a quarter of participants were aged 80 years and over, showing that the programme is successfully reaching those in the oldest age category.

[4] A lower score indicates less loneliness. See pages 5 to 6 for further information.

Under 50	10%
50-64	28%
65-79	39%
80+	24%

Figure 2 - Age of CMF questionnaire respondents at entry, n = 1,498

Interestingly and perhaps unexpectedly, it is those in the younger age category (under 50s) who score highest on the De Jong Gierveld scale at baseline, indicating they are, on average, more lonely that the older age groups (under 50s mean score is 3.65 (n=104) compared to 2.82 (n=419) for the 65 to 79 age group). Statistics recently published by the Office for National Statistics indicated that younger adults aged 16 to 24 years reported feeling lonely more often than those in older age groups.[5] The Campaign to End Loneliness highlights that middle age can be a time when potential triggers of loneliness often occur, such as early (sometimes involuntary) retirement, children leaving home and relationship breakdown.[6] Recent analysis of ELSA data shows that becoming retired is not associated with a sudden change in levels of social engagement. Rather, in the lead up to retirement, individuals generally reported a gradual decline in social engagement, and then afterwards saw a gradual increase. Those who retire voluntarily (usually the wealthier) report the highest levels of social engagement prior to and following retirement, and those retiring involuntarily (usually the least well off) report the lowest.[7] We might speculate that, given many of the Networks are daytime groups, those of working age who are engaging in the programme are not in work and therefore more likely to be socially excluded and cut-off from the mainstream of society.[8]

As illustrated in Figure 3, the largest proportion of respondents to the questionnaire came from a white ethnic background (52 per cent), followed by those with an Asian background at 29 per cent. The programme is extremely successful at engaging an audience that is ethnically diverse – more so than the wider population. The 2011 Census indicated that

[6] Campaign to End Loneliness (2015) *Loneliness across the life course* [Online] Available at: https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/blog/loneliness-across-the-life-course/ [Accessed 19th June 2018]

[7] Banks, J. Batty, G. Nazroo, J. and Steptoe, A. (2016) *The dynamics of ageing: Evidence from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing 2002-15 (Wave 7)* https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/elsa/docs_w7/ELSA%20Wave%207%20report.pdf

[8] Mental Health Foundation (2010) *The Lonely Society* London: Mental Health Foundation https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_lonely_society_report.pdf

among the over 50s, 78 per cent were from a white background, with 14 per cent Asian and six per cent Black.[9] BME communities are often considered 'harder to reach' so it is positive that the programme has been so successful in engaging non-white participants, especially given Birmingham is considered a super-diverse city. In comparison, the national Ageing Better evaluation finds that those from a white ethnic background make up 68 per cent of all programme participants. This is important because the wider literature suggests that people from minority ethnic groups are at greater risk of loneliness.[10] Based on the De Jong Gierveld scale, those from a BAME ethnic group reported being lonelier at baseline than their white counterparts (3.83, n=545 and 2.73, n=652 respectively). However, it is important that the programme also ensures the continued engagement of white participants, given they are arguably under-represented currently.
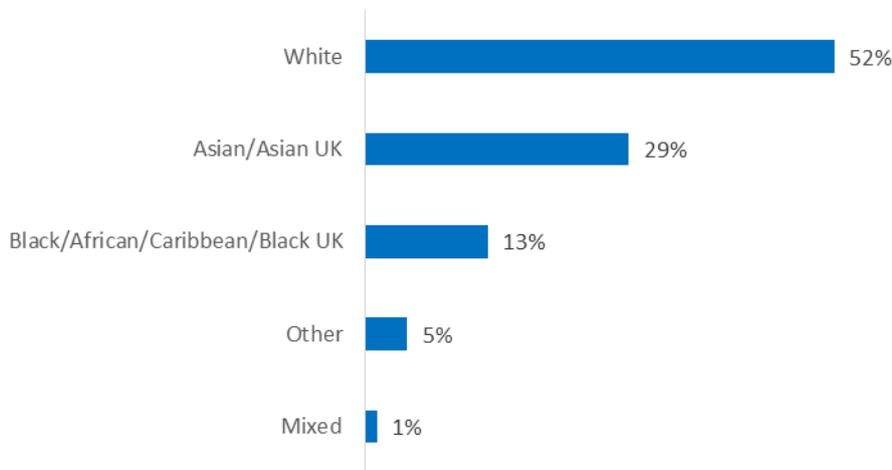
Figure 3 - Ethnicity of CMF questionnaire respondents at entry, n = 1,639

Overall, the programme is successfully reaching the most lonely, as illustrated by figure 4 below. Almost a quarter of questionnaire respondents (23 per cent) fell into the most-lonely category on the De Jong Gierveld scale at baseline.

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[9] 2011 Census data sourced from Nomis https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/
[10] Goodman et al. Op Cit.
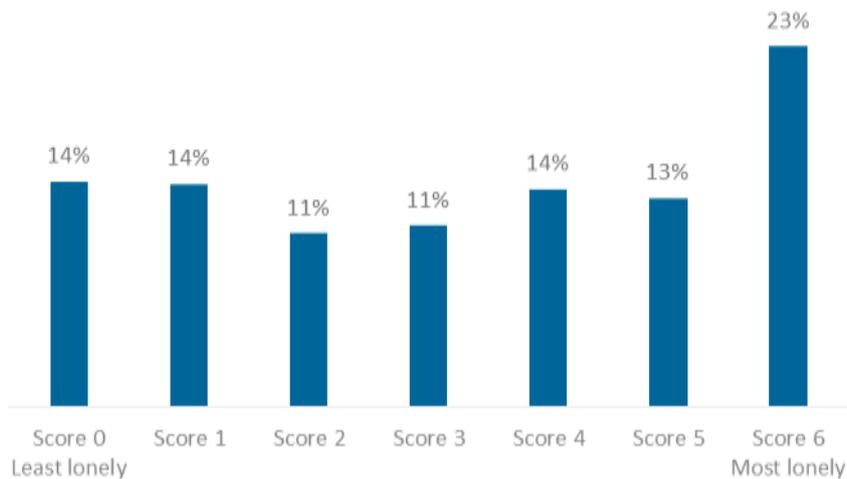
Figure 4: Baseline scores on the De Jong Gierveld scale, n = 1,235

Changes in loneliness and social isolation

On average, we found that participants reported reduced loneliness between entry and follow-up on both measures. For the De Jong Gierveld scale we found an 11 per cent reduction in overall loneliness from 3.6 to 3.2 (n=401). This is broadly in line with the findings from the national evaluation of Ageing Better (3.3 to 3.0). Figure 5 below shows the distribution of scores on for respondents who answered at both entry and follow-up. This shows that the biggest reduction is of those categorised as the most-lonely (score of 6) with modest increases in the proportion of participants categorised as least lonely (score 0 to 3).

Figure 5: Baseline and follow-up scores on the De Jong Gierveld scale, n = 401

As measured on the UCLA scale, we found that mean average loneliness score has dropped from 5.6 to 5.1 (n=450), again broadly comparable with the national evaluation (5.7 to 5.3). Almost a third of participants (32%) reported a decrease in loneliness from entry to follow-up, with just over half (55%) indicating that the level of loneliness experienced had remained the same. Over a tenth (13%) indicated that their level of loneliness had actually increased from entry to follow-up.
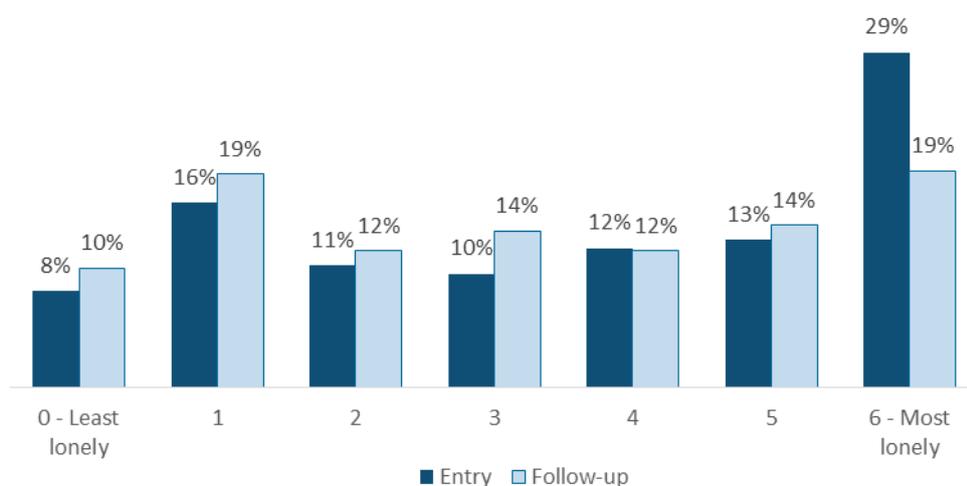
As measured on the UCLA scale, we found that mean average loneliness score has dropped from 5.5 to 5.0 (n=384), again broadly comparable with the national evaluation (5.7 to 5.2). Almost a third of participants (32 per cent) reported a decrease in loneliness from entry to follow-up, with three fifths indicating that the level of loneliness experienced had remained the same. 8 per cent indicated that their level of loneliness had actually increased from entry to follow-up.

On both scales, the size of reduction in overall loneliness was greater for females. On the De Jong Gierveld scale this equated to a 12 per cent reduction in average scores for females compared to 10 per cent reduction for males. On the UCLA Scale there was a 9 per cent reduction for females and a 7 per cent reduction for males. We also found that a greater proportion of females (33 per cent, n=340), experienced reduced loneliness compared to males (27 per cent, n=107).

When examining the De Jong Gierveld results by age, we see that the under 50s experienced the largest decrease in loneliness, although they were also the most lonely age group to begin with and the sample is very small (n=28) Those aged 65 to 79 had the lowest follow-up overall loneliness score of 3 (n=153). On the UCLA scale, those aged between 50 and 64 years old saw the largest reduction in loneliness from entry to follow up, with average loneliness score also from 5.7 to 5.1 (n=97)

Participants from a white ethnic background saw a smaller reduction in the level of loneliness experienced compared to those participants from a non-white background. Again, this group were overall more-lonely to begin with and therefore there is greater scope to record a reduction. According to the De Jong Gierveld scale, the mean total loneliness score for those from a white background fell by 7 per cent (n=195), compared to a 15 per cent decrease for those from a non-white background (n=200). White participants still reported a lower overall level of loneliness at follow-up (2.91) compared to non-white respondents (3.4).

The data gathered from the UCLA loneliness scale shows a similar pattern. Both white and non-white respondents saw a similar decrease in the proportion of participants reporting a reduction in the level of loneliness from entry to follow-up (32 per cent, n=229 and n=212 respectively). But respondents from a non-white background reported a larger drop in mean loneliness (5.9 to 5.3) compared to white participants (5.3 to 4.9).

Social contact

The magnitude of health risk associated with social isolation is now deemed to be comparable with that of cigarette smoking and other major biomedical and psychosocial risk factors.[11]

Most participants who provided information at both entry and follow-up reported no change in the level of contact with family members – see figure 8 below. 20 per cent reported an increase in the level of contact, with 12 per cent reporting a decrease (n=405). Contact with non-family members also displayed a similar pattern: 64 per cent reported no change, 19 per cent reported an increase and 17 per cent experienced a decrease in contact (n=483).

Figure 6 - Changes in social contact from entry to follow-up. Social contact with family members n = 405, social contact with non-family members n = 483

According to the CMF data, over a quarter (28 per cent, n=119) of those aged under 64 (the average retirement age for men is 65 and for women 64[12]) reported an increased level of contact with non-family members, compared to 16 per cent of those aged 64 and above

11 House, J. (2001) Social Isolation Kills, But How and Why? *Psychosomatic Medicine*: March-April 2001 - Volume 63 - Issue 2 - p 273-274 Special Issue: Comorbidity Studies: Editorial Comment

12 https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/averageageofretirement

(n=321). Similarly, just over a fifth (22 per cent) of those aged under 64 reported an increase in contact with family members (n=108), compared to 18 per cent of those aged 64 and over (n=273). Again, we see greater change among younger cohorts, who often have lower levels of social interaction and higher levels of loneliness on engagement with the programme.

The level of increase in social contact with non-family members differed slightly between white and non-white beneficiaries at 21 per cent and 17 per cent respectively. A greater proportion of white respondents also saw an increase in the level of contact with family (24 per cent, n=211) compared to those from a non-white ethnic background (14 per cent, n=187).

We found only small increases in the extent to which beneficiaries were members of social and civic groups such as a religious groups, charitable associations, educational classes and social clubs. This is in line with the findings from the national programme.

Many of those we interviewed said that they were happy with the level of social contact they had, including those with relatively low levels of social participation. This stemmed from a combination of having family nearby and being involved in social activities, including those being funded through Ageing Better. Many of those we spoke to had full diaries of activities.

> *I don't [feel lonely] because I go out and socialise. I go out Wednesday to the over 50 club, and I go to the church Monday morning, I go to church Sunday, I go to bible study Wednesday evening, I go to the market Tuesday.*
> **Female participant**

Only few people explicitly said they would like more social contact. In one instance this was because there was a perceived lack of appropriate activities for men locally.

Many of the beneficiaries we spoke to had been members of social clubs for many months or years. In some cases, these clubs had benefited from Ageing Better funding and could now offer a new activity. In a few instances we found that participants had taken part in Network activity while other activities they usually attend were closed over the summer.

This qualitative evidence, combined with the statistic that over 70 per cent of the over 65s reported no change in their level of social contact with non-family members, may suggest that the programme is primarily engaging those who are already socially active and providing enhanced or replacement opportunities rather than additional ones. This is not necessarily problematic, as social contact does not necessarily indicate lower levels of loneliness and isolation, and Ageing Better in Birmingham is also about preventing as well

as tackling isolation. However, 'supportive social ties' have been shown to enhance physical and mental health among older adults.[13]

In the LGBT community interviewees reported generally lower levels of community activity. Some highlighted that the gay scene is primarily one that attracts young people and consequently there were fewer opportunities to join activities where they felt comfortable as an older person. In other instances, opportunities for socialising were limited by the fact that some were not 'out' in their local community.

Very few of those we spoke to had experienced the Ageing Better funded network as the only or main source of social interaction. However, for those that did, the effect was transformative. A widowed male participant in his 80s joined an Ageing Better funded gardening project and talked about the difference that this had made to his life:

> *I'll be quite honest, other than shopping, washing and that myself, I don't see anyone. So, it's a break and I get to be able to chat to people. It got to a point at one stage where I was talking to the television or the radio because I had no-one to talk to. So, here it's a blessing, and being in the garden with friends helps me to socialise. It's great. I can be doing a bit of gardening and helping the people around the community.*
> **Male participant**

Even for those with very active social lives, many - especially women –felt that having frequent activities available was vital for their well-being and to prevent loneliness and isolation in future. Almost all the participants that we spoke to particularly valued the social aspects of attending Networks and the opportunity to engage with others. They often mentioned the enjoyment of meeting new members and the diversity of groups.

> *It's lovely because we have got quite a few new people come. Some of them are older people, some of them are younger people. It's really good, and it's a mixture […] It's nice to get to know people, and to know how they do things, and that's what I enjoy. I like meeting people. It's really worthwhile coming because we've all made good friends.*
> **Female participant**

Wellbeing

Our analysis has found that participants had greater wellbeing at follow-up than at baseline, with average scores increasing from 21.1 to 23.2 respectively (n=434). Again this is broadly in line with the national picture.

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[13] Umberson D, Montez JK. Social Relationships and Health: A Flashpoint for Health Policy. *Journal of health and social behavior* 2010;51 (Suppl): S54-S66. doi:10.1177/0022146510383501.

Breaking the scores down by gender, it can be seen that females experienced a greater change in wellbeing, with scores improving by 11 per cent from 20.9 at baseline to 23.2 at follow-up (n=321). Males experienced a smaller change of 8 per cent, but their follow-up score was similar to females at 23.3 (n=109).

Those aged 50-64 years old experienced the greatest change in wellbeing as measured by the SWEMWBS, with scores increasing from 20.1 at baseline to 22.8 at follow up, an improvement of 13 per cent (n=92). Those aged 80 or above reported the highest levels of wellbeing at follow-up, with a score of 24 for this age group (n=113).
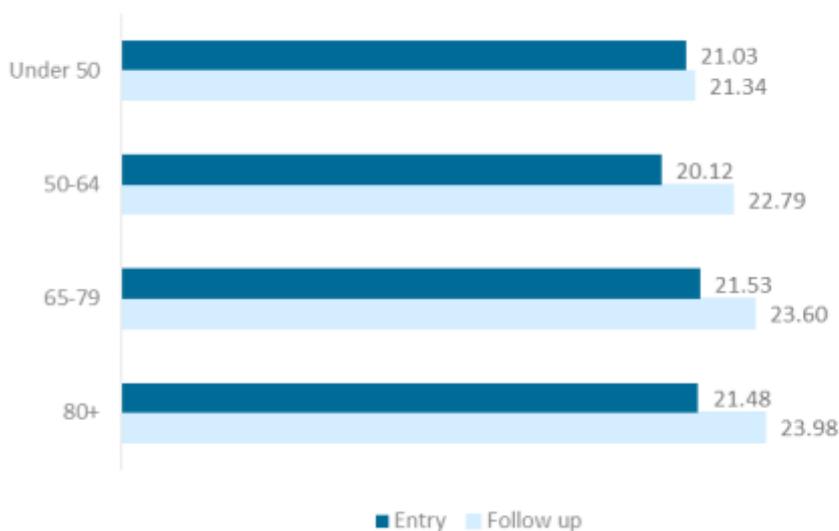
Figure 7 - SWEMWBS mean scores by age groups. Base: under 50 = 28, 50-64 = 92, 65-79 = 164, 80+ = 113

Individuals from a non-white background experienced a greater change in wellbeing, reporting an increase in their wellbeing of 11 per cent from baseline to follow up (n=205), whereas those from a white background experienced an increase of 9 per cent (n=219).

Findings from interviews with participants highlight that improved feelings of well-being are one of the key benefits many respondents experience. Many feel that this is down to the social interaction that the activity offers. For some, this acts as a diversion from other worries. As one participant told us, "*you know, you can have a laugh and a joke, and it takes your mind off any of the problems if you have got any.*" Interviewees told us that networks gave participants something to look forward to where they could swap stories and humour and feel a part of something.

Some interviewees highlighted that attendance at the activity had improved their general confidence levels. This was not necessarily in relation to undertaking a specific activity or skill, rather a general feeling that their overall confidence had improved. In one instance a participant felt that it had improved their confidence in being able to join in. This provides an encouraging basis for preventing future isolation.

It gives you a confidence and a feel-good factor. I think that reacts all through your life, really [...] it gives you a purpose to get up and get out and do something [...] because where I live, if you don't join in things, it's very easy to isolate yourself.

Female participant

03. Networks

In this chapter we explore how networks have been established and run, the extent to which networks are new groups or already established groups, and the implications that has for the Ageing Better In Birmingham programme

Working through established groups

In the year one report we highlighted that Networks were largely created through established community groups rather than entirely new groups and identified a need to investigate further the impact of this. For applications where this information is available, we can see that most applications to the Ageing Better Fund (70 per cent) are either from community groups that pre-existed Ageing Better in Birmingham or Networks that are affiliated to pre-existing organisations (Table 1).

Organisation type	Total number of applications made	Number of applications approved	Number of applications rejected/withdrawn	Application success rate
Existing community group	60	32	28	53%
Affiliated to an organisation	36	11	25	31%
New Ageing Better group	41	18	23	44%

Table 1: Applications to the Ageing Better Fund by organisation type

There are a number of reasons why the programme has attracted a higher number of applications from established groups. The initial focus on target-led delivery has clearly influenced Enabler behaviour. Enablers are not, in general, being proactively approached by prospective Network Leads. Rather, Enablers are having to actively seek out and promote the programme and encourage Networks to apply to the Fund. They are doing this by approaching established organisations and voluntary and community groups that work with older people to generate interest and this has proven, in many cases, to be an effective approach. A more community-development focused approach, which seeks to build capacity at the grass-roots level, and generate more wholly new Networks, is likely to require a different skill-set and is certainly more time consuming and resource intensive than engaging with established organisations.

Benefits of working through established groups

Networks set up through established voluntary and community sector (VCS) or private sector organisations appears to provide an effective model of delivery. Network Leads highlighted how helpful it is to have the support infrastructure of an established organisation to draw on. In a small number of cases, Network Leads and others active in organising Networks told us that this allowed them to focus on delivering activities for participants (often, this is the aspect they are most passionate about), with the administrative requirements of the programme (managing funding, monitoring and evaluation requirements) being carried out by paid staff.

We found many instances where older people did not wish to volunteer in a formal capacity (explored in Chapter 6) and were put off by the prospect of 'dealing with forms or funding' or ultimately being responsible for the network. However, some were often very happy to contribute to organising and delivering activity (such as making tea and coffee) without the wider responsibilities that come with Ageing Better funding. In many cases, activities would not be running without the involvement of these informal volunteers. The availability of someone with expertise and capacity to carry out the administrative elements of running a Network can therefore help to ensure groups can benefit from the Ageing Better funding while still maintaining participant involvement. Working through established organisations provide an obvious source of such expertise and capacity as they are more likely to have prior experience of making applications for and managing funding.

Established organisations often already have access to the client group, making consultation and generating interest in activities less daunting and more straightforward. Larger VCS organisations offer additional benefits. We found instances where they were able to promote activities across other networks and communities, and bring together different groups of people leading to increased social interaction that may not have occurred otherwise.

Limitations of working through established groups

Ageing Better in Birmingham is currently heavily dependent on working through established groups. Even where entirely new Networks have been created, Leads often found out about the programme through their involvement with established organisations and community groups (such as faith groups and support groups rather than organisations running the Hubs). At the programme level, this strategy has succeeded and has helped to meet, and indeed exceed, targets for engaging older participants. However, it is clear that this strategy has mixed levels of success at the Hub level.

The Tyburn Hub operates across a region of the city that is seen as fragmented with little sense of neighbourliness, unhelpful town planning, limited local public transport and a substantially weaker voluntary and community sector infrastructure.[14] Consequently, the preferred approach of recruitment through established groups has proved to be less effective here. A relatively small number of applications for funding have been received from the Tyburn Hub (11) and they have one of the lowest success rate compared to other hubs (55 per cent) – see Chapter 5. It is notable that of the 12 Ageing Better Fund applications from the Tyburn Hub where organisation type is recorded, eight are from new Networks – the opposite pattern to the programme as a whole.

The Tyburn Local Action Plan includes the creation of a Community Organisers Programme, which will provide training for ten community organisers to 'build relationships, connections and contacts in and across communities to activate people and encourage active citizenship'. In future years the evaluation should explore the extent to which the programme helps to inspire more citizens to take a more active role in their communities.

Network Enablers consider that having some prior experience of managing grant funding is an important factor in generating interest in Ageing Better in Birmingham. While the skills and capacity provided by larger organisations is a real benefit, the lack of this can be a barrier for some established but smaller and more informal Networks. This appears to be particularly the case within the LGBT Hub – they have a low number of applications to the Fund and most are from existing community groups. Established small and informal Networks that are already functioning well and sustainable are reported to be put-off by the potential of the Fund to add a further layer of expectation and administrative burden (such as financial management and evaluation requirements) and 'why rock the boat?' One Network Lead from an established (yet small) Network reported that:

> *I didn't enjoy the procedure at all. There seemed to be so much going on. At quite a few times, I thought, 'I'm not doing this. I don't have to do this.' I won't do it again.*
> **Network Lead**

There is a risk of diminishing returns from working through established groups, as the pool of potential groups able to apply for funding shrinks. The programme is already receiving second bids from Networks. The Enabler from one Hub for instance indicated that they are now spending most of their time targeting second applications. However, as we discuss in Chapter 5, the success rate of second applications appears to be lower and there is a requirement for second applications to show development (in terms of activity or participants) rather than simply requesting funding to continue as previously. It is likely

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14 Key causes of social isolation in Tyburn Ward as identified through consultation with approximately 250 Tyburn residents and groups during creation of Tyburn Local Action Plan 2017

that in future years the trend for second applications will continue. The evaluation will monitor this as the programme progresses.

A typology of Networks

As the discussion above suggests, the umbrella of 'established groups' covers a variety of types of organisations and experiences. We have explored the possibility of developing a more nuanced typology of the different types of Networks, taking into account links to established organisations, the role of the Network Lead and the expertise and support they are able to draw on. The typology below is based on the Networks we have visited or interviewed this year. The definitions are 'ideal types' that describe key characteristics and emphasise similarities; members of that particular type may not share all the characteristics. We have also sought to identify potential strengths and weaknesses of each type – this is not to say that every Network that fits the type description necessarily exhibits these strengths and weaknesses. If the typology provides a useful basis for further analysis the evaluation can test, develop and refine this as the evaluation progresses.

Type 1: Established, formal organisation (such as charity or housing provider) running a Network as part of their wider service offer. Network lead is employed by the organisation.[15] Strengths: A well-connected, experienced, organisation may provide subsidy and support. Greater ability to access additional funding from external sources, for example formal funding from trusts and grant-makers. Paid staff member more likely to have capacity to manage Fund requirements.

Weaknesses: Care needed to ensure that beneficiary voice is heard.

Example: Sara Park Intergenerational Cycling Club (see case study on page 24).

Type 2: Well-established (but not necessarily formal) community group, led by experienced active-citizens. Funding is used to extend or develop the group's core activity.

Strengths: Established presence in the community including regular client group. Leads often experienced volunteers, community or religious leaders. Experienced in raising ongoing funding.

Weaknesses: Can sometimes be particularly reliant on the enthusiasm and experience of a single active-citizen. Risk that they do not reach new people but simply use Ageing

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[15] It should be noted that Ageing Better funding cannot be used to pay for staff costs or financially benefit the organisation making the application.

Better Fund to continue their work.

Examples: Creative Threads (see case study on page 36), Journey MCC Asylum Seekers' Support Group (see case study on page 46). Most of the Networks we engaged with this year fit this type.

Type 3: New Network set up using Ageing Better funding. Network is independent but led by active-citizens who are well-connected with established community organisations, such as a religious group. Network is might be an off-shoot of, or affiliated to, an existing group.

Strengths: Links to established community organisations can provide access to resources such as free room hire as well as a way of reaching people and communicating about the Network. Active citizen-led.

Weaknesses: Reliance on voluntary sector support is problematic for areas where the VCS is less well developed.

Example: FIGS (see case study on page 37)

Type 4: Informal (often new) Network set up by active-citizens (often older people/beneficiaries) without links to established organisations. Ageing Better Fund used to set-up the Network.

Strengths: Grass roots, beneficiary-led, not reliant on support from voluntary sector.

Weaknesses: Network Leads may lack experience and capacity, less likely to benefit from support provided by established community organisations. More difficult to encourage people to set-up / harder for Network Enablers to reach.

This type appears to be least common and requires most support to be successful. While a few of the Networks we engaged with as part of our field work most closely fitted this model, none of the case studies included in this report fall within this type.

How are Networks reaching socially isolated older adults?

One of the possible concerns about mainly working through established groups is that they may be less effective in reaching those who are most lonely and will primarily work with existing participants. All Networks seeking funding from Ageing Better in Birmingham are required to demonstrate how they will reach socially isolated older people. For established groups it is important that they can demonstrate how the funding will add to or enhance

what they usually provide in order to reduce or prevent social isolation. Networks are achieving this primarily through one or more of the following ways:

Expanding the range of activities on offer: providing new activities in order to attract a new and different audience. For example in residential accommodation we found an instance where existing communal space was used to establish a choir to enhance the quality of life of residents and potentially attract a different core audience.

Enhancing current activities: we found a number of instances where funding was used to enhance the current activity to improve the overall experience with the same goal of attracting new members. This often takes the form of hiring an expert to enhance skills workshops.

> *[A photographer] came along and she was very informative. She taught us all the dimensions of pictures. She does freelance photography and it was very, interesting. Now, we're on a mission to take photos with her knowledge of what she's told us. Hopefully, we've all come away with a better idea and she's coming back when we've done these photos and she's going to give us more help*
> **Network Lead**

Offering current activities to new audiences: in some instances Networks have used the funding to extend their core offer to a completely new group. For example, the Sara Park Activity Centre that worked predominantly with younger people and families used the funding to establish an intergenerational cycling club to bring young and older people together. See the case study below for further detail.

Most Leads indicated that they had attracted new participants to their Networks as a result of the funding for the approaches described above. However, it is difficult to judge the extent to which these activities are reaching the most isolated. As discussed in the previous chapter, the CMF data suggests that the activities are reaching some of the most-lonely, the evidence also shows that the programme is not engaging people with little or no social contact or social participation at baseline. This was a view shared by a number of Network Leads who highlighted that reaching the most isolated older people was challenging and questioned whether their approaches were effective in doing this.

However, Ageing Better in Birmingham is as much about preventing isolation as addressing it. It is arguable that Networks are helping to prevent isolation by providing activities to groups who might otherwise be vulnerable to isolation, for example, because they live alone, do not speak English or are LGBT. It is also important to remember that having lots of social interaction does not necessarily mean someone does not feel isolated or lonely.

Quite a few of the people that come to the group have got a lot of other activities going on, but that doesn't mean to say that they don't feel isolated. The vast majority live alone, and that in itself can be quite isolating, however many activities you may have in the week.

Network Lead

It is arguable that the quality of the interactions and the building of sustainable relationships outside of the Network activity that are important in reducing feelings of isolation and preventing future loneliness.

Case Study: Sara Park Intergenerational Cycling Club (Sparkbrook Hub)

The Sara Park Intergenerational Cycling Club is a new initiative operated by the Sara Park Activity Centre. The Centre offers communal sports, enrichment and learning activities for young people and families in Small Heath. Run by local charity Blue River Support Services, the Activity Centre aims to provide a focus for positive community activity in the area. The Intergenerational Cycling Club was started in Summer 2017 with funding from Ageing Better in Birmingham.

> *The idea with this project was to bring the older people and younger people in the community together [...] there is a lot of experience and knowledge among the older members of the community. It would be good for them to be back with the younger members of the community to see if they could help teach them skills and share their experiences.*
>
> **Network Lead**

The club is open to everybody and not specifically marketed at or advertised to old people. A wide range of age groups attend the sessions, with the oldest being in their 60s. This shows a project designed for all can attract and engage older people. Every two weeks, participants meet at the Activity Centre to go for a bike ride – usually somewhere scenic, such as along the canals – and then they return to the Centre for post-ride refreshments.

The Network has led the Activity Centre to establish new partnerships with Birmingham Bikes, who can offer free bikes for adults, and Cycling UK, who are able to offer training to volunteers to enable them to become ride leaders. As a result of this, more people are now volunteering for the organisation and volunteers have increased their skills. The Club is said to have helped older participants make new friends and expand the range of people they have contact with. Older people also play an important role in sharing their expertise with younger members.

> *I think [older] people who attend have made more friends, so less isolation. People who they probably would never have met before, they've made good friends with them [...] Obviously, other people have skills in cycling maintenance that they've been able to impart to other members of the group [...] I think there are much fewer older people than younger people, but the older people that we have had have been instrumental in the day.*
>
> **Network Lead**

The Activity Centre intends to continue the Club and is considering applying for future funding through Sport England or Awards for All.

Network support needs and the role of Network Enablers

The level of support Network Leads require to prepare an application to the Ageing Better Fund and for delivering activity varies considerably. While most Network Leads found the application process 'easy' or 'as expected', this hides the levels of support required from the Network Enabler. Almost all Network Enablers underestimated the level of support that they would be required to provide and the length of time that they would be called on to deliver this. The support offer is flexible and tailored to the needs of the Lead. There is a benefit to providing more intensive support however, as Enablers felt this was more likely to create stronger buy-in to the national evaluation among those groups which received more intensive support, perhaps because of the stronger relationships formed.

On balance, Network Leads and Network Enablers tell us that established groups can require less support than newly formed groups. However, educational factors (including for example low literacy rates or where English is a second language) and cultural factors (including for example religious sensitivities often have a greater impact on the need for support).

Support provided tends to fall into one or more of the following categories:

Completion of Application: While a small number of Network Leads with limited IT skills require support from Enablers to complete the application, the most common support with needed with applications appears to be related to demonstrating how the activity will address loneliness and social isolation. This is clearly an issue that some Networks struggle to communicate and is the second most common reason for applications being declined.

Providing financial and/or administrative support: While there is a recognition that the payment process has become more straightforward, some Networks still find managing the invoicing process difficult and needed help with this. We also found instances where Leads needed assistance in sourcing potential suppliers for activities not listed on the preferred suppliers list, for example, a Tai Chi instructor.

Management of activities: Network Enablers also underestimated the extent to which they would be involved with Networks after the submission of funding applications. The extent of their involvement varies; for some this may simply be encouragement at the start of activities, for others support includes assistance with delivery, this is potentially something a VCS partner or staff member may be better placed to provide.

> *[The Network Enabler] helped us with things like taking surveys, registration forms for new members and setting up social media groups so we can reach people who've signed up to [the Network]*
> **Network Lead**

We found many instances where the support needed was considerable, particularly where a Lead was inexperienced or new to the role (whether or not the network itself was new or established). Sometimes the Lead was not fully aware of what the role entailed. Two of the Leads we interviewed indicated that they had not enjoyed the experience and, although they would remain active within their group, they would not wish to continue as the Network Lead.

Network Leads that required the least amount of support often were experienced community activists or supported by VCS organisations. What appears to be particularly effective is where an organisation provides the administrative and 'back office' support, allowing the Lead or other active-citizens to focus on engaging beneficiaries and delivery of the activity. This seems to work well as the administrative aspects can be off-putting to some volunteers and it capitalises on the passion of active citizens who are motivated by addressing loneliness

Managing evaluation requirements: In our Year One Evaluation report, we highlighted that some Network Leads would have benefitted from additional information and support on the purpose of the national evaluation questionnaire. This remains the case for some Leads interviewed for this report. We found a small number of Leads indicating that they felt uncomfortable asking their peers to fill in the survey, due to either the personal nature of some of the questions, or the perceived length of time required to complete both the baseline and follow-up survey. There may be merit in Network Enablers playing more of a role in explaining the need for the questionnaire and assisting with its administration as they are not as personally involved with participants as some Leads.

> *I think the enabler should come and deal out the questionnaires at the beginning. […] I think they should be the ones that explain why they need it, and just to reassure [participants] a bit.*
> **Network Lead**

04. Activities

In this Chapter we report the range of activities delivered across the Ageing Better In Birmingham programme and highlight key characteristics of a successful activity. We also examine how networks are working to make their activities sustainable and the ways in which activities are attracting male participants.

What makes a successful activity?

The Ageing Better Fund has provided funding for Networks offering a considerable range of activities. The most frequent primary activity is exercise (42 Networks) - for example Nordic walking, Bhangra and Bollywood dance, Tai Chi. This is followed by arts activities (30 Networks), such as flower-arranging, choirs, needlecrafts, music therapy and photography. Food related activities (27 Networks), Trips (27 Networks) and skills workshops (24 Networks) are also popular. The variety of activities is important to ensure that the diverse interests of older people can be met. The primary activity categories also hide the fact that many Networks combine elements of multiple activities, for example, a Network may combine light exercise sessions with arts and other skills workshops and a meal out or afternoon tea. In this chapter we draw on both quantitative and qualitative data to offer insights into the factors that make Networks successful and appealing to members.

The role of the Network Lead

Of particular importance is the role played by the Network Lead. Both Network Leads and beneficiaries identified the important qualities for Leads:

- Warmth and interest in people
- Being passionate about wanting to support older people
- Understanding the time commitment needed to run a network and having the confidence to delegate tasks within a team of volunteer supporters
- Understanding sources of financial support available to help run the Network and the ability to network with potential supporters
- Being immersed in the local community in order to understand the people and context.

Both Network Leads and participants suggested that effective Network Leads need to be passionate and enthusiastic about making a contribution to the lives of others, with a real interest in people, so that their warmth will shine through.

> *I think whoever you select or encourage to a leadership role in it has got to be warm, and interested in other people.*
> **Participant**

Participants valued Leads (and volunteers) who took time to get to know them personally. Developing trusting relationships also helped Leads to inspire others to get involved and try new things.

> *[Network Lead] is incredible. She just talks to people and people follow her and go. She gets people to go where she thinks something's going on that might be good for them [...] She tries to make life a bit more fulfilling for people that perhaps haven't got all the energy and ability that we've got just at this moment*
> **Participant**

Some take time to contact participants outside of the group to check how they are or to offer them transport to and from the venue. In some cases, Leads and volunteers had become to feel like friends to participants. Developing these kinds of relationships, that are more likely to persist beyond the Ageing Better programme provides a potential source of sustainability and should help to prevent future isolation.

The list of key skills and qualities identified that make an effective Lead are diverse, and not necessarily to be found in the same person – a people person may not be the best at sourcing funding. We found a number of instances of inexperienced leads underestimating the extent of work involved. Potentially these issues could be resolved if different roles and responsibilities could be shared across the Network and with VCS organisations providing support. Another option might be to seek to train active citizens in the types of tasks that are commonly required. However, we consider that this could actually serve as a disincentive. Our research shows that many are wary of formal volunteering. Active-citizens and Leads are often motivated by wanting to bring people together and make a difference. Offering training may reinforce perceptions that running a Network requires special skills, a significant time commitment and involves a level of administration that is off-putting to many.

Welcome and personal touch

The most successful networks appear to be those which create an environment where individuals feel connected to others. Perceptions of how people are greeted, in particular on their first attendance, are important. Having a dynamic, warm Network Lead, together with beneficiaries who help to ensure everyone in the group is enjoying themselves and work to cultivate friendships, keeps people coming back and a desire to keep the group

going. During some of the field visits, participants reflected on the nervousness they felt attending for the first time, but that the friendliness of the lead and having another participant to befriend them and offer them a seat next to them made them feel confident enough to return again.

> *The people that I knew already in that group, I've got to know a lot better. I think it really helped this current group, that some of us did know each other already, because we had more confidence and we could extend the welcome to the new people.*
> **Network Lead**

Staff, volunteers and participants remembering personal details about people's lives can have a big impact. It was noticeable during fieldwork visits that those who volunteered to make the drinks remembered how each person liked their tea or coffee. This personal touch made participants feel cared for. One participant explained she is diabetic, but is comforted in knowing that the other participants and volunteers keep an eye on her and fetch her a biscuit if her blood-sugar levels start to drop. This warmth and care can develop into providing a sense of family for some.

> *It can be very friendly, we've got one lady who takes everybody's birthday so we're making sure everybody gets a birthday card and a little box of chocolates on their birthday.*
> **Network Lead**

Such a personal touch is vital for older people to feel an emotional investment in the Network, which in turn can lead to investment of money or time in order to help sustain it. Creating active involvement in a group, together with a sense of community and friendship among those attending, leads to a stronger, more resilient network, with more chance of long-term sustainability. We suggest it is these aspects of Networks that are most likely to contribute to people feeling less isolated. It also highlights the importance of small contributions to the running of the Network, though few of those making drinks for others would identify themselves as volunteers.

Activity

The CMF includes high-level data on the type of activities that respondents have participated in. We analysed outcomes for the three most popular activities - skills development activities, physical activities and social activities.[16] As reported in Chapter 2, participants generally reported an increase in wellbeing.[17] Those who took part in some form of skills development activity (n=382) reported a 13 per cent increase in wellbeing

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[16] Sample sizes for other activities were too small for meaningful analysis.

[17] As measured by the SWEMWBS

from baseline to follow up – similar to those who did not take part in these types of activity (10% increased, n=52). There was a more pronounced difference when we compare results for those taking part in physical activities; those participating in physical activity (n=311) reported an average increase in wellbeing of 24 per cent, compared to only a 5 per cent increase in wellbeing for those that did not (n=123). Similar patterns of change are observed in both the loneliness measures. This might suggest that incorporating some form of physical activity within Network activity could help boost wellbeing.

Surprisingly, this trend was reversed when analysing participation in social activities. Those who participated in social activities reported an average increase in wellbeing of only 6 per cent, compared to an average 23 per cent increase in wellbeing for those who did not take part in any form of social activity. Again, we see a similar pattern in the loneliness measures. It would be useful to explore this further with more detailed analysis to understand better why this might be. One notable point is that those who did not take part in any social activity also had a lower baseline wellbeing score (19.97) compared to those who did (21.44), which partly accounts for the greater increase over time. This might suggest that those who are most in need are not necessarily attracted by social activities, but are able to benefit from other types of activity.

Motivations for attending an activity vary and typically fall into one of two groups. For some, the main driver is a particular interest and these participants were attracted to what we describe as *activity focused Networks* – Networks where the practise of a skill or pastime or shared topic of interest is the main focus, rather than being mainly or purely about social interaction. In these instances, while individuals came along initially for the activity, they often also valued and benefited from the social element too. In some instances the Network allowed participants the opportunity to renew interests established earlier in life. For example, one participant told how she had been interested in art for many years and initially attended the Network (an art class) for that reason. While she describes it as not a 'serious' art class, she continues to attend because she enjoys the company so much. Activity-focused Networks can be enhanced and encourage new membership through the involvement of experts and tutors. In another art-focused Network, sessions culminated in an exhibition of resulting work at an Ageing Better in Birmingham event. The members of the Network felt extremely motivated by this.

> *It's not just about feeling good, it's about giving you a bit more confidence in what you're doing.*
> **Participant**

However, we continue to find that many participants are motivated primarily by the social aspect and are attracted to *social-focused Networks*. These Networks provide activities where the primary aim is to socialise, rather than to undertake activities. This might mean a Network offers a variety of activities (such as games and singing) as well as a space for participants to simply interact with one another. A social-focused Network may still be organised around a particular activity, such as crafts, but it is one in which is primarily

offered as a way for individuals to interact and socialise. For example, some women we spoke to talked about enjoying attending a knitting group for social interaction and not because they particularly enjoy the knitting. Activities tend to be undertaken in a group or social setting with opportunities to chat, share ideas and materials as part of the activity. Lunch clubs and tea parties would fall into this category and appear to be popular with participants. Unsurprisingly, the availability of refreshments is important in either case. The provision of tea and coffee adds to the social feel of Networks.

The role of one-off trips

There has been a strategic decision by the Programme team to move away from funding one-off trips in favour of more regular activities that are perceived to have more of a sustained impact. This has resulted in funded trips and outings being embedded as part of a wider activity, for example a trip to a gallery for members of an arts and craft group. Participants appear to value these opportunities, although they are less likely to be motivating factor for participants attending the group.

One-off trips are valued by the beneficiaries and as a result Network Leads are keen to be able to offer them to participants. For participants, day trips are seen as allowing them to visit places and experiences they may not otherwise due to barriers of cost, restricted mobility/transport, or having no-one to accompany them. On some of the trips people socialised, made friends and found out about other activities in the area. Some trips are for a range of ages and this intergenerational aspect, together with the opportunity to meet other people from the local community, is welcomed by participants.

There is also potential value in a one-off trip, particularly as a kick-start to an activity and/or to attract new individuals to an activity.

Practicalities

For some, although not all, an accessible location, be that walking distance or convenient by public transport, is important in in maintaining attendance levels. Although interestingly some participants indicated that they travelled for up to an hour on public transport to attend a favoured group.

Charging for an activity does not necessarily adversely affect attendance and we explore this further on page 35.

Engaging men

Recent analysis of ELSA data suggests that over 1.2 million older men reported a moderate to high degree of social isolation and over 700,000 reported feeling a high degree of

loneliness.[18] The research found that in general older men are more isolated than older women with less contact with their children, family members and friends. The analysis shows that though overall men reported less loneliness than women, older men living alone were lonelier - suggesting that older men are more dependent on their partners.

As reported in Chapter 2, women are more likely to participate in Ageing Better in Birmingham than men, yet men are arguably in greater need as they report higher levels of loneliness at baseline. This is line with programme nationally and it is acknowledged that getting men involved can be more difficult. Interestingly, although more women had led an activity in the last 12 months than men, as a proportion of participants, men were more likely to lead an activity and to organise/run an event compared to women. This a recent change and it will be interesting to track whether the increase in men running activities leads to an increase in male participants. It is also notable that the LGBT Hub has more male than female participants, although their total participant numbers are small (69 males out of 93 participants). Further research is needed to understand why the trend is reversed for this Hub.

The gender difference in participation is likely to be partly due to demographic difference - women outlive men. In 2014 to 2016, a man in the UK aged 65 had an average further 18.5 years of life remaining and a woman 20.9 years.[19] As highlighted above, men may be more dependent on their partner for social activities, a view reflected by some of those with interviewed.

> *The only men who come with us are widowers. I'm wondering if men don't go because they've got their wives with them. I'm a widower. To be truthful, I don't think I would have got so involved if my wife had been alive, because we would have been doing other things.*
> **Male participant**

This further emphasises the importance of targeting widowed and single men.

From our observations and interviews, men appear to be more attracted to activity-focused Networks, and seek to join in order to develop skills and knowledge or because they enjoy the activity, rather than because they are seeking an opportunity to socialise. This is supported by other research that found that men 'may prefer services which are built around their particular interests, workplace or experiences'.[20] So, social-focused activities like coffee mornings are less likely to be of interest.

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[18] Bench, B. and Bamford, S. (no date) *Isolation: the emerging crisis for older men. A report exploring experiences of social isolation and loneliness.* International Longevity Centre
[19] National Life Tables, UK: 2014 – 16. Office for National Statistics
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/bulletins/nationallifetablesunitedkingdom/2014to2016
[20] Bench & Bamford Op Cit

Many of the funded Network activities explicitly target women. Eight Networks have the word women in their name (for example, Local Women Together), a further seven have received funding for activities for women only, such as a women's exercise class. In contrast very few Networks appear to explicitly target men. There are only two Networks with the word men or lads in the name, and none of the descriptions state they are targeting men.

Further, many Networks are based around activities that are traditionally perceived as feminine such as needlecrafts, cake decorating and flower arranging. Some activities are described in a feminised way (for example, 'pampering sessions'), which can be problematic. While there is no reason why men should not participate in these activities, research from The Baring Foundation indicates that some older men hold 'very traditional and separated roles', which includes gendered ideas of hobbies and leisure activities. As a result they may be less likely to be attracted to these types of Network activities.[21] There are some traditionally male activities (walking football) but there are far fewer of them. This may be a potential barrier. One participant reflected on the lack of male focused activities available now.

> *The local community hall […] had the men's night. They had a snooker table there. The men came along and they had a boy's club attached to it. We played football. There were pitches in the local park. The community hall has been closed down now, it's a used car wash.*
> **Male participant**

From interviews and observations during fieldwork visits to groups we have observed that men tend to sit in their own social circle and play games and talk with other men. Others may not socialise much at all, preferring to do a solitary activity within a social setting. However, the apparent reluctance of men to socialise may not always be a choice. Greater effort may be needed to engage men and create opportunities to start conversations. This may mean disrupting usual patterns of behaviour. One man told us:

> *I had a good chat with a guy there last week. He doesn't mix well, he's not much of a small talker. He goes on the computer every week and doesn't talk to anybody. Last week, somebody else was on the computer, and the dominos wasn't going, and I just had a good chat with this guy, and he so appreciated it.*
> **Male participant, 82**

What works in engaging men?

Qualitative research into cultural engagement with older men carried out by the Baring Foundation suggest that men are also influenced by the same factors as women including

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[21] Baring Foundation. A handbook for cultural engagement with older men
https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=24251

practical issues such as provision of transport and refreshments.[22] As described earlier in this chapter, the Network lead/group facilitator is also important in engaging older men in social activities. Creating the right atmosphere for the activity is one of the key roles for the group facilitator. Male participants value a relaxed, casual, friendly and non-competitive environment. They need to develop trust with the project leader and other participants in order to fully integrate in the dynamics of the group.

There is potentially more that could be done to involve organisations with large numbers of male participants in Ageing Better in Birmingham. While Enablers told us they promoted the need for men during their promotional activities, none indicated that they had targeted specific groups and organisations that are popular with men (for example sports clubs, working-men's clubs etc.)

In one instance, peer-to-peer promotion had proved to be successful in engaging men in an activity. Men already involved promoted the activity to other men. Peer promotion is highlighted in other research as an effective method of recruitment. Research from the Baring Foundation found that the majority of participants agreed on word of mouth being the most effective way to recruit new participants. Recommendations from peers, current project participants and family members, especially female relatives, were found to be successful methods of recruitment. Bench and Bamford also suggest that one way to prevent social isolation amongst men may be for services to engage men through their partners, and may be something for the Programme to consider.

Sustaining activities

Ageing Better in Birmingham is designed to provide 'seed-corn' or start-up funding to get new or enhanced activities off the ground, with the expectation that they will be self-sustaining. However, this can be challenging for Networks. It is worth considering that the format of many Networks means they are likely to require funding, from one source or another, on an ongoing basis in order to maintain activity. As highlighted in our Year one report, maintaining activities is arguably as important as creating new ones for preventing social isolation. The decision to only fund new or enhanced activities through the Fund was made to avoid Networks becoming dependent on what is a time-limited source of funding. However, this is difficult to avoid, given the challenges of sourcing funding elsewhere. Indeed, a key motivation for many established groups applying to the Fund is to sustain their group – although funding must, in theory at least, meet the fund criteria which does not allow applications to pay for existing activities.

One possibility is that relationships forged through Networks can be sustained beyond the life of activities, although there is little evidence to suggest this is happening on a large

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[22] Ibid

scale just yet. As one participant told us, 'it would be a shame to see it all fold up because then you lose touch with people again.' This suggests they are still reliant on the Network to bring people together. In a few of the cases we sampled people have arranged to meet outside of the Network to go for a meal or to attend different activity together. Others have extended the social time together with new friends by meeting before the network activity to have lunch or to share a cup of tea in a café or someone's house afterwards. One participant highlighted how participants offered support to a Network member who had no family.

> *The group's pretty special to be honest, I mean, we had one bloke getting baptised and half of the group went to support him because he didn't have any family.*
> **Network Lead**

This shows there is clearly the potential for groups to help build support networks that operate outside the funded activities. There is also clearly interest from participants in ensuring activities continue and grow. Often we found participants had recommended the activity to friends and family, which also demonstrates satisfaction with the activities.

> *I will tell my friend, it's up to them if they want to come and join or not to go to group.' […] I always tell them that it's a really good group and you should come as well*
> **Female participant**

Most Leads that we interviewed were considering how to sustain their activities in some form. In about a third of cases they were seeking some form of regular contribution from participants. Contributions are often sought to cover the costs of enhanced elements (such as tutors) rather than to sustain the group.

Most of the participants we spoke to felt that, although there will be some who would find even a small charge a barrier to attending, most of their peers were in a position to afford a small, reasonable contribution towards costs. Key elements of sustaining a group through this approach appear to be making costs proportionate, transparent and having a flexible approach to seeking contributions. What can be charged will depend on the income levels of the target community.

> *They pay me £4.50 for the day, where they have breakfast, dinner and pudding and as much tea as they want. They also pay me for the taxis. […]I charge them £10.50. £4.50 for the meal, £3 each way, that's £10.50. It doesn't sound so much, especially if they know what they're paying for.*
> **Network Lead**

Rather than fixed fees some Networks have successfully asked for donations, with a guideline amount.

> *We didn't want [charges] to be a barrier, and we didn't want to make it official, we insisted that they are donations for the current project, not a charge. There was one*

person who we thought was coming, and she thought that £4 was too much. So what we
agreed was you could put in what you wanted, £4 was just a guide.

Network Lead

Case study: Creative Threads

Creative Threads is an arts group that meets at an Age UK Centre in Harborne and is supported by the city-wide Hub. The group was established prior to Ageing Better in Birmingham and successfully applied for funding for a tutor to enhance sessions, pay for the room, provide refreshments, and to create promotional material to advertise the group more widely.

The Network Lead, who is an older beneficiary of the group herself, applied a 'suggested donation' from the beginning in order to build the future sustainability into the group. Members are asked to contribute £1 towards refreshments and £4 towards the session when a tutor is present and £3 if she is unavailable. The funds are stored securely by Age UK. Beneficiaries appear to be happy with this arrangement, as one them explained:

It's entirely up to people if they put in and there's no pressure on people to do
that [...] I think that's reasonable. People sometimes bring their own bits and
pieces to add to [materials available] but there are a lot of materials provided as
well.

However, asking for voluntary contributions does not work in all circumstances. Costs for some groups are higher than can be reasonably covered by members, and some Networks supporting participants on lower incomes find this more challenging. Some Network Leads also appeared wary of financial transactions getting in the way of the spirit of their group.

It's easy to say [the participants will] cover [the cost of room hire], but if we only have
eight [people] one week I don't expect £27.50 between them. If you start expecting
people to pay, or needing people to pay, then you're in trouble, because then if it's not
paid you go into arrears and then you're starting to chase people for money and that's
not what the group's about.

Network Lead

Other networks were looking at alternative sources of funding either to exclusively fund future activities, or to complement the donations from participants. Examples of possible sources of funding were churches and other faith-based groups, Awards for All and other trusts and small grant-makers. However, Networks will likely require a certain level of

formality (for example, to be formally constituted) and financial management capacity in order to successfully apply for and manage the funding. This would likely limit the types of Networks that realistically are able to source funding from these routes.

Out of all the Networks we visited, the example below arguably most closely reflects the concept of the Fund as kick-start funding as it was used to cover one-off costs that have helped to launch the project. The Network has creative but ambitious plans for sustaining and growing their work.

Case study: FIGS

FIGS is a voluntary gardening group, aimed at men and women over 50 in Tyburn. It operates out of St Chad's Church, who store their gardening equipment in return for the group looking after the church garden. The grounds now look more attractive and the hope is this will entice more people to attend the Network. In future, the group would like to move out into the community to help more people to take part in light gardening work and to provide support to those who need help in their own gardens.

The group is a new Network, formed after receiving Ageing Better funding, which allowed them to buy tools appropriate for older people to use (for example, a lightweight lawnmower). The Network Lead is a 65 year old man, who is active in the local community. He is a previous school governor and now volunteers with Neighbourhood Watch and the church's lunch club.

The area is very built-up, without many green spaces. The Network provides an opportunity for people to do an activity they enjoy and to socialise at the same time. It is also an activity that can be tailored to different abilities, be it weeding, potting plants or mowing grass. Participants meet with the Network Lead to offer ideas and suggestions and in this way are actively involved in deciding on the group's activities.

The group is building an element of both community work and sustainability into its future plans, by offering gardening services to people within the local area, who are then requested to make a donation. This will be used to 'regenerate' the gardening group in future.

> *Fortunately for us, we had several commissions [for gardening work] to generate some money. That's purely lucky, so we'd probably got a couple of hundred pounds in the kitty to start the year off with. So for our seeds and our soils and stuff like that, we've got a bit of money behind us to carry on.*
>
> **Network Lead**

An alternative approach to fund-raising is to explore ways of reducing or removing costs. For example, some Networks were looking at moving the meeting location to somewhere with cheaper room-hire costs or reducing the amount of tutor-time at sessions, in order to save money.

> *If we can't get any more on-going funding,[one option] is to ask the tutor to do some workshops less regularly […] It's a real balance between doing it ourselves and not perhaps making as much progress as we would like, and going through the bureaucracy [of applying for funding], so that we can have our tutor.*
> **Network Lead**

05. Ageing Better Fund

In this chapter we highlight the changes that have been made in relation to the Fund and the effect of these.

Application and success rates

The Ageing Better Fund can support activities up to the value of £2,000 and is designed to be particularly accessible to informal groups as well as constituted groups or voluntary sector organisations experienced in applying for and managing grants. Up to May 2018 the Ageing Better in Birmingham Fund had received 328 funding applications for £480,520. Of these, 203 were successful and were awarded funding of £293,897 in total.

The overall success rate of applications is 62 per cent – the same as reported in our Year One report.[23] While there continues to be substantial differences in the number of applications from each hub, with the city-wide accounting for most applications, and Tyburn and LGBT Hubs submitting relatively few, the differences in success rates are less stark. The lower levels of applications from Tyburn and LGBT, we believe, are largely explained by differences in the capacity of the VCS in these two communities – as explored in chapter 3.

	Total number of applications	Total number of successful applications	Success rate (%)
Citywide	141	92	65
Carer	82	44	54
Sparkbrook	62	44	71
Tyburn	27	12	44
LGBT	14	11	78
Total	326	203	62

Table 2: Ageing Better Fund overall success rates by Hub

Comparing success rates just for recent applications with the previous year (Table 3) we can see that the success rate for the Carers, Sparkbrook and Tyburn hubs have all increased. In contrast, the Citywide Hub has experienced a reduced success rate.

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[23] Year One report presented analysis based on fund applications up to April 2017.

	Total number of applications (May 17 – May 18)	Total number of successful applications (May 17 – May 18)	Success rate (%) (May 17 – May 18)	Success rate (%) (April 2017)
Citywide	47	25	53	71
Carer	23	15	65	49
Sparkbrook	31	24	77	64
Tyburn	11	6	55	37
LGBT	5	3	60	90
Total	117	73	62	62

Table 3: Ageing Better Fund success rate since May – October 2017

We would perhaps expect to see an increase in the success rate as the Fund has developed. We demonstrate the positive ways in which the application process has been improved later in this chapter. Network Enablers are also more experienced in supporting applications to the Fund. There has been considerable structural and personnel change within the delivery team at thee Citywide Hub, which may account for the drop in success rates here. As the Citywide Hub was previously exceeding targets, the emphasis on generating successful applications has also lessened. Most reapplications from Networks that have previously received funding also come from the Citywide Hub and, as we report below, the success rate for reapplications is much lower than the overall rate. The main reasons why applications to the Citywide hub were not successful over the past year align with the most common reasons why applications were unsuccessful more generally (see Why are applications unsuccessful? below).

Application process

Both Network Leads and Network Enablers perceive that the application process is now much improved. This follows a review during which the programme team consulted with stakeholders. Application forms and guidance have been streamlined, the language simplified and documents made available in a number of community languages.

Most Network Leads indicated that they found the application process 'straightforward' and 'easy'. Most have also received support from their Network Enabler - this is likely to have made a difference to their perception of the process. Network leads with prior experience of funding applications were least likely to say they had any difficulties in completing the application form.

> *The application process was quite straightforward. We worked with the Network Enabler. We were able to control the information with a few drafts before we actually submitted the application, and they gave us some tips on how to improve it. It was quite helpful. It was one of the easier application forms that I've done. (Network Lead with prior funding application experience)*
>
> **Network Lead**

Those Network Leads with least experience were most likely to report the most significant difficulties in submitting an application. This includes Leads who had stepped into the role recently (for example, because the original Lead had left due to a change in personal circumstances, or because the paid tutor who otherwise organised the group could not act as the Lead for the purpose of the funding application). Difficulties for the inexperienced Leads often related to costing. For example, one Network lead described the difficulty in 'guessing' costs for the application. This resulted in the Network not having enough funding to cover the full costs of the activity, and the group had to subsidise this themselves.

Decision-making process

The Ageing Better Fund decision-making process has benefited from reflection on experience to date and improvements made mean this now appears to function well. Membership of the Fund Panel has grown to five[24] and comprises two members of the Age of Experience group, a member of the project team, a member of the Core Group as well as a BVSC staff member who fulfils an administrative rather than decision-making role. The make-up of the panel works well. The lived experience and local knowledge provided by the experts alongside the perspective of a sector professional generates detailed and productive discussions. It is clear that the decision making process has also benefited from the accumulated experience of the members. The Core Group representative has been involved from the outset and Age of Experience members have been able to develop a good knowledge of the process. BVSC staff have created an environment in which constructive debate is encouraged before the group makes its decision.

It is positive to note that the Fund appears to have embraced the test and learn approach when making funding decisions and is prepared to fund potentially higher-risk activities which may not necessarily be successful.

[24] This includes a member of the BVSC secretariat responsible for administrative functions but without a decision-making role.

Case Study: LGBT Polska

LGBT Polska is a social group of people from the Polish LGBT community in the West Midlands area. It has a diverse membership with ages ranging from 22 to 70 and meets monthly in the Birmingham gay village. Many Polish LGBT people who live in the UK are afraid to 'come out' due to their experiences in Poland. While in many ways the group was successful, members became concerned that their existence is not well known in the wider community. They currently advertise using social media, however they are aware that not all older people use social media.

The group successfully applied to the Ageing Better Fund to purchase advertising space for the group in the Midlands Zone magazine for six months. Alongside this they intend to print and distribute flyers in LGBT venues.

It is hoped that the publicity that this generates will enable the group to increase its membership, particularly of older people at risk of isolation, and improve its sustainability through targeting the established LGBT community as well as attracting members who are yet to 'come out'.

Both Network Leads and Enablers viewed the decision-making process as more transparent. The feedback process is quicker, with feedback language agreed during the meeting. This leads to decisions being communicated more clearly and more quickly to the Network Lead than previously.

Why are applications unsuccessful?

The most common reason for an application being unsuccessful is a lack of clear plans for sustaining the activity and / or the impact; this was cited as a concern on 40 per cent of all unsuccessful applications[25]. This is despite the fact that the application form now asks for an explanation of how the applicant expects the network to continue after the financial support has ended. The next most frequent reason is not making a sufficiently clear case for how the activity will address isolation; this was an issue on 35 per cent of unsuccessful applications. Other frequently applied reasons for rejecting applications include a lack of involvement of older people in the design of the activity (20 per cent of unsuccessful applications) and because the request is to fund pre-existing activity without any development or enhancement (20 per cent of unsuccessful applications)..

As the Ageing Better Programme progresses the Fund has received an increasing number of second applications, that is, applications from Networks applying for a further round of funding. Second applications are welcomed by the Fund, though more rigorously assessed

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[25] Applications are often unsuccessful for several reasons and as a result percentages for reasons sum to more than 100.

to ensure that they include some development of the initial activity and are not simply a further continuation of established activity. This could be in terms of activity offered. All are required to reach a wider or different audience than before. The intention is to ensure that Networks do not become dependent on Ageing Better and are encouraged to be sustainable.

We identified 27 applications that were from Networks who had previously received Ageing Better in Birmingham funding. Of these, only nine were successful – a success rate of 33 per cent, which is much lower than for the programme as a whole. 14 of the 18 unsuccessful applications were rejected because they were for a continuation of existing activities without any development or extension to new participants. We can draw a number of conclusions from this. If networks are seeking continuation funding it suggests that they have not become sustainable. However, it may also suggest that six months is not sufficiently long to become self-sustaining. The programme team should consider how they can better support Networks to consider sustainability and how to achieve it. This also points to the need for more effective communication to Leads about the requirements for second applications.

It appears some applications are still being rejected for technical reasons (for example, the funding would financially benefit the Network Lead), despite being submitted via Network Enablers. This suggests that there may be a reluctance from Enablers to decline submissions themselves and pass the decision to the Fund panel. This view was implicit in some of the Enabler interviews. Being able to rule out applications prior to panel meetings would increase the amount of time for discussion of other applications and potentially save Network's wasted energy in submitting un-fundable bids.

06. Participant contributions to the programme

In this chapter we explore the different ways that participants are contributing to programme delivery, including the role of the Age of Experience group.

Contributing to Networks

There is a large body of evidence on the benefits that people derive from voluntarily helping others. [26] Casiday et al, (2008) as cited Jones et al, (2016) report that the relationship between making a positive contribution and improvements in health and wellbeing is stronger with older people than compared to younger people.

Analysis of CMF data suggests that more people are getting involved in the co-design of the programme, although the increases are not large. Increases between entry and follow-up are seen in the proportion of those sharing ideas to help plan a new activity (35 per cent to 40 per cent), deciding how an activity will be delivered (20 per cent to 23 per cent) and helping to run an activity for other people (17 per cent to 18 per cent, n=554). There is no significant change for males from entry to follow-up but increases for females in each of the three activities above.

An increase in sharing ideas is seen for all age groups. There has also been an increase in deciding how an activity will be delivered for the 50-64 and for 65-79 age groups, with an increase in helping to run activities for others among the 65-79 group. There has been an increase in both white and BAME groups sharing ideas, and both groups have also seen an increase in the proportion that are involved in deciding how an activity will be delivered.

Participant involvement is a key criteria for funding Networks and is encouraged by Enablers and Network Leads. We found few instances where Networks were fully co-produced with beneficiaries. The large proportion of Networks based on established groups may partly account for this, as opportunities to shape all aspects the activity can be limited. Many participants appear content to be consulted. The following quote provides a good example of a Network Lead involving participants in deciding on activities and keeping them fully informed about the funding application.

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[26] Jones, D., Young, A. Reeder, N (2016) The Benefits of making a contribution to your community in later life. Centre for Ageing Better. https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-09/Community%20contributions%20evidence%20review%20v2.pdf

For the next funding, they've decided where they wanted to go for the activities. They've picked out what they want to eat, you know, and again what I do is I put all the stuff I knew they wanted and ran the form through them and actually shared each bit of the form, explained how much we'd ask for, It's important they know what's going on

Network Lead

Many older participants are happy to contribute to the running of Networks without wanting to take a leading role. The following is not untypical of many participants' views.

I'm not an organiser to be honest. If I get to a group and they need help, I'll help out. I don't mind helping out, but I wouldn't start a group or anything like that. I've been asked several times to start a Slimming World group, but I'm just not interested. Its work, and I retired thirteen years ago.

Male Participant

As such, the CMF figures may hide the true extent of participant's involvement. We encountered numerous instances during our qualitative fieldwork where participants played important roles in the success of Networks but did not consider what they did to be 'volunteering', rather viewing this as 'helping out' or 'sharing knowledge'.

As well as organising Network activities and more informal contributions, we identified a third way in which some participants benefit from volunteering. In a few Networks, including the case study described below, older people are not the target beneficiary for the group, but play an important role in formally volunteering their support to help others – who may or may not also be older people. Older volunteers benefit from developing feelings of satisfaction and purpose and develop social connections with other volunteers and beneficiaries. These types of activities may also be particularly appealing to those people who are unlikely to want to join social or activity-focused Networks specifically designed to provide social interaction for older people.

The Journey MCC Asylum Seeker's Support Group is an intergenerational group that meets at the LGBT Centre in Birmingham. The Group received Ageing Better funding as part of the LBGT Hub. The group, organised by older people in cooperation with members of the group has been established for a number of years and the funding allowed them to run a lunch club for all ages. While most beneficiaries are under 50 years of age, a small number are over 50.

The support group provides a lifeline for many members. The group offers friendship and advice for asylum seekers who are in the UK due to being LBGT. They are often not 'out' within their own communities in the UK.

The group attracts a number of older volunteers, who befriend asylum seekers and offer them support, for example accompanying them to court dates. The experience of volunteering for the Network has increased their legal knowledge and in some cases their ability to use technology, such as smart phones or laptops. The older volunteers particularly benefit from feeling that they are being useful to someone in need, as well as benefiting from the social interaction of befriending others. Although not the group's primary purpose, it is a successful way of expanding older people's social interaction.

Age of Experience group

As with the Ageing Better Fund, we have observed many improvements in the way the Age of Experience group is running since our last report. It has grown in membership to 27 members (from 22 as stated in our Year one report). Membership remains broadly a 60/40 split between women and men. While members are still predominantly white (British, Irish, other) the group has increased its representation from Black and minority ethnic members which now make up about a quarter of the total membership.

As Ageing Better in Birmingham has developed it has expanded the range of opportunities for older people to contribute. In year two for instance the programme has undertaken a considerable amount of commissioning, for example with regard to local action plans – consequently there have been many opportunities for Age of Experience members to become involved in the procurement process. As the marketing programme has rolled out there have also been an increasing amount of media opportunities for them to become involved in. There have also been instances where involvement opportunities are not Ageing better focused – for example members have assisted researchers at Birmingham University and engaged with young people participating in the National Citizen Service. Across the programme there are currently approximately 20 opportunities each month. The availability of opportunities is dependent on the needs of the Ageing Better programme and consequently there are periods where there are a considerable number of opportunities for Age of Experience members.

It is positive to note that a greater proportion of members were engaging with the more intensive co-production and procurement opportunities being offered than we found last year. With the right support most people should be able to take part in at least some of the opportunities. This suggests that more individuals feel equipped to make a positive contribution.

We have found considerable improvement in planning and preparation for this group. The level of understanding about the role and purpose of the group among members has also increased. This is likely due to the improved induction process. New members are introduced to the BVSC programme team and potential opportunities that they may wish to take up are discussed. Communication between the programme team and the Age of Experience members has also increased. Members have co-produced an electronic newsletter that is circulated on a regular basis and that provides project updates, beneficiary testimonies and potential engagement opportunities for members. This is viewed positively by recipients.

Network Enablers recruit, select and support group members and this generally works well. The recruitment target of three new members per Hub per year can be challenging. In some instances this may be because Enablers are targeting active citizens who are already busy running Networks and/or other voluntary activities and do not wish to also contribute to the wider programme. If this is the case then Network Enablers should consider broadening the offer to a wider audience.

More concerning, two Enablers indicated that they found it difficult to 'sell the benefit' of membership of the group. In one instance this was because the Enabler was not sure what these benefits are. There may be merit in providing further guidance to Enablers and/or producing promotional material setting out the role and benefits of contributing for group members. This could include examples of the variety of ways that people can contribute. This would also potentially help to address preconceptions held by some older people that the opportunities available through the group are 'managerial' type roles.

Impact of Age of Experience

There are considerable benefits arising from the involvement of older people in the Ageing Better programme. For the programme itself, staff indicate that being able to draw on the expert's own experiences and local knowledge has provided a greater understanding of viability of initiatives, particularly (but not exclusively) during fund panel sessions. Programme staff reported that co-production with experts has helped to target marketing activities and led to increased engagement from their peers.

Members have played key roles in marketing and promotion of the Ageing Better programme, which has resulted in outputs including local newspaper and radio coverage and bus advertising campaign. Being able to draw on experts' lived experiences can potentially be a powerful tool for promoting the Programme. Done with care it can provide a unique and first-hand perspective for the target audience.

Age of Experience group members valued the opportunity to be able to give something back to the programme, particularly for those that had benefited from funding for their Network. Members indicated that their participation helped to bring about a sense of purpose and value and, in some instances, counteract the negative perceptions they had of ageing. Most valued the social aspect of involvement and regularly cited being able to meet new people and make new friends as key benefits from membership of the group.

07. Ageing Better in Birmingham – the wider picture

In this Chapter we bring together insight provided by external stakeholders involved with the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. This includes their perceptions of the programme as well as an understanding of how it fits within the broader landscape.

Current situation in Birmingham

The Ageing Better in Birmingham programme is being delivered during a period of substantial change across Birmingham. Birmingham City Council has experienced considerable cuts in overall budgets and consequently the voluntary and community sector have been hit hard by reductions in programme funding. There has also been considerable change across the health landscape. Until recently, there were three Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) responsible for planning and commissioning healthcare services across the city. Since April 2018 they have merged to become NHS Birmingham and Solihull CCG, the largest CCG in England.

The effects of budget reductions across Birmingham are considerable. For the Council the priority is on delivering targeted statutory services. There is a view that is shared across parts of the Council that there is a need for services to be developed that 'help people help themselves' with the Council playing a facilitative rather than delivery role. Insight work carried out on behalf of the Council identified that local areas (wards) where there is a weaker community infrastructure have more contact with specialist services and / or coming into contact with these services at an earlier point of need.

The move to a facilitative role is reflected in the Council's adopting the 'Three conversations' model.[27] This model aims to create a new relationship between professionals and people who need support, and provides a graded process of conversations aimed at helping people lead independent lives, with traditional support packages offered only when their other options have been exhausted.

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[27] https://www.scie.org.uk/future-of-care/asset-based-places/case-studies/three-conversations

The focus on preventive strategies is also echoed in the Neighbourhood Networks programme being rolled out for older people in Birmingham on behalf of Birmingham City Council. This is a community based programme to enable older people to live independently and pro-actively participate within their own communities with programme staff providing services that reduce social isolation and opportunities for volunteering.

For the VCS, there is a perception that it has been hit hard and is increasingly looking to replace lost funding from other sources. While some have embraced a culture shift of 'doing things differently', this is not yet widespread across the sector. This may be a further factor in explaining why the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme is receiving such a high proportion of applications from established groups and organisations.

Perception of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme

The AB programme is seen by the local stakeholders we spoke to as a positive programme, and one that has been required. The programme is currently overachieving in terms of targets set by the Big Lottery Fund. It is felt that it offers something not currently offered and is innovative in its approach.

> *[We asked ourselves] how [can the AB programme] do something that was different and that would make a lasting difference, something that was not already being done before. I still think that that is really what is still happening in AB, there is a desire to shape something new and different and to try not to duplicate and do the stuff that is being commissioned or paid for in another way.*
>
> **Stakeholder**

It is considered a timely programme, and one that is influencing Council thinking and direction, as seen in the introduction of the Neighbourhood Networks programme. Most felt that the programme needed to support the growth of community infrastructure as well as addressing isolation and loneliness amongst older people. There was a consensus that the programme is currently doing considerably better at the latter, and has had a limited impact (so far) on supporting the growth of a grass roots sustainable infrastructure. This is in line with our findings on the types of Networks being supported, as reported in Chapter 3.

The extent to which the programme is felt to be using an asset based community development (ABCD) approach is mixed. Most felt that the programme was not delivering 'true' ABCD – mainly as a true ABCD approach requires time and is a much slower process, working at the pace of the individual. Delivering community development is challenging - empowering individuals within a community to 'take the lead' requires effective enablement. This is different to what Network Enablers are currently providing; one stakeholder described them as facilitators rather than enablers. ABCD involves challenging people's perceptions and to work differently.

> *We've had a number of book clubs saying 'we want to hire a hall.' Why? If I went to the library and someone picked up the same book as me and I said, 'why don't we meet up and have a conversation about it?' I don't need a hall to do that. It's about getting people to think differently. That they're not dependent. However, there is a risk attached to that'*
> **Stakeholder**

However, it should be noted that there was not necessarily a common view on what ABCD is and how it can be practically be implemented. Most felt that there may be an inherent tension between an ABCD approach and the perceived requirement to deliver outputs for the funder.

> *...as much as [Big Lottery Fund] want to talk about outcomes, and everyone talks about outcomes, actually, when it comes down to it, the reality is that what most people depend on to look at the success of the programme are outputs*
> **Stakeholder**

It was encouraging to note that stakeholders felt that BVSC should consider how the programme could deliver more of an ABCD approach. Some indicated that Network Enablers need to be resourced sufficiently to give them the time and skills to focus on grass roots community development. For some, the availability of funding for Networks has created a perception that the programme is primarily a source of funding for activity and one that, while welcome, could potentially be in danger of becoming 'another fixed term grant funding initiative'. For some this is at odds with true community development, where funds are offered only after identification of needs and asset-based solutions.

Most recognised that achieving ABCD is hugely challenging. They also echoed our findings that many active-citizens would benefit from being able to draw on administrative support, typically provided by a voluntary or community organisation. Some felt that there may be merit in introducing a gradual phasing out of the Network funding to increase their future sustainability. It was recognised that this may mean some Networks end earlier than expected, however this would be offset by those remaining that would be on a stronger and more sustainable footing.

What does success look like?

Stakeholders were asked to describe what a successful Ageing Better in Birmingham programme would look like in 2021. All felt that success would include greater coverage of Networks across Birmingham to include those areas of the city with little existing community and voluntary infrastructure. . Networks would be self-sustaining and helping to address loneliness and social isolation amongst older people.

Some felt that success could include participants acting as 'change makers' within their own community. By this we mean someone that wishes to make a change and then gathers knowledge and resources to make that change happen. Consideration should be given as to

how the programme could help support this and how the evaluation might capture progress.

Stakeholders also suggested that success should be measured against demonstrable changes in policy and / or investment. This could include an increased prioritisation of approaches that enable people to become less dependent on 'the system' and that enable communities to develop resilience. According to stakeholders, Ageing Better in Birmingham is already influencing the Council's thinking. The programme itself is seen by stakeholders as a learning resource through which the Council is developing expertise, insight and learning. The Ageing Better Programme Director is considered to have worked effectively to develop relationships and is well placed to ensure that learning is shared through formal and informal routes within several council departments.

08. Conclusions and recommendations

In this Chapter we summarise key findings and make recommendations for consideration by the Ageing Better Programme Team

Ageing Better in Birmingham has overachieved in meeting the targets agreed with Big Lottery Fund. It is successfully engaging ethnically and age diverse participants and older adults who are the most-lonely. After engagement with the programme, there is a notable reduction in those who say they are most lonely.

These achievements have been primarily achieved by working through established voluntary and community groups. Most funded Networks appear to be either existing community groups or affiliated to such a group. In this report we sought to explore whether this should be a concern given the programme's ambition to create a new movement of community action and a lasting infrastructure of Networks.

Working through established organisations has a number of benefits, providing an efficient way for Enablers to make contact with active citizens and promote the programme. However, working through established groups is not always effective in those areas where the voluntary and community sector is less well developed. There is also a risk of creating dependency on the Fund from groups seeking to replace of supplement funding from other sources that has been diminishing over recent years.

It is perhaps more useful to differentiate not just between new and established groups but to consider the extent to which Networks have access to expertise and support – often provided by voluntary and community organisations. This can be particularly important for grass-roots or beneficiary-led Networks. It will be useful to explore the extent to which local action plans designed to build community capacity are effective in doing so.

Recommendation: The evaluation in future years should assess the extent to which the programme helps to inspire more people to take an active role in their communities.

The quantitative data suggests less change in enhancing participants' social contacts. This is something that should be explored further, but may be related to working through groups with established memberships. We have not been able engage sufficient wholly new Networks in the evaluation to determine whether they are more likely to be effective at reaching those at risk of social isolation. It is important to remember that the programme has an important role to play in preventing isolation as well as addressing it. In this regard,

the quality and sustainability of the activities is as important as creating opportunities for social interaction in the first place.

Recommendation: The evaluation should investigate further the impact of the programme on social contact and the reasons why less change is seen on this indicator.

The enthusiasm, personalities and hard work of Network Leads play an important role in making a successful Network. But participants are also crucial in creating the welcoming, personalised and friendly environment that encourages new members to attend and then keeps them coming. Networks that involve physical activity appear to be associated with greater wellbeing gains for participants.

Recommendations: The programme team should encourage Networks to think about how physical activity could be incorporated. The evaluation should carry out further analysis on associations between activity types and outcomes.

Most participants are women, and while both men and women have similar levels of loneliness at the baseline, women appear to benefit more through increased reductions in loneliness. Far more Networks target women or have a traditional female focus than target men. It is important that Networks effectively engage men to ensure they are able to benefit too. Activity rather than social-focused Networks may be more appealing to men, particularly activities that are not designed or promoted as being targeted at reducing social-isolation among older people.

Recommendations: Network Enablers should target organisations and places that are popular with men in order to promote the programme. Promising approaches to engaging men should be tested and learning and case studies widely communicated. Enablers and the Fund should also look to support activity-focused Networks offering the skills and activities that appeal to older men.

Changes to the Ageing Better Fund have been positive and the decision-making process more streamlined. Applicants generally find applying for the funding straightforward, although the support of Network Enablers is vital in this – particularly for less experienced Leads. The differential success rates between Hubs are becoming less stark. Some applications that do not meet technical requirements are still being presented to the Panel.

Recommendations: Ensure that Network Enablers feel empowered and confident to decline applications that do not meet technical requirements. This may require additional support and training.

As the programme progresses, the volume of second applications is likely to increase. Many of these appear to fail because they are merely continuations of the original activity.

Recommendations: Network Enablers and the programme team should ensure the requirements for second applications are clearly communicated, and promote ideas for how activities could be developed, particularly with a view to encouraging sustainability. An alternative is to only fund Networks once, however, this may further constrain the ability of Networks to become sustainable. Many Network activities require ongoing funding and raising this can be a challenge for many. Asking for modest, voluntary contributions to costs can be effective, but is not appropriate for all Networks. Networks with links to, and support from, voluntary sector organisations may be better equipped to source other grant funding.

Recommendations: The programme team should consider how they can better support Networks to build sustainability, for example through ideas and examples of effective fundraising. The programme should also encourage potential Networks to think about how they could make a difference to social isolation without the need for ongoing funding.

The Age of Experience group has also improved since our last observation. Membership has grown and is more diverse. Members also feel more connected to the programme and there is evidence of positive contributions they are making to the design and delivery of Ageing Better in Birmingham. Some Enablers find recruitment challenging and were not always able to articulate the benefits of participation to potential participants.

Recommendations: The programme team may wish to spend some time with Enablers, particularly those newer in post, communicating the benefits of the Age of Experience group, for both members and the programme. Case studies and testimonials from members should also be used to help with recruitment of new members.

The Age of Experience group is only one way in which older adults contribute to the programme, and there has been a small increase in people getting involved in sharing ideas and deciding how activities should be run. But these statistics may underestimate the role of participants, as the small and informal contributions to effective Networks outlined above may be overlooked. Many older people do not wish to take on the responsibility of organising Networks, but are often pleased to help out in smaller, more informal ways. They benefit from this by building a sense of purpose and value – important in wellbeing and feeling part of a community.

Ageing Better in Birmingham fits well with the current direction of thinking on the provision of services in Birmingham more broadly. It is seen by stakeholders as timely, innovative and influential. However, it is also questionable whether the programme is achieving its community development ambitions. Output targets combined with the established delivery model does not encourage this approach. As the programme approaches the half-way mark there is value in the programme team and stakeholders

considering if and how to reposition the programme with a greater focus on community development.

Recommendation: The programme team should consider how the role of Network Enablers may need to be adjusted to focus on community development. This is likely to require a different skill-set to deliver asset based community development. Review the measures of success and how they are used so that sustainable community development rather than funding of Networks is incentivised. Reassess the way the programme and in particular the role of the Ageing Better Fund is marketed.