Increasing social networks and making friends in Later Life

Connect Hackney Key Messages

Where has this learning come from? The recommendations below come from over 25 Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) projects funded by Connect Hackney[1] which work with socially isolated older people in Hackney. Our learning is drawn from the experiences of older people, project staff and formal evidence from the evaluation of Connect Hackney projects by the University of East London.

How comprehensive are these recommendations? This document is focused on the particular issues that our projects have faced and the solutions they have developed. It reflects our current learning and will be added to as the programme progresses.

1. The VCS should be valued for its role in providing older people with the opportunity to make friends and increase social networks, even where this is not the intended aim of a project or organisation.

- Attending VCS projects is a key way that older people make friends and meet new people
- Being noticed and remembered by staff and participants at VCS activities can significantly benefit someone experiencing isolation and/or loneliness
- Regular and ongoing activities can enable people to become familiar with each other and develop social ties
- Subsidised lunch clubs where food is made affordable and where older people are welcomed are highly valued amidst the proliferation of more expensive bars and cafes

2. Home visits and 1-1 support are key for older people experiencing isolation

- Isolated older people told us they valued the 1-1 support provided by staff who were able to really listen to them and reported that this interaction helped them 'feel human again'
- Isolated older people valued staff who were 'friendly', 'approachable', 'non-judgemental' and 'supportive'. They also responded well to staff who had a 'calm' approach with no pressure and who understood the time it may take for them to be ready to join a group activity
- For some participants VCS staff had the role of 'professional friends' who provided support, meaning that other friendships weren't overburdened and thus were made more sustainable

- Home visits enable projects to reach people not ready to access community venues and group activities and support them to re-engage with the world at their own pace

3. VCS projects can be designed to maximise social contact between participants

- Providing time and space to socialise before, during or after an activity can enable attendees to get to know each other and potentially form bonds and friendships
- Projects based around a specific topic e.g. music, crafts, sociology can enable people to bond with others through a shared interest
- Social connections within the lifetime of a project could be further strengthened through a memorable social experience e.g. a group trip to a local museum, allowing participants to bond outside of the usual activity
- Project plans and budgets should include time for staff to call people to encourage them to attend and for them to follow up with absent participants
- Projects can be designed to include follow up sessions to help maintain social connections after the project has ended, this could include using social network technology e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook (where relevant digital skills and access to digital technology allow for this)

4. The approach of staff is key to retaining participants and encouraging friendships

- Warm greetings, introductions and name tags can help people get to know each other and create a friendly atmosphere
- Delivering projects in an informal, relaxed, open, and respectful atmosphere can support