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What features of projects have had the most success in reducing social isolation and loneliness amongst older people living in Hackney? What methods have been the most successful in reaching, engaging and retaining older people in sustained activities?

Addressing social isolation and loneliness amongst older people before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: in-depth report on projects for men, people with learning disabilities, ethnically diverse groups, and complex needs

HOW TO TARGET YOUR SERVICES - SUMMARY REPORT

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Summary

Background

The 'Connect Hackney' programme is addressing social isolation and loneliness for people aged 50 and over. It is part of the 'Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better' programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund in 14 areas in England. A total of 50 community-based projects have been commissioned in two Phases (Phase 1 and 2)¹. Commissioned projects in Phase 2 include those targeting specific groups of older people not easily reached by other projects within the programme: men, those with learning disabilities, ethnically diverse groups and those with complex needs. This report shares learning about these targeted projects from the ongoing local evaluation of the overall Connect Hackney programme and aims to inform commissioners and policy makers with a remit to tackle social isolation and loneliness and promote health and wellbeing amongst older people.

Aims and methods

This report presents qualitative findings which contribute to addressing 'test and learn' questions on the success of the targeted projects in relation to reducing social isolation and loneliness and on the reach, engagement and retention of participants within these projects *prior to the COVID-19 pandemic*. The research also explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the targeted projects and their participants. Qualitative interviews were undertaken with 17 project providers and 35 project participants capturing perspectives from across the targeted themes. All interviews were conducted via video-conferencing software or via telephone during the COVID-19 pandemic between May and October 2020.

Findings

Project reach

- Projects used a **combination of strategies** to reach potential participants, but **some strategies** or combination of strategies **were reported to be more effective than others** and these differed according to the groups targeted by the projects.
 - **Men:** referrals from other organisations and outreach to directly engage with potential participants (e.g. on the street or in venues frequented by the target group of interest).
 - **Older people with learning disabilities:** referrals were the most effective strategy as opportunities to connect directly with the target group were limited by the lack of spaces for this group to come together. Projects struggled to recruit participants and had to address issues associated with transport, location and the cooperation of carers.
 - **Ethnically diverse groups:** word of mouth was the most effective strategy reflecting that these organisations were deeply embedded and trusted within the communities that they served.
 - **Complex needs:** referrals from other organisations and outreach to directly engage with potential participants (e.g. through door knocking, or in venues frequented by the target group of interest).

¹ 26 projects were commissioned in Phase 1 (2015-2018) and 24 projects in Phase 2 (2018-2022).

Project engagement and retention

- Across projects, ***the offer to connect with others through meaningful activities was an important driver of initial engagement and ongoing retention***. What constituted meaningful activities varied across the different target groups:
 - ***Men***: practical activities with a clear purpose (e.g. IT club, dominoes club, boat trips).
 - ***Older people with learning disabilities***: a range of activities which offered choice (e.g. IT skills, photography, making jam, planting and harvesting vegetables).
 - ***Ethnically diverse groups***: activities to connect with others who shared the same language and cultural heritage (e.g. poetry, cookery, dance).
 - ***Complex needs***: creative and physical activities that offered opportunities to achieve new goals, be independent and establish new routines (e.g. pottery, wallpaper design, lawn bowls).

Perceived project impact

- Across the targeted project themes, ***common types of participant benefits*** were reported by participant and provider interviewees (***new social connections and friendships, improved wellbeing and mental health***). ***The main benefits varied by project, reflecting the different circumstances and needs of participants within projects***. For example, new social relationships and improvements in wellbeing were reported across all the targeted themes, but descriptions of new social relationships were especially strong for the ethnically diverse projects, suggesting social connections were a primary motivation for joining these projects.
- Common underlying mechanisms which led to these benefits across projects were: ***regular participation in meaningful activity; undertaking activities together either individually in a shared space or through working towards a common goal; the qualities and skills of project staff and project activities as a bridge to activities outside the project***. The exact nature of these mechanisms differed across the targeted themes.
 - ***Men***: sharing interests and expertise with others in a practical way; a dedicated safe space to come together regularly over time with a skilled facilitator for organisational support; and group outings to extend opportunities for social connections and friendships to develop further.
 - ***People with learning disabilities***: ability to choose from a wide range of activities; enabling participants to exercise control and take part in decision-making; and active facilitation to support the development of positive relationships between participants.
 - ***Ethnically diverse groups***: taking part in activities to celebrate a shared cultural heritage; having a safe space in which to do this; and group outings and exhibitions to engage with a range of different communities.
 - ***Complex needs***: taking part in creative and physical activities led by skilled facilitators with specialist expertise; sharing the experience with others in a similar situation; and group performances and outings to extend participation in activities outside of the projects.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic

- **Project providers re-orientated their workloads in three ways to: (i) support participants' immediate needs; (ii) adapt and re-start group activities remotely and (iii) develop 'dual' delivery models to include in person as well as remote delivery.** Project staff were committed to achieving this but recognised the enormity of the task. The provision of the one-to-one support by project staff grew, whilst group activities decreased.
- **Many projects were able to re-start group activities remotely** either **within structured group-based remote sessions** (e.g. an online exercise class) or **through informal group connections** (e.g. chat, sharing pictures and videos via smartphones). The ability to switch to remote delivery at all, and the speed at which this was done, depended on several factors including the level of digital skills among participants and providers and whether projects included a digital component prior to lockdown.
- **Projects acted as an anchor for participants in the pandemic.** Project staff were someone familiar to turn to for help, supported participants to adapt their routines and develop new ones, and facilitated access to a social network for mutual support.
- **Some participants were able to access remote activities but this depended on their digital skills (or support to develop these), access to equipment and Wi-Fi, and preference for remote engagement.** Some interviewees who did not want to engage with the digital world prior to the pandemic reported they were motivated to do so during lockdown. Participants mostly enjoyed reconnecting with project activities via remote platforms but all participants were **keen to get back to 'in-person' contact.** Those who were able to experience in-person activities were overjoyed when they were re-introduced at the end of the first national lockdown.
- **Co-production practice was still evident across project themes** albeit in less formal ways compared to before the pandemic. Maintaining co-production was dependant on the extent to which project staff had to focus on supporting the immediate needs of participants and the level to which co-production had been embedded in the project prior to the pandemic.

Conclusion

The Connect Hackney programme for people aged 50 and over is a community-based approach to addressing social isolation and loneliness and its adverse consequences for health and wellbeing. The projects which targeted men, people with learning disabilities, ethnically diverse groups and those with complex needs offered a diverse range of group activities and practical and emotional support for individuals. The findings support the continuation of targeted interventions to reduce loneliness and social isolation and improve wellbeing among older people.

Qualitative interviews with providers and participants identified new friendships and improved wellbeing for project participants. The targeted projects brought together people with shared experiences (celebrating commonalities in culture, background, circumstances)

and this was a key element that enabled participants to flourish. Exploration of the ways in which these perceived benefits were achieved suggest a number of underlying features (e.g. regular participation in meaningful activities, the qualities and skills of project staff); which need to be adapted for particular groups and personal circumstances. Findings on reach, engagement and retention similarly suggest ways in which generic strategies can be combined and optimised for specific groups. Findings on the impact of COVID-19 have documented the ways in which project staff and participants have responded and highlighted the vital new roles (e.g. supporting immediate needs) and continued roles (e.g. ensuring that participants can support each other remotely) projects have played.



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