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Promoting Mental Health and Well-being in Later Life

A guide for commissioners of older people's services

*Policy in
practice*





This booklet offers commissioners an easy guide to services that promote good mental health and well-being in later life. It describes a broad range of examples of low-cost, high-impact services from around the regions, with a brief service description and contact details for each service.

It offers clear and simple ideas for services that meet older people's needs and aspirations and the corresponding benefits.

Service-user quotations bring to life ways in which mental health policy can be translated into positive, practical action.

The guide will be a useful resource when planning preventive and personalised services for older people and will strengthen the commissioner's 'toolbox' of information.

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Autumn 2010

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Contents

Section 1	2
Introduction	3
Practical services – why are they important?	4
Current policy environment	6
Summary	6
Acknowledgements	7
Section 2	8
Service examples	9
Keeping fit and well	10
– Nordic walking	11
– Cycling: ‘Easy Rider’ project	12
– T’ai chi classes	13
– ‘Chill Out and Relax’ project	14
Relationships and opportunities to contribute	16
– Telephone befriending service	17
– Park Street Centre	18
– ‘Good Companions’ project	19
– ‘Good Neighbours’ scheme	20
Reaching excluded groups	21
– Asian Elders Information and Advice	22
– ‘Peace of Mind’ Bangladeshi Mental Health Promotion project	23
– ‘Men in Sheds’	24
– ‘Just for Men’ project	25
– ‘Opening Doors’ Central London project	26
Tackling depression and reducing isolation	27
– Walking groups	28
– Bereavement support service	29
– ‘Circle of Friends’ telephone conferencing scheme	30
– Mental health advocacy project	31

Section 1



Introduction

Our population is ageing. Demographic changes will result in dramatic increases in the numbers of older people in the UK over the next decades.

Compared to previous generations, many older people¹ now experience a long period of good health and well-being and continue to be active, contributing members of society.

The contributions that people make in later life as workers, which we will all increasingly rely on, are estimated at £230 billion² per year – about a quarter of the total economy. Older people's unpaid contributions as volunteers, carers and grandparents are valued at £270 billion³ per year – all causes for celebration.

In order to maximise people's opportunities to make these contributions in later life, sometimes we need to step in with support or services. This is especially true at times of transition, such as going into or leaving hospital and during times of bereavement and retirement.

These are times when our resilience can be challenged and often a small amount of input can make a huge difference to our ability to cope.

Promoting good mental health and well-being in later life benefits the whole of society by maintaining older people's social and economic contributions, minimising the cost of care and improving quality of life.

¹ Older people refers to those aged 50+

² Age Concern England (2006)

³ Meadows, P. and Volterra Consulting (2004). This figure estimated using CPI to account for inflation over the period.

Practical services – why are they important?

The UK Inquiry into Mental Health and Well-being in Later Life⁴ shows that there are very high returns to be made on small investments in preventive services. The Partnership for Older People Projects (POPPs) also echoes these themes. The final evaluation of POPPs shows that commissioners can be confident of the cost effectiveness of projects focused on well-being and delivered through practical help.⁵

The UK Inquiry into *Mental Health and Well-being in Later Life* identified five themes that older people said were important to their mental health and well-being:

- **Discrimination** – Age discrimination, both in service provision and in wider society, was seen as the biggest barrier to mental health and well-being in later life.
- **Participation** – Older people need to be able to participate in economic, civic, social, cultural and political life.
- **Relationships** – Having friends, family and neighbours are all important, as is feeling part of a wider community.
- **Health** – Good physical and mental health and having access to high-quality care services is key.
- **Income** – Older people say that they want to have enough money, but view the ability to provide for others and feel part of society as more important.

When these five themes are congruent, they enable people to stay well and experience fulfilment in their lives. We need to ensure that services are readily available at times of life transition, such as retirement, bereavement, illness and hospitalisation. These are times when we know that extra support can make a huge difference in helping a person to maintain their independence and to cope.

This guide offers commissioners a ‘menu’ of low-cost, high-impact services that respond to older people’s aspirations and tap into the resources an ageing society offers. All of the services mentioned here (and many others) are offered by local Age UKs and Age Concerns. They are preventive, upstream and require only relatively small amounts of funding. Many services involve the use of volunteers whose added financial value contributes to low service cost.

The examples described here reflect how close working and innovative partnerships with a variety of statutory and non-statutory partners can enable these crucial services to continue to be delivered.

⁴ Age Concern England and the Mental Health Foundation launched a UK Inquiry into Mental Health and Well-being in Later Life in late 2003 because of a shared concern that mental health in later life is a much neglected area. The inquiry’s first report was Promoting Mental Health and Well-being in Later Life. Published in 2006, it drew on evidence gathered from over 1,000 older people and nearly 200 organisations and professionals.

⁵ *National Evaluation of Partnerships for Older People Projects*. Executive Summary. PSSRU.



Current policy environment

The NHS White Paper has announced plans to give local authorities responsibility for public health. This new policy, as well as the development of Big Society, offers opportunities as well as challenges to providers and commissioners. Commissioners need to know which services will help keep people out of hospital, offer value for money and provide more for less with proven benefits. Services need to be personalised, local and user-focused.

The services described in this guide are known to work well and meet older people's needs and aspirations for their lives. They echo current mental health and well-being policies which have a life-course approach and which aspire to a better quality of life for older people.

Summary

The services in this booklet provide commissioners with value for money and ensure that hospital admission and costly medical interventions are reduced by preventing crises.

Service examples have been placed under four headings. In fact, there are many cross-overs reported in terms of outcomes for older people across all the headings. A typical example is an Age Concern keep-fit exercise class which, as well as being beneficial in itself, became an important friendship group for the participants. After the classes ended, participants requested more opportunities where they could continue to meet, with a little support. The class was highly valued for the opportunity it presented to make friends and be able to continue to meet with them on a regular basis. Examples such as these provide compelling evidence of the underlying thread running through these themes – the need to have fulfilling relationships, to contribute and to connect with others.

These services, offered in a timely way, provide older people with opportunities and support that make life-changing differences and enable the ongoing and invaluable contribution of older people at all levels of society.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to those local Age UKs and Age Concerns who have shared their service examples to illustrate key themes in this booklet.

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This booklet and the current series of regional workshops – *‘Mental Health and Well-being in Later Life: Practical delivery solutions’* – bringing commissioners and providers together to share good practice around the provision of these services, are funded by the Department of Health as part of the Third Sector Strategic Partner Programme.

Section 2



Service examples



Keeping fit and well

1. Nordic walking – Age Concern Surrey
2. Cycling – Age Concern Northamptonshire
3. T'ai chi – Age Concern Bath and North East Somerset
4. Exercise classes – Age Concern Chandlers Ford

Relationships and opportunities to contribute

5. Telephone befriending – Age Concern North Yorkshire
6. Daytime opportunities – Age UK Lincoln
7. Befriending – Age Concern Durham
8. Home support – Age Concern Isle of Wight

Reaching excluded groups

9. Asian Elders Information and Advice – Age Concern Coventry
10. Bangladeshi mental health promotion – Age Concern Tower Hamlets
11. Daytime opportunities for men – Age Concern Cheshire
12. Exercise classes for men – Age Concern Chandlers Ford
13. OLGBT befriending – Age Concern Camden

Tackling depression and reducing isolation

14. Walking – Age Concern Bath and North East Somerset
15. Bereavement support – Age Concern Gateshead
16. Telephone conferencing – Age Concern Isle of Wight
17. Mental health advocacy – Age UK Cambridgeshire

Keeping fit and well

Exercise can help the prevention of and recovery from depression. Mood and affect have been shown to be improved by as little as single bouts of exercise of less than ten minutes⁶ per day. The implication of this finding is that even small changes in activity levels of sedentary older people will enhance well-being. In England, only 17 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women between the ages of 65 and 74 meet the recommended levels of physical activity.

Physical activity helps to prevent cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity. Strength training can improve muscle strength, which is important for daily living, such as getting up from a chair or walking, and can make a huge difference in preventing falls and their consequences.

The following services offer a range of exercises from the very gentle to the more challenging – and participants are supported to participate and achieve the most benefit they can regardless of their condition.



⁶ 'Five Ways to Well-being'. New Economics Foundation.

Nordic walking – Age Concern Surrey

‘I am 75, reliant on medication for life and enjoyed walking with the support of the poles.’

‘I learnt a new skill. It’s a good idea for keeping fit and less boring than the gym.’

Age Concern Surrey and the PCT Falls Prevention Board closely collaborate on falls prevention work. Age Concern Surrey’s Nordic walking programmes are promoted at the board’s events around the county. The PCT has mapped all suitable exercise classes in the county on its website and has also produced a leaflet for use in sheltered accommodation, or by individuals living alone, with some simple exercises. Age Concern Surrey has offered 27 courses to date across 15 locations in Surrey and Hampshire. Seventy per cent of attendees are women, and 36 per cent are aged between 65 and 75. Participants say that they enjoy the fresh air and company.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Helps older people to sleep better.
- Improves joint movement.
- Improves ordinary walking.
- Enables older people to feel fitter and breathe better.
- Encourages better posture.
- Improves well-being.

How is the service delivered?

There are economies of scale using one hub and administration for 27 courses and managing a database of over 600 names (with 200 on the waiting list). This exercise can easily be organised alongside ordinary walks and cycle ride programmes. It can also be adapted to specific groups based on health profile, ethnicity and age groups, so is very inclusive. Virtually all participants describe themselves as in ‘good health’ or ‘very good’ health. This is not a clinical measure as many have chronic conditions – a variety of joint problems, back problems, arthritis, stiffness, high blood pressure, asthma which may impact on their lives – but participants’ mindset is that they are in ‘good health’.

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Cycling: ‘Easy Rider’ project – Age Concern Northamptonshire

‘I joined this project in July 2008 as someone returning to cycling after a gap of 34 years. They provided high-quality instruction and support and encouragement at every step of the way. Through this project I was able to combat my social isolation and literally cycled my way out of clinical depression! I became much fitter and much happier. The bike gave me a new sense of purpose in life.’

‘Easy Rider’ is a national pilot health project set up with Age Concern Northamptonshire and NHS Northamptonshire with funding from Cycling England. These two pilot sites aim to reintroduce cycling as a leisure pastime and transport option. People of all ages access the project, although the main focus of the project is to encourage people in the mid-age range to take up cycling for health. The project welcomes people of all abilities and backgrounds, experienced or inexperienced cyclists, and those who wish to return to cycling after a break, or who want to develop their skills further. In order to reach as wide a group of people as possible, the project is taken out to hospitals and local fairs and fun days. Interested GPs actively promote the project and its benefits by giving out cards to patients diagnosed with depression.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Appeals to older men.
- Offers cycling for fitness, health and well-being.
- Brings volunteering benefits.
- Tackles depression.

How is the service delivered?

Older people interested in the scheme are supported to overcome potential obstacles to their participation. Many older people have never sat on a bike or have not cycled for years and feel afraid of falling off or of losing their balance. Staff will take a fixed-wheel bike to the person’s house to help them feel safer about balancing on a bike and can also offer tricycles and tandems. Rides vary from short rides around the town to longer, country rides and are supported by experienced, nationally trained volunteers and dedicated project staff. Over 200 volunteers have been recruited into the scheme who, in turn, plan and deliver training to other volunteers.

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T'ai chi classes – Age Concern Bath and North East Somerset

'I moved to Bath after my husband died...and I didn't know anyone before I joined the t'ai chi class. It's been great because I've made a new friend... I was existing before, but now I'm living.'

'I look forward to this every week. It's the highlight.'

Age Concern Bath and North East Somerset offers a range of services to older people which promote well-being and help to make later life an enjoyable experience. These include lunch groups, dance and movement, Wii Fit, day activities and an art club. These are fit as a fiddle projects, funded by the Big Lottery with additional support from Norton/Radstock Town Council, and are supported by a range of partners including the Bath and North East Somerset Active Lifestyle and the Primary Care Trust Falls Unit.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Offers falls prevention.
- Maintains health through gentle exercise and movements.
- Provides a form of relaxation.
- Maintains mobility and flexibility.

How is the service delivered?

There are three t'ai chi classes per week in a community centre and people travel from all around Bath to participate. People attending the class are a mixture of ages. A volunteer supports the class and the tutor is a trained practitioner who works inclusively with participants. It is possible to do the class from a chair and people with differing physical abilities attend. The tutor also offers the class in sheltered housing. Participants report improved mobility and feeling more relaxed after sessions.

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‘Chill Out and Relax’ project – Age Concern Chandlers Ford

‘I feel much happier and I’m sleeping much better.’

‘Our instructor is very good and I plan to continue going to her other exercise groups, as she understands and listens to our needs.’

Age Concern Chandlers Ford offers a range of sessions on physical activity, healthy eating and healthy lifestyles, as part of the fit as a fiddle programme, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The benefits of the sessions are promoted as enabling people to be able to deal better with stress, get a better night’s sleep, understand the effects that certain foods can have on stress levels and recognise how exercise can help to deal with stress. Participants report feeling less stressed and more relaxed and say they enjoy meeting together at the class.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Uses exercise as a way of improving well-being.
- Makes older people feel less stressed.
- Helps them to sleep better.
- Enables them to make new friends.
- Tackles rural and social isolation.

How is the service delivered?

Eight classes of ‘Chill Out and Relax’ sessions are offered. A tutor who is experienced in group facilitation teaches all the sessions and different activities are available every week. For each new activity, an active network is supported for the first eight sessions for a minimum of 12 people. Participants can try out a new class entirely free for eight sessions.

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Relationships and opportunities to contribute

We are 'hard wired' to enjoy helping one another.⁷ Mutual exchange and reciprocity builds trust between people and creates positive social relationships, yet 36 per cent of people aged 65 and over in the UK feel out of touch with the pace of modern life and 9 per cent say they feel cut off from society. Nearly half of all older people (about 4.6 million) consider the television as their main form of company.

Nearly 600,000 older people leave their house only once a week or less. Services and activities such as these provide opportunities for older people to contribute to and participate in meaningful activity, and to make meaningful relationships with others.

⁷ 'Five Ways to Well-being'. New Economics Foundation.

Telephone befriending service – Age Concern North Yorkshire

‘I find it rewarding – the chats and the laughs.’ Volunteer

‘I have such a lovely lady. The calls lift my days.’ Client

This service started initially as a pilot in Hambleton and Richmondshire and then extended to Harrogate, becoming countywide in 2008. An older woman, referred by her daughter, had been bereaved by her husband several years earlier. She had negative feelings almost all of the time which impacted on all aspects of her life and meant that she did not go out. She also felt very anxious about living alone, and although she had some health problems, she felt that she was ‘always bothering’ her doctor, and did not want to burden her family with her problems. The telephone befriending service, and the relationship that developed as a result of it, led to a gradual improvement in how this woman felt about her life, and enabled her to start to socialise and ‘come back to life’.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Helps people to maintain their independence.
 - Tackles loneliness and social isolation.
 - Assists older people to maintain social networks and remain a part of their local community.
 - Improves confidence through improving health and well-being.
 - Provides opportunities for volunteers to help others in their community.
-

How is the service delivered?

This service is structured around a supported and monitored relationship between the older person and the volunteer. A regular, confidential call to lonely and/or isolated older people is offered. Part time co-ordinators make assessment visits and match the older person with a trained volunteer. Volunteers – currently numbering about 35 – are of all ages and are a mix of students, young mothers, young professionals, semi-retired individuals and older people. Over 90 older people are supported across the service, with many aged over 75.

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Park Street Centre – Age UK Lincoln

‘The centre is a great place to make friends and feel included. Staff are very friendly and helpful.’

‘It’s a place where I feel happiness and enjoyment. I can join in activities, have my lunch, arrange my insurance and even have my hair cut. It’s my weekly social retreat.’

Age UK Lincoln offers a wide range of well-being activities and befriending from its Park Street Centre in the middle of town, including sequence dancing, language classes, computer courses, Nintendo Wii, Scrabble, belly dancing, a choir, friendship clubs, art classes, New Age kurling and yoga. Information and advice, insurance advice, a foot clinic, reflexology and body massage are also available, offering a holistic approach to services.

Age UK Lincoln also has an active presence in the local gay and lesbian community, participating in annual Pride events and running an OWLS club (Older Wiser Lesbians) on a weekly basis in the coffee shop in Park Street Centre. Age UK Lincoln actively seeks out new ways in which it can support local communities and minorities. It provides outreach points throughout the city and sets up discussion groups in order to get a good sense of what older people want in terms of opportunities to socialise, have fun and get support when they need it.

What benefits and outcomes does the services provide?

- Reduces social isolation.
- Provides daytime activities.
- Provides opportunities for making friends.
- Offers health and well-being activities.

How are the services delivered?

The centre is staffed by volunteers, and activities, services and trips are available on a drop-in and booked basis throughout the week.

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‘Good Companions’ project – Age Concern Durham

***‘It brings a smile to people’s faces
and it brings a smile to my face
as well.’ Volunteer***

A significant number of older people are at risk of mild to moderate depression. One older person using this project had not left the house for over 20 years. Another woman had stopped going out on her regular afternoon visits to meet friends for a coffee and a chat. Having felt anxious and unable to go out, this woman now feels more confident to go to events on her own and is enjoying life again.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Tackles isolation.
- Reaches older people at risk of depression.
- Enables older people to feel more confident.

How is the service delivered?

Trained volunteers spend time building relationships with older people who have been referred because of concerns about loneliness, isolation and depression. Sometimes trips are arranged to places that the older person may wish to visit but has not been able to get to for many years. Volunteers will accompany the person to activities or events, until they feel able to go to them on their own or with friends.

Alongside befriending, there are activities available, such as New Age curling, exercise classes and craft sessions which provide opportunities for developing new friendships.

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‘Good Neighbours’ scheme – Age Concern Isle of Wight

‘I recently had a hip replacement and needed to get to the next town for the doctor to check on my progress. I only walk very slowly and I can’t manage to walk to the bus stop or to use the bus. A volunteer drives me there and takes me for regular medical appointments. The driver is patient and kind – just the job.’

This scheme operates in three parts of the island, with more to follow, and offers long and short-term support. Local residents were invited to say what kind of scheme they would want to use, what skills they could contribute and when they would be available. Core services include shopping, companionship, transport, and information and advice, but each scheme is unique depending on the skills and abilities of volunteers in the neighbourhood.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Reaches large population of retired residents without family or friends to call on in times of need.
- Tackles loneliness and isolation.
- Attracts volunteers because of the ‘one-off’ support aspect of the scheme e.g, shopping for someone leaving hospital.
- Attracts retired couples who can volunteer together.

How is the service delivered?

An emergency helpline is widely advertised in each neighbourhood and the phone is held centrally by Age Concern Isle of Wight. Existing volunteers move over to the ‘Good Neighbours’ scheme as it expands, so that the helpline can be manned by volunteers in each local community. Bi-monthly social gatherings are held for volunteers and clients so that they can get to know each other, as well as highlighting and addressing local issues or concerns and sharing good practice.

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Reaching excluded groups

In the UK, 11 per cent of older people describe their quality of life as very poor, quite poor or neither good nor poor. Older people who are most excluded, financially and socially, may also face multiple discriminations as well as age discrimination.

These groups include older gypsies and travellers; older people from black and ethnic minority communities; and older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people.

Services that are welcoming, friendly and culturally appropriate enable local Age UKs and Age Concerns and other partners to reach out to excluded groups. Services that appeal to older men, who frequently do not use GP services or talk about their health and mental health, are beginning to develop more widely.



Asian Elders Information and Advice service – Age Concern Coventry

‘A lady who lives alone and is isolated, without family support, and is also depressed and confused, has been assisted to get Pension Credit, Disability Living Allowance and Community Transport. She is now able to visit the day centre again and has help from a carer in the mornings and evenings. She is feeling more confident about herself and less withdrawn.’

Service Manager

Age Concern Coventry has invested time and energy in building up trusted and valued relationships in the south Asian community and has increased access and uptake of south Asian older people to its services. The advice and assistance provided by this service has been able to significantly improve the quality of many Asian people’s lives by helping them to claim relevant benefits and to navigate through the mental health and social care systems.

The service offers assistance with claiming benefits, dealing with social services and mental health services, assisting families who are caring for an older relative with dementia, arranging community transport, and providing day centre opportunities for older people who have become isolated and withdrawn. The manager also assists with finding sheltered accommodation for a family member, and in dealing with housing associations and issues around managing families’ caring responsibilities.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Reaches targeted south Asian communities.
- Improves uptake of services among south Asian older people.
- Addresses social isolation.
- Provides ways of making the best use of GPs’ services and bringing early symptoms of depression to light.

How is the service delivered?

This service has a manager who speaks the relevant south Asian languages and who offers sessions at the local Age Concern office by appointment, as well as home visits for frailer or disabled clients. There are also 12 other outreach surgeries, including temples, mosques, gurdwaras and day care and drop-in centres.

Information and advice services are a gateway to other services that local Age UKs and Age Concerns provide. People using the service are often referred on to the day centre and local lunch clubs, a befriending scheme, bereavement support, and an exercise programme – all provided in welcoming and culturally appropriate settings.

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‘Peace of Mind’ – Bangladeshi Mental Health Promotion project – Age Concern Tower Hamlets

‘It’s very comforting that you are here, doing this job.’ A client speaking to a volunteer.

Age Concern Tower Hamlets has developed relationships with organisations and elders from many of the local communities it serves. In Sylheti, the Bangladeshi language, there is not a word for depression. People present at the GP with physical symptoms and may have symptoms of depression overlooked. The Bangladeshi Mental Health project was funded by Tower Hamlets Primary Care Trust and set up by Age Concern Tower Hamlets in partnership with Mind in Tower Hamlets. It is an example of good practice in delivering race equality in mental health.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Raises awareness of mental health as an issue in the Bangladeshi community.
- Tackles depression and anxiety.
- Raises GPs’ awareness of mental health issues.

How is the service delivered?

A bilingual resource pack and film were developed in consultation with a number of Bangladeshi elders in community-based centres. The pack supplies notes for a two-hour facilitated session with a small group, or a programme of weekly sessions that act as a support group for service users or carers. The resource is delivered by a project worker who also holds seminars for those working with Bangladeshi elders groups and who liaises with health professionals. The film has been shown on a Muslim TV channel, resulting in requests for copies for use by mental health and community workers nationally.

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‘Men in Sheds’ – Age Concern Cheshire

It has been months since I have felt well and after my session here I went home and felt good. It’s got me back doing something, which I haven’t done for a long while.’

Based on an Australian model – Australian Men’s Shed Association’ (AMSA) – ‘Men in Sheds’ is the model for three similar Age UK/ Age Concern projects across the country. It is a very simple concept and offers something different – all men over the age of 55 are welcome. It was launched in January 2009 as a ‘social men’s project’ and is not promoted as a mental health project (although people with mental health problems do attend).

Attendees are called ‘learners’ and are part of Age Concern Cheshire’s large education department. There are many add-on service opportunities and evidence is being collected on the outcomes of the project and the potential health savings.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Offers access to information and advice.
- Promotes healthy living.
- Tackles loneliness.
- Provides opportunities to make friends.

How is the service delivered?

The shed is open three days a week from 10am to 4pm. It is staffed by a co-ordinator and four volunteers who have different proficiencies e.g, first aid, joinery experience, woodturning experience and teaching. About 10 to 14 men, aged between 50 and 92, attend each day. They are a mix of widowed, separated, married professionals and non-professionals, and include men who abuse drugs and alcohol. The men attend on different days – some every day, some on a monthly basis – and they use the tools to repair and make things, or just chat and have coffee.

As a result of attending the shed, some of the men have joined other Age Concern activities and courses, such as a golf social club, a book club and a creative writing group. They have also accessed information and advice, including benefits advice.

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‘Just for Men’ project – Age Concern Chandlers Ford

‘It is so good to exercise just with other men. I am now thinking of the food that I eat and am trying hard to eat a lot better.’

‘I have lost 4¾ inches from my waist and can stretch much better. It’s also good being with other men. I haven’t missed one week and I had a wonderful time.’

This service targets men who feel more comfortable discussing men’s health issues and exercising together in a men-only setting. Many older men do not present to GPs with health problems and do not talk to other family members about their concerns. These sessions are designed to be sociable and fun with a lot of interaction and discussion, which helps participants to raise issues while focusing on goals to increase their levels of fitness in a supportive setting. These are fit as a fiddle projects, funded by the Big Lottery Fund, which are designed to help older people live healthier and more active and fulfilling lives.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Promotes health and well-being among older men.
- Provides healthy eating options for men and promotes the links between healthy eating and exercise.
- Promotes friendships with other participants.

How is the service delivered?

Eight sessions are offered covering exercise, simple relaxation techniques, healthy eating and confidence building and are tailored to individual goals. Weight and measurements are taken in order to track progress. The sessions are also designed to stimulate debate and discussions around men’s health issues.

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‘Opening Doors’ Central London project – Befriending for older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people (OLGBT) – Age Concern Camden

‘I don’t need to hide who I am any more.’

‘Opening Doors’ operates across five London boroughs, led by Age Concern Camden and partnered with four other borough-wide Age UKs/Age Concerns. The project supports older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people in a range of ways. Despite positive changes in public attitudes towards homosexuality and its decriminalisation, older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people can still experience discrimination. One service provided by the project is one-to-one befriending for older lesbians and gay men. This service has been developed in response to an expressed need for an OLGBT service that addresses loneliness and isolation.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Tackles isolation, loneliness and homophobia.
- Helps to maintain independence.
- Encourages well-being and social contact.
- Provides volunteer fulfilment and mutual friendship.

How is the service delivered?

An experienced worker assesses the social needs of people who self refer or who are referred to the service. People are then put in touch with a range of community and social care services and are ‘matched’ with a volunteer befriender. The befriender will have had a CRB check, cleared reference checks and received training.

Volunteers offer befriending that matches their clients’ needs e.g, a fortnightly visit and support to go to the coffee shop, a weekly visit or a weekend phone call. The service is provided in Camden, Islington and Hackney.

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Tackling depression and reducing isolation

Social relationships are critical to our well-being. Social isolation is a big risk factor for depression, which is the most common mental health problem in later life affecting up to 25 per cent of people over 65. Just over 1 million older people (11 per cent) in the UK always or often feel lonely and 17 per cent of older people have less than weekly contact with family, friends and neighbours. Services that help to diminish loneliness and isolation provide a way back into the community for many older people and enable them to start to contribute again. Many befriending schemes also provide an opportunity for volunteering which is highly valued by volunteers and also promotes good mental health and well-being.



Walking groups – Age Concern Bath & North East Somerset

‘We love learning new walks as we are new to the area.’

‘What would I do without the walking group? It’s brilliant!’

These walking groups – part of the fit as a fiddle programme, funded by the Big Lottery Fund – are very popular for meeting people and making new friends. The walks also work well for people who no longer have a dog to walk. Members have got to know each other and they look forward to, and anticipate, the walks with pleasure. People report that they feel fitter and pleased to be able to do an activity that they know is maintaining their health and fitness levels.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Improves and maintains fitness in a low-impact and gentle way
- Provides opportunities to make friends
- Tackles social isolation

How is the service delivered?

Seven different types and lengths of walk are available, including for people using a wheelchair. They may be to a specific destination, such as a garden centre, or end at a tea shop or pub for refreshment. Some walks are fast paced, others slower. They run in different parts of North East Somerset as well as in Bath city centre. Transport is not provided but some people share lifts and some walks start from residential homes.

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Bereavement support service – Age Concern Gateshead

‘I lost my husband of 54 years a few months ago. I didn’t want to add to my daughters’ sadness by telling them that I still feel so empty and without hope and they don’t live near me anyway. I was able to unburden myself to the bereavement volunteer and slowly, I’m starting to look towards the future and feel stronger.’

The bereavement support service is targeted particularly at frail and vulnerable older people in Gateshead who may not be able to access other services, perhaps because of mobility issues. Bereavement can be a disabling process, and support at this point in time can help to prevent someone from needing more medical interventions than they might otherwise have. One older man, whose wife had recently died and who was living alone and had no contact with family, started to use the service. After several weeks of visits from a bereavement volunteer, he felt more confident. With support, he attended the Age Concern men’s group and now regularly goes there.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Manages the impact of bereavement on people who are particularly frail and vulnerable.
- Supports older people who may not be able to access other services e.g. because of mobility issues.
- Provides an ongoing relationship and support, which can enable the person to move forward and improve their quality of life.

How is the service delivered?

Trained volunteers offer home visits for as long as the person needs support. This confidential service helps older people to express very difficult emotions safely, as well as gently helping them to address the practical issues that bereavement brings. Clients are often referred on to other Age UK services to help them access benefits or widen their social networks. As well as home visiting, Age Concern Gateshead runs a monthly drop-in service at a local hospital for people who have been bereaved. A member of staff facilitates this in partnership with the hospital and a cancer charity.

Volunteers receive regular supervision. People can self-refer and also referrals come from GPs, other health professionals, social workers, families and neighbours.

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‘Circle of Friends’ telephone conferencing scheme – Age Concern Isle of Wight

‘I enjoyed it very much as everyone was so friendly. I loved reminiscing... and I loved how it was so casual. I loved the fact that we were all going to meet at the end, it was so exciting. I have got everyone’s numbers so I do hope to hold on to the friends.’

Age Concern Isle of Wight has extended its befriending service to offer the ‘Circle of Friends’ telephone conferencing scheme to groups of older people living alone. Participants chat together on a party line over a number of weeks, eventually meeting up to put ‘faces to voices’ and to continue the friendships they have forged on the phone.

The project was partly aimed at managing high demand for one-to-one telephone befriending. The provision of a group setting – rather than a one-to-one scenario – enables people to participate, but only to start speaking/joining in conversations when they feel comfortable enough to do so. This unintended outcome has enabled the charity to understand a far-reaching need of people who will not approach traditional services. Thirteen groups have been run to date with increasing success.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Tackles loneliness and isolation.
- Reaches older people living alone.
- Reaches older people who do not access face-to-face services.

How is the service delivered?

No computers or mobile phones are required to participate. A block of seven weekly conference calls are placed to a group of five to six clients living locally to each other, facilitated by either a member of staff or a volunteer. In the eighth week, transport is provided to take all members to a local café to meet over a cup of tea. Participants can then exchange telephone numbers with those they wish to keep in touch with. The organiser then provides details of local groups, clubs or societies which clients can join to enjoy the social activities they have talked about during the calls.

People build their confidence in this way and can also be forwarded to the one-to-one telephone befriending service after the sessions end, if there is a volunteer available, or on to a social club if there is one in their area. Costs include administration, facilitation and telephone connection.

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Mental health advocacy project – Age UK Cambridgeshire

‘Thank you. I feel much more organised now.’

Acute anxiety over any issue will impact on a person’s day-to-day functioning adversely. Listening to someone discuss their problems in a formalised setting has a powerful and positive effect on their mental health.

This service aims to break down barriers that prevent access to information by being open to any enquirer. It provides a route through which peoples’ concerns, expressions of their wishes, and protection of their rights are recognised. The empowerment and protection of vulnerable people who may not be able to make their own decisions is legislated for in the Mental Capacity Act.

What benefits and outcomes does the service provide?

- Eases anxiety.
- Prevents problems becoming crises or unmanageable.
- Encourages empowerment, making control and choice a reality.
- Promotes individual and human rights.
- Challenges poor and discriminating practice.

How is the service delivered?

The service is countywide and offers a very wide range of support. This can include anything from dealing with simple issues such as arranging Direct Debit in order to manage household bills better to safeguarding a vulnerable adult in an abusive situation. The service is free, independent and confidential. It is open to people over the age of 65, regardless of defined or diagnosed mental health needs.

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