

# WHAT HAS WORKED WELL WHEN REACHING AND ENGAGING OLDER MEN?



Visual minutes by Dave Bain: <https://davebain.com/>

# Overview

In August 2019, projects within the Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) programme came together to reflect and share their learning about engaging men aged 50 and over. This topic was chosen because, across the programme, there have been significantly fewer male participants than female participants.

This trend matches recent research in this area which highlights the importance of engaging with older men and suggests that they may even experience higher levels of loneliness and isolation than older women. See research such as *Older Men at the Margins*, *Independent Age* and *All the Lonely People* for further details.

BAB projects commented that this roundtable discussion was a useful opportunity for them to reflect on their practice, and what may have influenced older men's engagement.

The majority were not proactively focusing on engaging older men. They reported that the fast-pace of the sector does not always encourage reflection about diversity at the point that funding is first received, with a subsequent impact on who engages and who does not throughout the course of the project.





## Having a focus on 'doing' an activity rather than purely socialising

Older men may be more likely to participate in doing an activity, rather than attend something which is purely social. Those who are more isolated may feel particularly anxious about talking to others directly without a shared activity to focus on. However women may also have similar feelings; BAB projects did not feel this was exclusive to older men.

Some BAB projects noticed that men tended to want to share their skills. For example by showing others how to do something that they are knowledgeable about, such as woodwork or car maintenance. This was particularly the case among men in their 50s. This skill-sharing element has not emerged to the same extent among older women in BAB projects.

Similarly once older men have attended a group or activity, they may be more likely to continue engaging if they feel a sense of ownership and sense of responsibility within the group, guiding the direction it goes in rather than being a more passive attendee. However BAB projects thought this is also likely to apply to women, rather than being exclusive to older men.



## Able to participate at their own pace

A number of BAB projects noted that it worked well to engage older men when there was no pressure to do all of a set activity; they could instead participate at their own pace, which included the option of sitting and watching others. This might even take a drop-in format, with no minimum commitment each week.

Similarly, if this flexibility involved the opportunity to take on more responsibility if they wished to, then that worked well too.

A good facilitator is key to creating this comfortable and flexible environment, and therefore the likelihood that participants will continue to engage. BAB projects felt that this environment was important for both older men and women.

Older men may take a longer time to 'open up' within a new group, particularly if it is out of their comfort zone. For activities that only last a few weeks, with a set end date, it can mean that the activity finishes just at the point when the individual is feeling comfortable. In these scenarios, it works well for the project to consider possible ways the individual could still be involved afterwards, for example as a volunteer or ambassador.



## Having a diverse range of activities, groups and services available

Not everyone will want the same kind of group, activity or service. It is important that there are a diverse range of options available to suit a diverse range of needs and wishes. Similarly, BAB projects learnt not to make assumptions about what older men will be interested in but instead to be as flexible as possible around that individual.

For example, some older men will prefer to be around other older men and may wish to join a male-only group. However others may find it easier to talk to women, or to younger people, and will therefore look for different things. For this reason BAB projects had mixed opinions about whether including the word 'men' in the name of a group worked well or not – in their experience it attracted some men but put others off.

Similarly, not everyone is able or wants to join a group, they may prefer one-to-one situations either in the community or in their own homes. This might particularly be the case for those who have not socialised in a long time, or who have anxiety or mobility difficulties. BAB projects have found two significant gaps in the types of activities and services available in Bristol; those that occur at the weekend, and those that take place within the individual's home.



## Stereotypes that older men have about certain venues and activities

Older men may have preconceived ideas about local venues, for example as being 'for women' or 'for old people'. These perceptions may make them less likely to engage with activities taking place in these venues. When choosing a venue, it helps to reflect on who the main users of that space are. Sometimes these differences might be quite subtle, for example one project found that having breakfast in a pub was more appealing for older men than having breakfast in a café.

Older men are also likely to have preconceived ideas about the activities themselves; what is 'for' men and what is 'for' women. This will make them less likely to proactively search for certain activities, and if they do become aware of the activity, they are likely to assume it is not 'for' them.

One way to partly overcome these stereotypes is to ensure the event is marketed in a gender-neutral and age-neutral way, so that these individuals are not put off by it appearing too 'feminine' or too 'masculine'.



## Word of mouth

Older men may be more likely to perceive an activity as 'for them' if they know that other men of a similar age are already involved. One way to do this is to encourage existing male participants to bring along other men who might be interested in joining. This often happens naturally when older men have played a central role in setting up the activity. Having a local advocate, particularly if they are male, can also help.

Another way to do this is by promoting activities for men through reaching out to those connected to them, for example their partners or children. Some BAB projects have found that partners, in particular, may seek out information on behalf of older men and encourage them to engage. In this scenario, reflect on how your marketing materials are likely to be received by men, even if they are not the ones making the initial contact.



## Value of social prescribing

BAB projects found that it worked well to reach older men through social prescribing projects. These projects could provide the additional support for people to attend activities or groups. This was a route by which many had engaged with older men, who they may not otherwise have been able to reach without the social prescribing service.



## Steering groups

When trying to maximise engagement from certain communities, BAB projects found it useful to run ideas past their steering or advisory groups, for example regarding leaflets or other promotional materials. It worked well to have these groups from the beginning of the project, although it may take a while to build momentum and engagement. However short-term funding may mean that organisations need to establish new steering groups relatively frequently according to different funding criteria.

The nature of feedback, particularly from steering groups, is that a project mostly only hears from people who are already involved, not new groups that they are trying to reach. It is therefore important to use the steering group as a starting point, but to consider whose voices are not present within that group.



## Working with existing groups and organisations

Some BAB projects found it worked well to reach older men through existing community groups and organisations. If these organisations already successfully work with older men, then BAB projects could work in partnership to promote their activities through these channels and expand what is already offered to individuals.



## Time of day

Many BAB projects found it easier to engage men aged 70+ and believed that this was because most activities, groups and services ran during weekday daytimes. Men in their 50s and 60s are more likely to be at work during these times and therefore unable to attend or engage with the project's activities.

When planning an activity or meeting, remember that the time of day it is scheduled for will affect the diversity of the people who can attend.



## Free food

Although not specific to older men, BAB projects reported that offering free food encouraged people to engage and attend activities and was therefore a useful tool in a variety of situations.



## Humour

Some of the BAB projects found it worked well to use humour when first engaging with older men, particularly if the project would eventually involve talking about more serious issues such as their feelings or mental health. Unlike with older women, there was more of a pattern among older men of building up an initial rapport through the use of humour.



## Diversity more broadly

There are many factors which influence whether an individual will get involved with an activity, however a few trends have started to emerge within BAB projects. Engaging older men is entwined with these wider challenges related to diversity that are faced by many BAB projects.

In terms of social class, BAB projects have found that those who are middle-class are more likely to engage in community groups, activities and services. This may be because they have had previous experiences of engaging in similar activities in the past, compared to people from other class backgrounds. No particular trends in gender have been noticed within our learning about social class.

The diversity of staff and volunteers involved in a project may affect who engages and who does not engage. BAB projects who had older male volunteers found that it worked well when these volunteers interacted with older male participants, as it had similarities of spending time with a peer. Likewise, many BAB projects thought that the nature of the third sector being predominantly female is likely to have an impact on engaging with older men; if they can't see themselves represented, they may be less likely to engage.

In order to reach a more diverse range of individuals, a project may need to be flexible in some fundamental structural ways. For example although the main service model might be one-to-one, being able to offer the same service in a group format may be more appropriate for some BAME communities. Similarly, the language used and even the entire way the project is described and marketed may need to be altered in order to be understood by and be relatable for certain groups.



**Further BAB learning resources can be found at:**  
<http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/learning-so-far/>