



# Outreach Learning Report

Enabling resident engagement and community building within sheltered housing communities

A research project by the Ageing Better in Camden Outreach Team  
Jo Stapleton, September 2021

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## About Ageing Better in Camden

We are a partnership of older people and Camden organisations, working together to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people. We draw on existing skills and resources in the local community to tackle social isolation and loneliness.

Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better aims to develop creative ways for people aged over 50 to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. It is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.



@abc\_camden



[www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk](http://www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk)

# Background and evidence of need



Over the last three years the Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) Outreach Service has worked extensively within sheltered housing as part of its remit to proactively find, meet and engage with Camden residents aged 60+. This approach has enabled us to reach older people not known to, or reluctant to engage with formal social activities, services and support.

Between March 2018 and March 2020 (pre Covid-19), the outreach team worked within 23 sheltered housing communities, providing:

- 1348 conversations/engagements with residents on the doorstep
- Delivered 62 outreach pop up and follow up events, resulting in 630 resident participations/engagements.

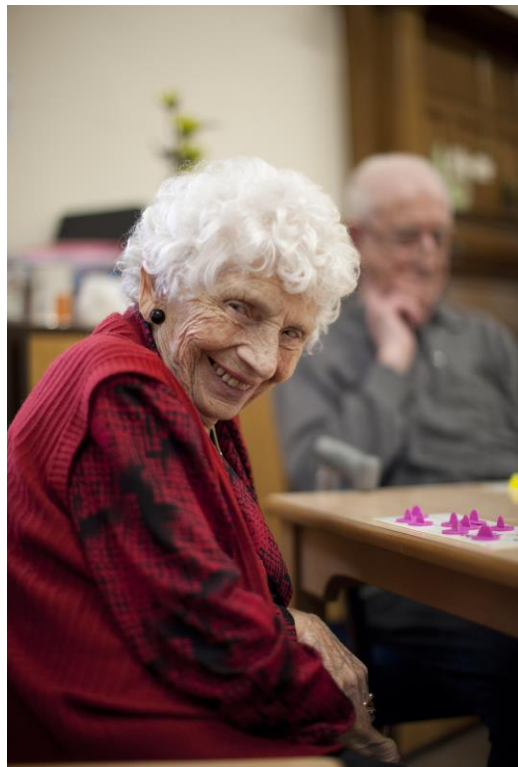
Through our interactions with residents and by listening to their experiences, we have learnt that despite living in the same physical location with people of a similar age, in the absence of an active and shared community, sheltered housing residents experience high levels of social isolation and loneliness. *'I stay in and it's not good to not see people...I want company not TV'. 'It's so quiet and I get miserable and bored. Even if you see family, you spent more time alone.'*<sup>1</sup> (sheltered housing residents).

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes in this report come from *'It was a day of friendship: older people's views on outreach in sheltered housing'*. Helen MacIntyre, September 2020. (<http://www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/latestnews/2021/1/12/outreach-in-sheltered-housing>)

The majority of sheltered housing schemes have a communal area but if not used either for formal activities or their use encouraged as informal meeting spaces, many residents lead isolated lives and seldom mix with fellow residents. *'First time I've been in the room with people in it - normally no one's here.'* *'I know they [my neighbours] exist but usually we just wave. But today we're here in the same place.'*

The reasons behind why isolation exists within sheltered housing communities are a complex picture and not determined solely by the availability of activities onsite. From our experience of working within sheltered housing, we have learnt that:



- It should not be assumed that, without positive intervention, social connections and a sense of shared community will occur between residents simply as a result of living in the same building.
- Sheltered housing communities are diverse with a wide range of experiences and needs amongst residents. This includes a wide span of ages, interests, varying levels of mobility, physical and mental health, social skills and life experiences (for example homelessness).
- The availability of formal activities on offer to residents within many sheltered housing communities is limited and often sporadic. Regular social activities are often challenging to arrange, sustain and deliver as a result of high staff turnover and availability of regular staff onsite.
- Where formal activities are available, take up of activities by residents is low and predominantly female. Scheme managers and residents often refer to the 'same old faces' who are likely to attend. As a result, the activities on offer often reflect the interests of a relatively small group of residents – the people who already attend.
- Feedback received from residents on the doorstep (particularly older men), is that the sheltered housing activity offer is female orientated e.g. 'coffee mornings', when arranged by the scheme feels institutional

and is being provided for people who are old and vulnerable: *'It's not for people like me'*.

- If attending community groups or organisations in the past is not part of the older persons life experience, they are less likely to self-identify with a formal activity or to attend. As a result, changing the activity on offer alone is unlikely to increase their likelihood of attendance.
- Low attendance and take up by residents at onsite activities feeds into a negative and self-perpetuating culture. The residents who do attend activities feel that their neighbours are antisocial. This leads to feelings of resentment and can result in residents being made to feel unwelcome should they take a chance and join in. The outreach team witnessed residents being excluded from invitations to social opportunities by both residents and scheme managers with a 'there's no point inviting X, they won't come' attitude.

The culmination of these factors is a stagnant and self-fulfilling culture of 'nothing happens here'. This is detrimental to the sheltered housing community and makes it difficult for any future activities or social opportunities to run successfully without a focused and repeated intervention to build trust and relationships between residents.



# Our approach



To successfully meet, engage and bring together residents, particularly those who are less likely to attend organised social events such as coffee mornings (e.g. older men), the outreach team developed an initial three-step approach as follows:

- A letter drop to residents, introducing the team and inviting residents to drop by and join them at an informal pop up event in a few days' time.
- A door knock to residents to say hello and reiterate the invitation. The door knock provides an effective gentle 'nudge' and encouragement to attend. Residents are provided with a contact number to opt out of receiving the door knock.
- Host an informal pop-up event in the residents' lounge, inviting residents to drop by and join the team for a free coffee and cake, meet their neighbours and pick up information about free local activities for Camden residents aged 60+.

For more detail on how the outreach teamwork in sheltered housing, please see the report 'Doorstep Outreach, a practitioners guide'.<sup>2</sup>

Between March 2018 and February 2020, the outreach team delivered 23 initial pop-up events in sheltered housing communities.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/latestnews/2021/1/12/doorstep-outreach-a-practitioners-guide>

Conversations held on the doorstep during door knocking and with residents at these initial events, in the majority of cases, identified a need for at least one other repeat intervention by the outreach team. *'I know it's only a small thing, but it's wonderful because it's broke the monotony - we wouldn't be here if not for you.'* *'I feel better, more like a human. You feel like you're in a little box on your own: I hate it. When I moved here, I thought I would mix with people but you don't.'* Repeat visits to sheltered housing locations also proved essential to engage with residents missed first time round and to bring about a positive shift in community culture.

Of the 23 sheltered housing communities the outreach team supported, 19 received follow up contact. Of those, dependent on need, 14 sites received between 3 and 11 further interventions, involving letter dropping, doorstep conversations and invitations to residents to join the outreach team and neighbours at further pop-up events on-site and off-site in the local community.



These events included activity taster sessions (Boccia, seated exercise and bingo), social fish and chip lunches, local guided walks, restaurant and café meals, visits to local community partners and outreach pop-up events in cafes, leisure centres and libraries.

This reflected the desire of many residents to meet and socialise with their neighbours in the wider community (not just their building) and local area. By inviting residents to join them at events and activities off site, the outreach

team were able to provide a bridge to the wider community.

Crucially, the team did not start with the assumption that all sheltered housing sites wanted activities to be delivered, thus framing the conversation in terms of **what activity** should be delivered. Instead, they spent time connecting and engaging with residents about what might be of interest to them. They truly started with a blank piece of paper and supported the residents to share what

they wanted and didn't want as opposed to starting with an assumption of what type of provision was needed. This is always good practice, but essential if you are to engage residents beyond those who always join activities. They are likely to have some connections. But those more isolated residents who may not have many social connections are likely to be labelled difficult or unfriendly, often just require repeated opportunities to take up what is being offered to them. The interaction with the outreach team via chats on their doorsteps acts as a bridge to connection with others.

A summary of outreach pop-ups/follow up activities between March 2018 and March 2020 is as follows:

Year	Pop-up type	Number of events	Number of locations	Participant attendances
2018	1 <sup>st</sup> pop up	8	8 locations	88
	Additional on-site activity	8	6 locations	65
	Additional off-site activity	12	7 locations	117
2019	1 <sup>st</sup> pop up	12	12 locations	121
	Additional on-site activity	11	7 locations	132
	Additional off-site activity	6	4 locations	69
2020	1 <sup>st</sup> pop up	3	3 locations	20
	Additional on-site activity	1	1 location	12
	Additional off-site activity	1	1 location	6
<b>Total</b>		<b>62</b>		<b>630</b>

Of the 630 instances of participation by sheltered housing residents at outreach events, men accounted for 225 (36%) and women 405 (64%). Whilst this reflects the gender split of participant attendance across ABC funded projects<sup>3</sup>, door knocking enabled the outreach team to meet and engage successfully with older men who accounted for 647 (48%) of doorstep conversations.

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<sup>3</sup> ABC Outreach with older men learning report



Every door knock provided an opportunity for the outreach team and the older person to meet. This was significant as only 39% (526) of doorstep engagements took place at first door knock. The majority of interactions, 61% (822), took place on return door knocking visits. In addition to meeting the resident, door knocks provided an opportunity to:

- Provide responsive information and support e.g an Age UK Camden Information and Advice postcard (to residents in need of support), and information about other activities and social opportunities in the local area.
- Build trust and a positive relationship with the resident. Some residents progressed from conversations held through doors at first or second visit, to a face-to-face encounter at a subsequent door knock.
- Put a face to the name of the outreach worker, receive reassurance of a warm welcome at the pop-up event and provide a valuable 'nudge' to people in need of encouragement to attend.
- Gain insight about what is happening in their sheltered housing community from the residents who are often under-represented in formal surveys – the people less likely to respond or attend organised activities.
- Challenge the 'nothing happens here' culture, by reinforcing a positive message about the event and that other residents met through door knocking have said they will attend.

# Complex work requiring support



To undertake effective doorstep outreach, workers need considerable skill, knowledge and stamina. For example, they must be able to:

- Be friendly and confident in interactions but highly responsive to the particular older person or other resident they meet on the doorstep
- Safeguard the interests of the older people they meet
- Be able to undertake dynamic risk assessments and to defuse and sometimes walk away from difficult situations
- Be able to maintain energy and enthusiasm when much of the door knocking does not yield a response
- Where appropriate, to organise follow up visits to establish or develop contact, provide information or support which are responsive to the needs of an older person

Outreach workers will require appropriate training and/or mentoring to undertake the role safely and effectively. On an ongoing basis, organisations carrying out this kind of outreach need to provide time and space for support between colleagues to discuss and reflect on both positive and difficult outreach interactions and to record details of interactions where necessary.

Given these demands it is likely that doorstep outreach should be undertaken by paid staff rather than volunteers. If undertaken by volunteers, support and supervision will be essential.

# Outreach activity in sheltered housing – our impact and examples



## Connecting sheltered housing residents to their local communities

Through follow up outreach pop-up events, the outreach team has provided opportunities to sheltered housing residents to meet and engage with other local people both inside and outside of the scheme. Opportunities provided to residents by the outreach team include:

- Vivian Court sheltered housing (July 2019) – 12 members of Abbey Community Centre Boccia team were brought together with 15 Vivian Court residents in their communal lounge to meet and enjoy their activity together.
- Greenwood and Highgate Road sheltered housing (April and May 2019) – 7 Greenwood and 8 Highgate Road residents, joined the outreach team as our guests for lunch at nearby Queen’s Crescent Community Centre. The visit involved transport on the QCCA minibus which offers a free transport service to the centre for local residents aged 65+. Following the event, several residents went on to access activities at QCCA, growing their local social connections in the process.

- Robert Morten House, Lymington Road, Lauriston Lodge and Webheath sheltered housing residents (December 2019) – invited to join the outreach team for lunch hosted by St Mary’s School Hampstead. A total of 36 residents attended and socialised with each other and residents from other schemes.
- Sage Way and Robert Morten House sheltered housing residents (March 2020) – invited to join the outreach team for lunch hosted by the nearby Story Garden. Five residents from the two sites attended and enjoyed lunch together.

## Being responsive to the community and empowering residents to shape their own activities



Sheltered Housing communities are constantly evolving in response to changes within the resident community.

*‘It’s good to say “Hello” to a few people, see a few faces. Because people change over the years. Some disappear, new ones come.’*

In the most active and successful sheltered housing communities we encountered, residents themselves played a key role in informally arranging and hosting the social life of the scheme. We found, however, that

once these individuals moved on or were no longer active due to health, there was a significant decline in the social life and community within the scheme. Residents shared numerous examples with us of past gatherings, activities and social events (birthday celebrations etc), that used to take place but had now ebbed away. The outreach team identified a need to provide responsive support to empower residents to re-establish their own activities and social events.

- Rackstraw House sheltered housing (May 2018): Following feedback received from residents, the outreach team liaised with Central and Cecil Housing Association on behalf of residents, to start a weekly seated onsite exercise class. The group launched successfully. The outreach team provided time limited support by letter dropping and door knocking residents to invite/remind them about the session. This support enabled one resident with substantive memory loss and a resident to arrange for a family member to sit with her husband, who she provides care for, to access and establish the activity.
- Vivian Court sheltered housing (June 2019): Following a number of outreach pop-ups and engagements with residents at Vivian Court, which has resulted in a positive cultural shift with growing numbers of residents attending outreach pop-up events, a resident shared with an outreach worker her desire to restart the resident run tea club that stopped several year ago. The outreach team provided support to the resident to negotiate equipment and to promote the event to residents via letter dropping and door knocking. Eleven residents attended the first tea club and the group established and continued to meet pre Covid-19. The outreach team provided additional support in December 2019 to help resolve an issue between two tea club group members.
- Waterhouse Close (September 2019): During a pop-up event a long-term resident shared that until a few years ago, residents met together to enjoy a fish and chip lunch. One resident took the orders, collected the money and the fish and chips. Speaking to residents, this was the activity that was most missed. The outreach team hosted a pop-up fish and chip lunch attended by 13 residents (some of whom have significant health and mobility issues and seldom leave their scheme). Supporting residents to find a way of hosting their own lunches in the future, a follow up lunch was trialled, with a view to arranging a weekly delivery of meals to the scheme for residents to enjoy as a communal lunch. This was put on hold due to Covid-19 but has now restarted.



## Improving emotional wellbeing and feedback received from residents: *“It made you feel different about living here, homely.”*

Between April 2019 and February 2020, ABC undertook 37 qualitative interviews with sheltered housing participants attending outreach pop-up events. The findings from this research evidence:

- The need and desire for ongoing social connections and opportunities between residents. *This is what should happen at least once a week, but this is empty seven days a week.*
- The role of outreach intervention and approach in bringing residents together. *‘Brilliant, just brilliant. This would be a death place.... There wouldn't be a cricket in here today if they [the outreach team] weren't here.’*
- The positive impact upon community building with sheltered housing and building residents social connections and networks. *‘I told my daughter that I wasn't going to be lonely here.... This is lovely. It's very nice.... Good to meet my neighbours.’*
- The impact upon residents' health and wellbeing. *‘I feel better, more like a human.’ ‘It makes you feel less lonely with something going on...It feels like you've done something with your life.’*



For more information about the research and findings, see [\*‘It was a day of friendliness older people’s views on outreach in sheltered housing’\*](#) Helen MacIntyre. September 2020. Ageing Better in Camden.

For further information about this research or our Outreach approaches please visit [www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/outreach](http://www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/outreach) or get in touch with our friendly team on [ageingbetterincamden@ageukcamden.org.uk](mailto:ageingbetterincamden@ageukcamden.org.uk).