



Short-term outreach to foster social connections away from formal settings:

Men talk about their experiences of informal walking groups

Helen MacIntyre, November 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 Age UK Camden and 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



ageingbetterincamden.org.uk

Background

Men at risk of social isolation and loneliness



Over the course of the Ageing Better programme, there has been concern that groups and activities designed to address social isolation and loneliness have failed to attract equal numbers of men¹. This has also been a concern for Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) who carried out research in 2019² to inform their engagement with older men. The starting point for this work was that despite the Age UK Camden (AUC) Outreach Team’s conversations with many men during street outreach³, few went on to join activities run by delivery partners in community centres and groups. At the same time, existing research⁴ indicated that older men may be subject to particular risk factors for isolation and loneliness including less contact with family and friends, past reliance on partners for organising their social lives and an increasing number

¹ The National Lottery Community Fund (2020) *Working and engaging with older men: Learning from Ageing Better*. Available at https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing_better_working_with_men_summary.pdf?mtime=20201117092421&focal=none

² Ageing Better in Camden (2019) Outreach learning report: Connecting older men to their communities. Available at <http://www.ageingbetterincamden.org.uk/latestnews/2021/1/12/report-working-with-older-men>

³ The Team had 613 conversations with men during street outreach from February 2018 to March 2019

⁴ Beach, B. & Bamford S.M. (2014) *Isolation: the emerging crisis for older men*. Independent Age. Available at <https://www.independentage.org/policy-research/research-reports/isolation-emerging-crisis-for-older-men>

living alone so that, given the ageing population, increasing numbers of men may be affected.

Ageing Better in Camden's original research with older men

ABC's (2019) research involved talking to 38 older men about their existing social lives and the ways in which they would like to socialise with others. Key findings included that:

- A significant barrier to joining activities for some men was when they took place in community centres, since they perceived them as places which were 'not for me'. They would prefer to meet in 'neutral' community spaces such as pubs, cafés, parks, or libraries which they did not specifically associate with older people.
- Some men would be put off if an activity was advertised too formally as a club or group for men.
- The majority (60%) said they would prefer informal drop-in type activities rather than formal scheduled groups where regular attendance was expected.
- Some men already connected with others through 'informal social hubs'. Examples were of those who socialised with companions in the pub, via book sharing in sheltered housing or with a known group in the changing rooms after a swim.

The AUC Outreach Team response: developing informal social hubs in neutral spaces to better engage men

One element of the Outreach Team response was that they began to facilitate informal drop-in sessions in libraries and cafes. These were intended to provide 'stepping-stone' support for older people – men and women - to socialise and develop social connections in a low-key way in 'neutral' community spaces. However, these had to close with the onset of Covid-19.

Instead, from summer 2020 to summer 2021, the Outreach Team facilitated walking groups⁵ in several Camden neighbourhoods. They were developed in

⁵ Details of the ABC Outreach Team approach to promoting and organising walking groups can be found in our practitioners' guide, '*Outreach during Covid-19: [How to set up walking groups to foster social connections between older people](#)*'

response to conversations at Covid-safe pop-ups in parks⁶, including with many men (109 of 234) where older people often expressed a wish to be physically in the company of others in a safe outside space. As with earlier neutral space pop-ups, the Team aimed to create a **relaxed social atmosphere** which would act as stepping-stones to the development of new relationships.

The walks were inherently informal in the key respect that **they took place away from any formal setting**. They had a structure, but this was intended as a loose framework which would be conducive to socialising. Main elements were:

- **Contact, usually by text**, with a meeting time and place
- **A plan for a walk**
- **A team member acting as a guide** to the extent that there was a need to provide a focus for social interaction
- **An optional tea or coffee stop** to allow time for more chatting if wanted.

Outreach Team involvement in these groups was time-limited⁷ and the ultimate aim was that, once this came to an end,

- **Relationships formed would continue and take on a life beyond the group**
- They might also form the basis of **new informal social hubs** – perhaps still a walking group - organised by the group members themselves.

A third of 70 older people who joined walking groups were men. However, the Team perceived a number of men in these groups as having become well-connected to their fellow walkers. **Two groups made up of 17 walkers continued to meet independently** since the end of significant Outreach Team support. **Nine – over half – of these walkers were men.** As such, we thought the outreach walks may provide a useful model for engaging older men in social activity and fostering their social connections away from a formal setting. We carried out a second piece of research to explore this possibility.

⁶ See our report 'Outreach during Covid-19: [Encouraging older people's social connection using outdoor "Face mask pop-ups"](#)'

⁷ Involvement of the Team with a group was for a few months. It was a Covid-19 context project which came to an end in September 2021.

The current research: why men joined a walking group, kept coming, and the impact on their social connections



The research involved interviews with seven men which we carried out to understand what appealed to men who had joined the walks and, if they did keep attending, what encouraged them to do so⁸.

All the interviews took place during the period when the Outreach Team were still involved in organising the walks. Five of the interviewees were part of a single group which has continued to walk independently of the Outreach Team; they had attended between four and nine walks at the time of interview and their walks had included between two and eleven people. They all continued to walk multiple times after interviews. One of the other interviewees attended another group and had joined walks five times, with walks including between one and three people; he also continued to join walks

⁸ The purpose of the research was explained to interviewees before they consented to take part and, straight after interview, they were sent an information sheet for a reference and in case they wanted to withdraw their participation; the names of all interviewees have been changed in this report. The study adhered to the research ethics protocols of the Social Research Association.

after his interview. The final interviewee had attended only two walks, again in a different group, first with one other walker then two. He had ceased attending three months before the interview.

The following findings are considered with reference to existing learning and research from ABC and other Ageing Better areas which has also shed light on what is important for encouraging men's social engagement.

Findings

Non-social and social aspects of the walks intertwine to influence joining and enjoyment

The previous ABC report², along with learning from other Ageing Better areas¹ and evaluation of Connect Hackney's work with older men⁹, indicates that men are likely to prefer to take part in activities that are not solely focused on socialising. Suggested reasons are that social meet-ups such as 'coffee mornings' are perceived as stereotypically female, that men want to engage with activities that match their existing interests or where they can share their skills, and that having this other focus reduces the pressure to socialise. Nevertheless, men value social aspects of activities they join. In line with this, men in this research gave a range of non-social reasons for joining or enjoying the walking groups but pleasure in social contact also featured prominently in their interviews.



⁹ Harden, A., Salisbury, C., Herlitz, L. & Lombardo City, C. (2021) *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*. University of London and Institute for Connected Communities, University of East London. Available at https://www.connecthackney.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Targeted_final_07212.pdf

1. Less social factors

- **An existing interest in walking for some or an alternative to previous activities or occupations**

For four men **walks as an activity aligned with previous enjoyment or habits of walking:**

'And I love walking you see. I've walked most of my life. I don't walk so far these days as I used to, but it's been a passion of mine, really, particularly walking in the hills. Although I don't do that so much... a walk is very appealing to me.' (Peter, small group 2)

'Well, I mean I used to go for a little walk on my own over the Heath. Have a little walk around, you know. I mean have a look at the ducks, you know what I mean... Yeah, I'd sit down. Do the crossword. And then probably a slow walk back home.' (Eddie, large group)

However, it was not necessarily the case that the walks only appealed to established walkers. Not all the men mentioned an existing liking for walking. And **for some, walks were an alternative to activity that used to occupy them.** One mentioned that retirement meant he had time which he didn't used to; five mentioned that Covid-19 had led to the cancellation of a range of other activities they had previously enjoyed including going to the gym, doing music and dancing lessons, being a cricket spectator and doing archery.

- **Learning about local places of interest**

Part of the Outreach Team approach was to plan walking routes which included places of interest which they researched so that they could tell the group about them. This was designed to make walks engaging and enjoyable and, if necessary, to provide material which could be a focus for social interaction, reducing pressure for walkers to find their own topics of conversation.

Six of the men, including all those from the large group, talked about these **places as a key feature of their walks.** Some of the places mentioned were Tomas Coram's Foundling Hospital museum, St Pancras New Church and Coal Drops Yard. They were described as a positive part of the experience at least in part because the **walkers were making new discoveries about their local area.**

'I mean what gets me like is living in London...it's amazing the amount of places that over the last 30 years, 40 years. So you drive around and you just sort of go past.' (Eddie, large group)

'Before we ended up in St Andrew's Gardens, we visited the St Pancras New Church. And we had a lovely time standing in the church...and looking at the statues and the stained-glass windows.' (Duncan, large group)

'Well, certainly the places were interesting. I mean King's Cross area is sort of very interesting to me because I live quite near and and I know very little about it. I haven't kept pace with all the developments you know over the years.' (Peter, small group 2)

Building in variety and creating this interest seems likely to be important for keeping the walkers engaged: one of the small group interviewees, who did not emphasise place as an important feature of the walks for him, said that all his walks had been in the same local park.

- **Physical benefits**

Two of the men explicitly mentioned the **physical benefits of the walks as important** to them, including in relation to problems that had developed because **they had been at home too much and inactive during Covid-19 lockdowns**.

'And when it first started, I was having trouble with my legs and my back...I join this, the first one and since then, it's helped me. I'm getting back to my routine now. Doing more walks now on my own.... But Age UK started it up, you know, since after the lockdown...I can walk much better now and I'm breathing much better and it helps my fitness as well.' (Steve, large group)

- **Being outside**

Several mentioned their enjoyment of **getting out of the house or getting into the fresh air**.

'No, no, there's no favourite because we've been over to like Regent's Park. That is quite nice, you know what I mean. There's a few animals and this, that and the other. And sit down, have a cup of tea... it's just nice to get out the house, you know.' (Eddie, large group)

'And apart from [the exercise, the walks help me] to feel a bit free. Try to breathe fresh air, yeah?' (Nick, small group 1)

2. Social aspects of the walks which appealed to the men

Some of the social features of the walks which appealed to the men were mentioned as social dimensions of the 'less social factors' above. For example, some mentioned **companionship of the group as making it different from walks they did on their own**. This was the case for Peter, even though he also very much enjoyed walking on his own, whereas Richard thought the sociability of group walks made them preferable:

'The fact that it was a group walk [appealed to me]. And with a leader as well...That was what appealed to me. Because of course, during lockdown we were so deprived of any human contact really.' (Peter, small group 2)



'I prefer group people. Sometimes we, when we are walking, you see we can have a chat you see about something else, you know. What happen is because you walk along [alone], you know, you get nothing.' (Richard, large group)

Interaction and shared experience with fellow walkers could **enhance their attention to and enjoyment of the local area while, at the same time, drawing them together:**

'The last walk, when I looked down the path...where we're in the park, I saw a big plane tree. And I saw these birds up there. And I said, "What's that? Must be all birds." And I went down there. Somebody had sculpt birds and put them up the tree...everybody went down and said, "Oh look at all the birds." We were just chatting about it. It was very interesting.' (Steve, large group)



'My [British] history, I'm not very good...Some of them, you know, one of them...he's very, very academic about those history this and that...Because in this area, because they are old houses, when you walk along just in Gower Street there's so many, many famous people or celebrities living there in those houses before, you see. To be honest with you, if you want to find something, just Google it. But you see some of them actually will speak to you. They know about it. You better listen rather than Google all the time.' (Richard, large group)

For Richard, this social interaction was also **an opportunity to practise his English:**

'Anyway, myself when I was working in the Council you see my English is quite fluent. But now you see 'cause I'm, I'm retire about 7 to 8 years now, I occasionally use English. That's why it's...not as good as before. That's why I try, you see. So I communicate with them and mix up with them. You see it much better that way. You see 'cause I can improve my English as well.' (Richard, large group)

Harden et al.⁹ and previous Ageing Better learning¹ has highlighted that some men may enjoy or get a sense of purpose from taking on an extra role which involves them in sharing their knowledge and skills with their group. Reflecting

this, Frank talked about **the pleasure he got from planning and leading a walk** on one occasion when the Team were not available to join them:

'Yeah, I sort of led that. We stopped every so often and looked at the architecture. Bits of this, that, and the other. Churches.... I mean, when I thought of my walk, I had to think about it in my head... And I just thought, "Oh yes, I know it'll go up there, turn left and there's the church, and there's Shaftesbury [Roseberry] Avenue, there's Sadler's Wells. There's the architectural buildings by the European architect. And then we'll go up to that coffee place in Amwell Street. It'll be a nice round walk." So it would just work.' (Frank, large group)



For four of the large group members, **social aspects were identified firmly as a primary appeal of the walks and as central to the benefits of joining the group**. Frank mentions the simple fun of being together:

'Oh we were just chatting, I was talking, I was making people laugh. And I think that's...that's key if you make people laugh. If you make people laugh and we just have fun.' (Frank, large group)

Others **explicitly mentioned walks as providing social opportunities and support which alleviated isolation and loneliness** which they experienced because of life circumstances including retirement, caring responsibilities, and the pandemic.

'Well, basically it's just nice, you know what I mean, to have a chat...I retired a couple of years ago, right? I mean you normally have so many different people you're chatting to at work...you chat to customers and chat to this ... but basically just nice to, I mean, just nice to talk to other people and see...Otherwise you know, especially with this epidemic, you're sitting indoors for like about a year doing nothing.' (Eddie, large group)

'It diminishes my sense of isolation. I meet a friend once a week, so I'm lucky and he's available. And I look after my parents. I go and see my parents and help them because they're getting quite aged now...[The walks are] such an oasis that I'm unwilling to go home at the end of it...I really, really look forward to it.' (Duncan, large group)

'I was getting low. You know I was going low because I'm on my own. And I, I haven't seen my family for over a year now...But the worst time was Christmas. 'Cause it was too long. And I was going down. And I was talking to one of the ladies and she felt the same...Nice people and nice to talk to different people. You know, they've all been in the same situation I have. I know how they feel. And I think that helps them as well. So it's good company and good time.' (Steve, large group)

Two men also mentioned that they valued the walks because they offered **face to face human contact which was an alternative to being on-screen or online.**

'Well, going on Zoom just seems to me to reinforce the fact that I'm isolated. The fact that you can walk and talk and you can actually see another human being...We keep a social distance and all that business. And um, we don't even shake hands, I mean, we're a very cautious group. But it's an antidote to isolation.' (Duncan, large group)

The two men from smaller groups also mentioned the social motivations for joining the walks but, as also noted below, talked less about social experiences with fellow-walkers.

Organisational ingredients of the walks which were important for engaging men, enjoyment and continued attendance

The men mentioned a number of other factors related to the way the Outreach Team facilitated the walks which seemed likely to be important for encouraging the men’s initial and ongoing involvement.

1. Invitations to walk

- Advertising and first conversations to encourage initial interest and engagement

Project staff interviewed by Harden et al.⁹ in Hackney, note that a combination of printed publicity and talk during outreach will be important for establishing trust and rapport which encourages men’s initial involvement in a group or activity.

Both print and first telephone conversations were mentioned by the men in descriptions of how they first joined walks. Four contacted the Team about joining walks after seeing a poster outside their housing or in the local area. One mentioned his existing familiarity with Age UK and their Camden offices suggesting that this gave him reassurance. Several of them mentioned that the Team responded quickly to their initial phone messages (within several days) to tell them more about the walks, and that they joined a first walk within a couple of weeks of this first contact. Two of the men said the Team called directly to invite them on a walk

Ageing Better in Camden COMMUNITY Camden age UK

March/April 2021 or when lock down restrictions ease and it becomes possible for up to 6 people to meet safely together outside

An invitation to join the Outreach Team at Age UK Camden for a safe, small group socially distanced local walk with optional tea stop. FREE

- Meet local people aged 60+ for a safe, relaxed and informal socially distanced walk
- Enjoy the changing seasons in your local parks and surrounding area
- Short and longer walks available taking in to account what's comfortable for you
- Walks will start and end in your local area – no need to use public transport
- Pick up a free reusable face mask and info about other local activities
- Subject to restrictions, join us at the end of your walk as our guest for an optional tea or coffee at a local outdoor café.

For more information and to book on to a walk, please contact the outreach team by calling: 07470 628 624 Please leave your name and telephone number. Jo, AnneMarie, Katharine or Lorraine will call you back.

We are part of The National Lottery Community Fund, Ageing Better in Camden programme. Our role is to proactively meet local people to pass on information about free local activities and events.

Please take our contact number with you and give us a call

Age UK Camden Outreach Walks	Age UK Camden Outreach Walks	Age UK Camden Outreach Walks	Age UK Camden Outreach Walks	Age UK Camden Outreach Walks	Age UK Camden Outreach Walks
Tel: 07470 628624	Tel: 07470 628624	Tel: 07470 628624	Tel: 07470 628624	Tel: 07470 628624	Tel: 07470 628624

indicating they had already given contact details to the staff during previous outreach activity.

- **Walks as drop-in events**

The previous ABC research², Harden et al.⁹ and learning from Ageing Better¹, all indicate that men would be more likely to participate in activities which were not too structured, and which did not require their participation in an over-formal way: where they can take part in on their own terms. A key element of this approach is that activities should run as 'drop-ins' with no requirement for every-session or even regular attendance. This flexibility might be particularly important for men with physical or mental health problems who may not want or be able to attend consistently.

With this in mind, the outreach walks operated on a drop-in basis and this also appeared to be important for the men walkers. Four of them mentioned that **they would like to continue joining walks as long as it fitted around other activities, commitments or appointments** and one mentioned that his **attendance was weather-dependent**.

- **Text invitations**

Two referred to the texts sent out by the Team with arrangements for each walk. Frank **perceived them as 'haphazard', perhaps reflecting that the texts had an informal feel**, while also noting that they worked.

'They have a pretty haphazard way of contacting us...well they have a way of contacting us. Yeah, either by text, I think it's usually by text ... Just swing up...they just text me and, "Walk tomorrow, 11 o'clock, usual place".' (Frank, large group)

Eddie indicated that the **text system supported the drop-in aspect of the walks** by allowing them to confirm they would be coming or cancel up to the last moment.

'I think they are organised quite well. You see after one walk, you see after couple of days...they actually will inform you what you call it the text etc. Is telling you the next walk, where the meeting...but I always have a late response. You know what happened is I don't know because that day I'm busy or not. That's why I always respond in the last minute...' (Eddie, large group)

2. Creating a positive social space

Harden et al.⁹ stressed the importance of skilled staff who can build trust with group members, facilitate group dynamics and keep the group informal and unpressured. In line with this, and responding to the earlier ABC research where men had said they wanted groups they joined *'to feel natural like meeting with friends'*, the Outreach Team also aimed to create a positive, comfortable social atmosphere on the walks. Their success was reflected in comments of six of the men who expressed their **appreciation of the kindness and attentiveness of the Outreach Team during their walks**. This was partly in terms of the time taken to interact with group members and to set a positive, comfortable, sociable tone.

'I think [the Outreach Team] treat people, I think they treat the people with a lot of respect. Which is great, that's really good...They're just nice. I mean, how straightforward is this.' (Frank, large group)

'Oh very much so, yes, they were very enjoyable, very good leaders and nice, nice companions too.' (Peter, small group 2)

One of the men said that he now regarded the **Team members as friends**:

'And we got on really well. I've made some good friends on that walk. Made friends with [Team names] who are always very helpful and they listen very well to what we have to say.' (Duncan, large group)



Two also mentioned how the Team were careful to **make sure that the walks were physically manageable for all** and that everyone remained included:

'They make sure we don't do more than we can handle.' (Duncan, large group)

'And the...interesting thing about these walks is that they are conducted at different paces. So there are people who are fit and healthy, rush on ahead, but then they stop. And look at things. And the people who are not so fit and healthy...Usually the leaders sort of huddle along with them or one goes up front, one back to the back. So that's no real problem.' (Frank, large group)

Six of the men also mentioned that they appreciated the inclusion of a **coffee or tea stop indicating that it was part of the welcoming, unhurried social experience.**

'...you're just meeting people, sitting in a park chair, and you're having a cup of tea or coffee or whatever and it's...it is good.' (Frank, large group)

'And she's kind...they're talking to us sometimes in groups, sometimes individual, depends how far we walk. And always even trying to

encourage us to have cup of tea at the end of the walks.' (Nick, small group 1)

Developing relationships and self-sustaining informal social hubs: The importance of a big enough group?

The work of the Outreach Team to facilitate the formation of informal social hubs in neutral spaces can be considered in terms of a short- or longer-term process. In the short term, they might be enjoyable, valued social experiences led by the Team which fulfilled an immediate need or desire for social contact, for an interesting outing or for exercise. **If walker relationships do not develop further, they may act as transitory social spaces, valued but with limited direct impact on the walkers' social connections.** The interviews suggested that this might be the case for both men who were part of smaller groups.

'Of course they been very chatty and friendly. They been very good people... After that everyone goes to his own way...' (Nick, small group 1)

'Yes, I believe that the idea was to sort of get us motivated to get on these walks ourselves, you know, without having a guide. But it never got anything like that with my...But of course, I only had the experience of two walks.' (Peter, small group 2)

In part, this may be about individual preference: Nick suggested that he preferred to limit social contact to the walks; Peter said that he did not join subsequent walks because other activities restarted which limited his time. And both men and women came and went from larger groups as well. However, there were **features of the larger group which seemed to make it more likely to foster social relationships between members and to continue as an informal social hub in the longer term** beyond the involvement of the Outreach Team.



The larger group had been formed in June 2020 from several early groups. These now contained smaller numbers, partly because some people were now more able to meet with family and friends or to return to pre-pandemic interests. The Team merged groups which were reasonably geographically close and also where they judged that particular individuals who they were bringing together would get on well with each other. This meant that there was likely to be a **bigger pool of people to interact with, even on days when some did not join a walk**. It increased possibilities for finding others with shared interests or life experience as well as for the interest of meeting people who were quite different. Men from the large group talked about both these things. Two of them **talked about discussing their common interest** in cricket. Others talked about how **the group was socially and ethnically diverse**. And several said that **they talked to a variety of people** during the walks with one mentioning that **the walking itself encouraged wide interaction**:

'We mix and match. This is the nice thing about walking, you see. You can talk to one person and then move...change to another person.'
(Duncan, large group)

The large group men also talked about **continuity of a core group of walkers over the course of their outings** despite individuals missing some walks. This

was in contrast to the small group walkers where only one of them had met one other person twice on his walks and their comments were more focused on their interaction with Outreach Team members. As such, **large group members had a better chance to form longer term connections since they were meeting the same people repeatedly.**

'I think there's been different people. I would say probably 90% the same, but there are one or two who are different. And you know, that's great.'
(Frank, large group)

'It has been a sort of nucleus of people with other people joining us from time to time. We've had a steady group on walks: [lists four names].'
(Duncan, large group)

Indeed, there were **signs of developing relationships in this group.** All the large group men mentioned actual meetings with other group members or suggestions made to meet outside the group.

'We went after this walk, and after the one before the last one, we went for a drink. We had a lemonade and we had a good chat.' (Steve, large group). Steve also talked about visiting another fellow-walker who lived near to him, having coffee and helping her with household jobs.

The following comment from Frank also highlights that **the process of establishing stronger ties may be tentative and gradual. As such the period of outreach involvement needed to be long enough to allow some relationships to take off.**

'And when I managed to sort out their telephone numbers ...and they didn't seem terribly anti me having their telephone numbers... And so far there hasn't [been a meeting outside the walks] ... There's no real commitment 'cause I'm not committed to any of the people in the group at the moment...but maybe I will be become committed. We'll see. Who knows.' (Frank, large group)

As well as being an outcome of these larger group walks, it seems likely that **these emerging social connections would act as 'social glue' which would encourage members to keep attending the walks and even to carry them on independently.** Indeed, when they reduced their involvement in the

organisation of walks to a minimum in September 2021, the Outreach Team reported that all these men were still members and that they planned to keep meeting as a group.

Finally, this transition to being an independent 'social hub' may be supported by **having enough people who can take on an organising role (although perhaps not too many)** and this may be more likely in a larger group. Both the smaller group interviewees said they disliked the idea of self-organised groups because they thought



it would be difficult to get people to come on time or to turn up at all. In the larger group, one man also expressed the view that he wouldn't want to organise walks but there were several who were enthusiastic about taking on this role as long (as their health permitted).

'Cause what happen is I don't really mind. Cause you see I'm good follower. Wherever you want to go, you see I follow you.' (Richard, large group)

'I would certainly like to lead the occasional walk myself. I don't see any problem with that. But I do suffer from severe arthritis.' (Duncan, large group)

Conclusion: Stepping-stone support for men to develop social connection away from formal settings



The Outreach Team approach to organising walks provides a potentially valuable model for supporting men to make new social connections. There are key novel aspects of this model. First, that social activity **takes place away from formal settings** which some men will not attend. Second, that **support from staff to promote and organise meet-ups is informal and short term** with the intention that relationships developed during walks take on an independent life and outlast this involvement. In addition, characteristics of the social space facilitated by skilled staff for this limited period of time and which were enjoyed by the men were that: it had **some focus and interest other than socialising**; yet it was **not over-structured**; and **a positive, relaxed social atmosphere permeated** the walks. There were hopeful signs from the interviews that, given a large enough group with the right mix of people, **these light-touch stepping-stones give men a good chance of making new friends** and, perhaps, becoming part of their own informal social hub.

