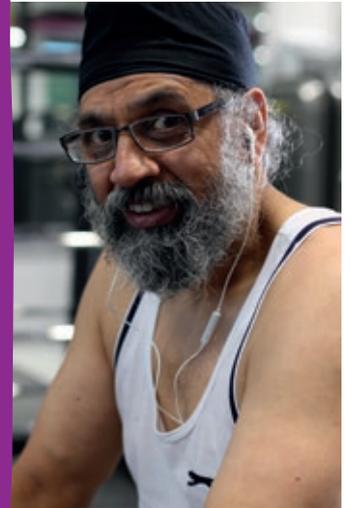


Learning about Loneliness

Our work with older people in Middlesbrough



**AGEING BETTER
MIDDLESBROUGH**



**TOGETHER
WE BELONG.**



From the beginning



A word from the Programme Manager

Ageing Better Middlesbrough strived to get beneath the usual processes, of measuring outcomes and outputs, to capture the true voices and experiences of local older people who are lonely or isolated.

We knew that counting bums on seats, using evidenced based scales and analysing data was only going to give us half the picture. To ensure that the programme is genuinely responding to local older people, we would need to try as hard as we could to get a full picture, preferably in High Definition.

Three years into the six-year programme, we have learned a lot about how challenging it is to gather and analyse informal, experiential learning in a way that is robust enough to be credible, but does not become so sanitised that it loses its connection to real life.

This report tells the story of what we have learned so far. What is interesting is that some of the most powerful messages are so ordinary by nature. Most of what we have learned is not new, and it certainly is not revolutionary.

At every event, focus group or interview we have heard again and again about the power of simple human kindness, even the smallest gestures can make a significant difference.

We know the right kind of support coupled with enough time and space to enable people to connect to one another is key.

We also know that getting this right is resource intensive and takes time and consistency; more time than most community projects ever get the luxury of having.

Every one of these interactions has further highlighted how hard it is to measure and quantify the true benefits for people. I talk about Ageing Better Middlesbrough as the equivalent of dropping a pebble in a pond – we only really measure the impact of the first few ripples, and even then we are barely touching the surface.

This learning report is a result of our attempts at reaching beyond the first few ripples. We have used methods that have tried to capture insight directly from staff and the older people who are involved in the programme.

We will keep trying to develop the ways we work with older people to capture their experiences and insights, so we can make as much difference as possible. In the meantime, I hope you find this report as inspiring as the older people who contributed to it.

- Michelle Dawson

We are Ageing Better Middlesbrough

Our aim is to find out why people aged 50 and over in our town are lonely and socially isolated and what we can do about it.

We have looked at what loneliness and isolation means to older people, how we can help reduce these feelings and how to give people the tools to become part of the community on their own terms.

We have discovered that people's experiences of loneliness are diverse. From those who feel like stepping outside is impossible, to those who join every activity in their area yet do not feel a depth of connection to the people they meet.

We have also looked at how we can better support those who are out doing things, to connect them even further with groups, activities and opportunities to get more involved in our programme and their communities.

In this way, our work is not just about people who are lonely or isolated. We look for the inspirational people who are getting out and making the most of opportunities. We are learning about what motivates these individuals and asking them to help us make more vibrant and accessible communities for everyone to enjoy and feel part of.

And we have reached into communities, supporting activities and groups to be more inclusive, which we know will help prevent people becoming lonely and socially isolated in the future.



“If we can put our ideas together and share them. It means people take them on board and that's how Middlesbrough is going to improve.”

- Action Group member



What we do

We are a Big Lottery funded programme that has £6 million to spend over six years to find out what works to reduce loneliness and social isolation for people who are over 50 and live in Middlesbrough.

We are part of a national Ageing Better Programme – a £78 million investment of National Lottery funding from the Big Lottery Fund to support people in later life.

There are 14 programmes including ourselves across England; in Birmingham, Bristol, Camden, Cheshire, East Lindsey, Hackney, Isle of Wight, Leicester, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Sheffield, Leeds, Thanet and Torbay.

We work closely with the other programmes, sharing insights and information to help innovate the work that we all do and find new and creative solutions to reducing loneliness and isolation.

Our learning here reflects what other areas have found and together we are building a body of evidence that we hope will shape a national solution to end loneliness and isolation.

What we are doing to help reduce loneliness and isolation

- We co-design our programme with older people, putting their voice at the heart of design, delivery and evaluation.
- We use asset based community development approaches to make sure community groups have the resources and skills to keep people active and develop social opportunities for people to connect.
- We organise taster sessions to introduce people to new activities. So far, we have provided 3,279 places for people on 321 taster sessions covering 64 different activities.
- We support older people to use digital technology.
- We created and now manage a membership of older people. We share information with them about groups, activities and opportunities in their area. We support our members to connect with each other and promote stories that highlight ageing well in Middlesbrough.
- We build relationships with representatives from local businesses, charities, care organisations, community venues and groups and the public sector, who are already linked into their communities. We help support and publicise the work that they do and find ways to work with them to recruit members and support older people.
- We work one to one in people's homes and community centres to help individuals make positive changes to feel less lonely and isolated. This includes providing specialist mental health support to those who need it.
- We find ways to listen and learn from the diverse range of older people we have met who live here. This includes asylum seekers and refugees, faith communities and BAME populations.
- We inspire older people to keep living their lives how they want to and to find joy in company and activity.

£6m

Investment of
National Lottery
funding from the
Big Lottery Fund

Our aim is to find out what works to reduce loneliness and social isolation for people over 50 in Middlesbrough...

Older people leading the way



What is co-design?

Co-design is a way of working on issues and solving problems that harnesses the knowledge and skills of people who have lived experience of those issues.

It uses creative and accessible activity to allow professionals and those with lived experience to come together as equals to plan solutions and make decisions about services.

For us, the experiences and insights of older people are essential and we place them at the centre of decision making.

We work with older people at all stages of our programme, using a structured approach to gather experiences and insights. We test out new ideas in a cycle of continuous learning and development.

We do this at all levels, from formal workshops and interviews, to conversations with older people at events and activities.

We emphasise the importance of feedback from our staff and older people and encourage this to be recorded and reflected upon.

Co-design in action

Mend the Gap is a project that we commissioned to find out how older refugees and asylum seekers in Middlesbrough experience loneliness and social isolation and how this can be reduced. It is delivered by Investing in People and Culture and Middlesbrough Environment City.

The group, which meets weekly to socialise, receive advocacy and find out about the local area, is key to the planning and decision making about how they spend their time together. Using creative and visual ways to include everyone, the project has created a group where older people are at the centre of the way it is run and developed.

66 Involving older people in the design of this project has challenged assumptions the programme held, built trust with individuals, and allowed the project to develop solutions that are more likely to make a positive impact in a sustainable way. 99

– Ageing Better Middlesbrough staff

Ageing Better Middlesbrough Action Group

Our Action Group is made up of about 13 older people – we say about 13 because new members join as old ones leave on an ongoing basis.

The group's role is to actively participate in the programme, helping to make decisions about how money is spent, which organisations we commission, staff recruitment and programme evaluation. Its members also take part in activities and help recruit new members.



How do we know what we know?

Everything we have learned over the last three years is a result of listening to the older people we work with, giving our staff the space to share their insights and recording what we have learned.

We have done this in a number of ways.

Informal learning:

We interact with older people every day during group activities, one to one sessions, therapy, phone conversations and so on. At each interaction we ask our staff to try and understand why older people are lonely, what motivates them and what support they need to overcome any barriers to getting more involved.

All of our staff are encouraged to record anything they find that is significant, and by that we mean, repeatable, remarkable or revealing.

Independent evaluation

We commission researchers from Teesside University to work alongside us to establish an independent evidence base that will help inform and progress our work.

The researchers have also reviewed the learning and data that forms the basis of this report. They support our findings, which echo the results of their own research.

Formal learning:

We brought people together specifically to find out more directly about their experiences of the programme.

We engaged with a number of older people – those who are part of our membership, those who have used our support services and those who help us deliver the programme.

We also spoke to staff, people who give their time to help us, members of the wider Ageing Better community, health and social care experts and other key stakeholders.



Our formal learning consisted of:

- Six workshops involving 25 members of staff
- Four focus groups with 28 older people
- Seven one to one interviews, plus six telephone conversations with older people
- Interviews with 14 stakeholder organisations and six Ageing Better programmes from different areas
- Gathering feedback from members of our Core Partnership - a group made up of representatives from 12 local organisations plus older people. They meet regularly to make decisions, develop the programme and provide guidance.
- Capturing the lived experience and insights from our Action Group
- Collating data about the individuals we work with using our database system
- Evaluating an online Google community where staff are encouraged to post insights
- Funding projects to develop and test innovative solutions to loneliness and isolation with a range of groups and communities. This includes BAME communities, asylum seekers and refugees, faith groups and people with Dementia and their carers.

Loneliness lived - what does loneliness feel like for older people in Middlesbrough?

The people we worked with have told us what loneliness is like for them:



Loneliness is no family support

66 It's hard. See my son lives 300 miles away and with work they just can't be here. 99

Loneliness is losing a partner

66 My husband died two years ago, we did everything together... It's awful, the worst thing is cooking for one and sitting at the table. The tears just come, I can't face it even now. 99

Loneliness is a belief that family members are too busy to help

66 I'm only 50 but my sons are grown up, living their lives... I've got just myself. 99

Loneliness is not knowing your neighbours

66 I have lived in my house for 25 years. I know the woman next door and the woman on the corner, that's it. People don't talk to each other. 99

Loneliness is not being able to go where you want to

66 The lack of buses stops me from getting out. The service is lousy, they give you a bus pass but it's no use. The last bus home from town is 5.20pm... and there is no service on a Sunday or bank holiday where I live. 99

Loneliness is living alone

66 Some of my most sensible conversations are with people on the checkout at the supermarket. The self-service tills stop that and I might not speak to anyone that day. 99

Loneliness is intensified at evenings and weekends

66 Closing the door on a night is the worst bit. Memories start coming back and I feel a little sad. 99

Loneliness is worse at Christmas and in the Summer holidays

66 I found the Summer months the worst as everyone was out and about with their partners or family, it emphasised my loneliness. 99



The most lonely and isolated people

Data gathered shows that we work with some of the most lonely and isolated people in the country. Our staff work with these individuals to help them become more connected to their communities and make positive life changes.

When we work with people on a one to one basis we ask them to fill in our survey which measures how lonely and isolated they are, as well as their levels of wellbeing.

The results showed people were notably lonelier than the UK population average and have lower levels of wellbeing.

To measure loneliness and isolation we use the De Jong Gierveld Six-Item Loneliness Scale.

It measures loneliness as a subjective experience that happens when people miss an intimate relationship (emotional loneliness) or a wider social network (social loneliness).

Both subscales are scored out of three with higher scores meaning higher levels of loneliness. An overall score out of six is calculated.



We also measure levels of wellbeing when people enter our programme for one to one support. The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) measures wellbeing out of 35, with lower scores indicating lower levels of wellbeing. Our data shows that the people we worked with came into the programme with lower levels of wellbeing than national averages.

Average levels of wellbeing at the start of one to one support

Average levels of loneliness at the start of one to one support

| Emotional loneliness (out of 3) | Social loneliness (out of 3) | Overall Score (out of 6) |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 2.37 | 1.95 | 4.33 |

According to the latest English Longitudinal Study Ageing/Omnibus the overall average score, for people aged over 16, for the UK population is 1.4. This indicates that the people we are working with are far lonelier than the national average. The higher average scores for emotional loneliness suggests that people are coming into our programme with a significant need for emotional support.

| Ageing Better Middlesbrough | UK population by age category | | |
|--------------------------------|--|---------------|------------------|
| | Data from The Office for National Statistics report: Measuring national well-being: Life in the UK: 2016 | | |
| | Aged 55 to 64 | Aged 65 to 74 | Aged 75 and over |
| 18.39 | 24.8 | 25.8 | 25.1 |

Measuring the impact of our work



We reduced loneliness

Once people complete one to one support we ask them to repeat our survey to measure the programme's impact on their loneliness, isolation and wellbeing. People who responded reported significant improvements in emotional and social loneliness.

Average reduction in loneliness with people who worked one on one with the programme and completed an exit survey (De Jong Gierveld scale)

| | At the start of their work with us | At the end | Difference |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Emotional loneliness | 2.2 | 1.4 | -0.8 |
| Social loneliness | 1.8 | 1.1 | -0.7 |
| Overall | 4.0 | 2.5 | -1.5 |

The score of people who told us they were the most lonely reported the largest average improvement of -2.5. This indicates that the programme is having the biggest impact on the loneliest people.

We significantly improved people's wellbeing

When we work with people one on one, we also see significant improvements in their wellbeing.

Average improvement in wellbeing with people who worked one on one with the programme and completed an exit survey (SWEMWBS)

| At the start of their work with us | At the end | Difference |
|------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| 18.7 | 23.7 | +5.0 |

According to the Measuring National Wellbeing Survey (2012/13), the UK national average for people aged 55 to 64 is 24.8 and rises to 25.8 for those aged 65 to 74.

Our data tells us that wellbeing scores improve significantly, and are much closer to national averages, after people have worked on a one to one basis with the programme.

We reduced levels of depression in 95% of people

We also collected data about levels of depression and anxiety from people who used our additional mental health support. This support was delivered by therapists on a one to one basis.

To identify the presence of, and measure the severity of depression, we use the PHQ-9 scale, a nine question survey. A score of 0 to 4 indicates no or minimal depression. At the other end of the scale scores of 20 to 27 indicate severe depression.

Ninety-five per cent of people reported a reduction in their levels of depression with 5% showing an increase and one person staying the same. People showed an average improvement of -10.5 from the start of their support to their most current score.

Average scores for depression with people who received additional therapeutic support

| At the start of their sessions | Current scores | Difference |
|--------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| 16.2 | 5.7 | -10.5 |

Significantly, the number of people who reported no or minimal depression increased from 7.5% of the total at entry to 60% at current. While the number of people reporting severe depression reduced from 45% of the total at the start to just 7.5% at current.

We reduced levels of anxiety in 90% of people

To identify the presence of and measure the severity of generalised anxiety disorder, we use the Generalised Anxiety Disorder 7 (GAD-7). A score of 0 to 4 indicates no or minimal anxiety. At the other end of the scale scores of 15 and over indicate severe levels of anxiety.

Ninety per cent of people reported a reduction in their levels of anxiety, with 7.5% showing an increase and one person staying the same. People showed an average improvement of -9.0 from the start of their support to their most recent score.

Average scores for anxiety with people who received additional therapeutic support

| At the start of their sessions | Current scores | Difference |
|--------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| 13.8 | 4.8 | -9.0 |

Significantly, the number of people who reported no or minimal anxiety increased from 12.5% of the total at entry to 65% at current. While the number of people reporting severe anxiety reduced from 60% of the total at the start to just 7.5% at current.

What works to reduce loneliness and isolation

Our work with older people has shown us that there is no one size fits all solution to helping people find a way to feel less lonely and socially isolated.

However we have identified ways that organisations can make positive changes to the lives of the individuals they are working with.

A unique approach to each person

The causes and effects of loneliness are very personal. As a result the solutions to tackle loneliness and isolation must focus on the individual's experiences, expectations and needs.

Understanding people's circumstances by listening and spending time with them is crucial to success. We take time to understand a person's goals to help them become less lonely and isolated. Providing this holistic, person-centred support requires months of relationship building to bring about even small change.

“Ageing Better is a social programme. My experience working with people here has shown me that social is massive. It is whatever it means to that person.

For some people it might mean getting a job. For some it's starting to make their own decisions again. It's not the thing you're doing, it's the feeling you get. That feeling is infectious. It's the start of something.

I let them know that this is a journey for me as well. How can I know someone's likes and dislikes from the start? We find out together what social means for them.

It's about trying things, not necessarily conscious decision making.”

”

— Ageing Better Middlesbrough staff



Throw out the assessment paperwork – rethinking professional boundaries

Developing a human connection, rather than a standard client/service provider relationship, creates a meaningful bond that leads to reducing loneliness and social isolation. It is things like helping someone find out which bus gets them into town, turning up at their house with a birthday card and cake, or allowing conversation to flow naturally rather than setting an agenda for a meeting. It is being a friend.

“I just needed somebody to be on my side, cause I don’t know anybody... If I’m in trouble, she’s on the end of the phone and I know she’s on the end of the phone.”

– Older person

“I could never have done that without the help of my friend. That’s what I call him... I said to him, ‘You’re helping me do this’, and he said, ‘I aren’t. You’re doing it yourself’. But if it hadn’t been for him, I wouldn’t have done it.”

– Older person

People that are referred to us for one to one support spend, on average, six months having regular meetings and phone conversations with one of our team. This time is not something that other services are usually able to offer.

It is time and resource intensive but gives us the opportunity to understand the complex needs of people whose loneliness and isolation is often entrenched and long term.

“Just taking the time to listen, eventually everyone will tell you something about themselves.”

– Ageing Better Middlesbrough staff

“Bring it down to a personal one to one level. You feel more like a friend than a worker. I am conscious when I first meet someone it is not servicey. Just chatty, ‘tell us a bit about yourself’.

I let people know I am just like them, that I have felt what they now feel. If someone has been bereaved I can resonate with that.”

– Ageing Better Middlesbrough staff



Gain trust and build confidence

Building confidence takes time but we know that activity at a regular time and place, with a familiar member of our team helps.

Once there is trust between one of our team and someone we are working with, through a meaningful relationship, we can then support them to build relationships with other people.

This can be seen at our taster sessions. Some members have been to 30 plus activities so far. When people return again and again, it is because of a connection to the staff member and their approach to the work.

“It’s the staff as well. Once you have been and met the staff, I mean apart from the people who go to the groups, you do develop a bond with the people, with the staff... You’ve got some continuity there with the staff, even though it’s different sessions. Once you develop a trust in someone, I think that goes a massive way.”

– Older person

The same is true for community groups, who together need to build confidence and trust to know that the group will succeed. This happens by giving people the opportunity to meet over and over again in the same place with lots of initial support from staff or helpers. In this way we can help sustain these groups.

“People need to build relationships with the staff member, then each other, then feel connected to the group before you can consider leaving them to it, and that’s fine, we know it takes time.”

– Ageing Better Middlesbrough staff

Taking a broader view, our learning supports the idea that communities, such as LGBT and BAME also need to build confidence and trust in external agencies. These groups have had promises for support made before and have been let down.

It has also taken time to restore their confidence that has been damaged by previous experiences of parachute initiatives.





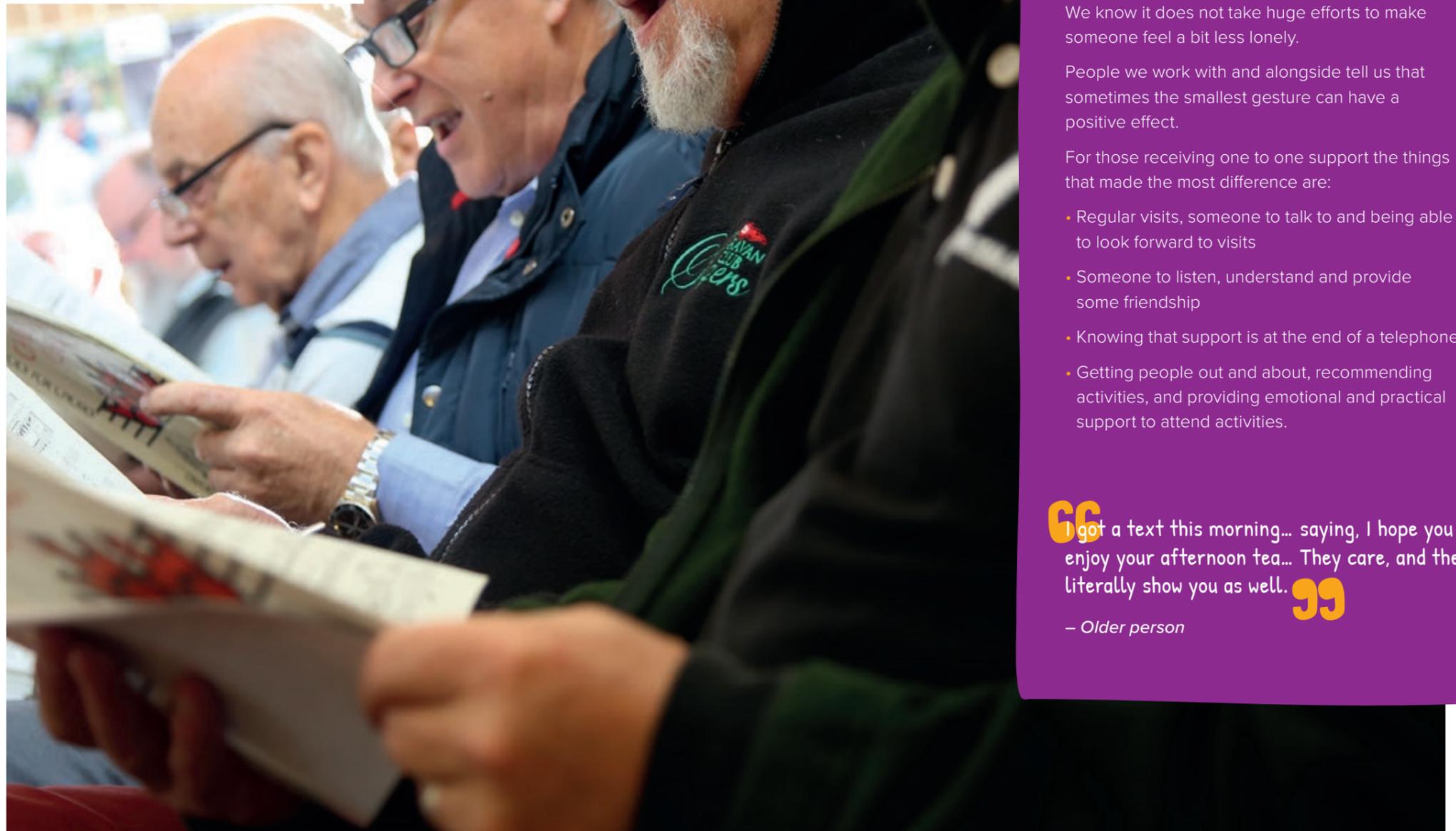
Hard-copy information is expensive but opens doors for people

Our membership is more than 2000 strong. More than 60% request information in a print, not a digital format, including those with access to email. Distributing a 12-page colour newsletter and a 12-page What's On guide every quarter costs a lot of money.

However we know that allowing people to access information in a way that suits them is key to encouraging more people to get involved in their community and activity. It helps plant an idea that they are not alone and gives them the options they need to get out and about.

66 I have been a member since last year, but this is the first taster session I have been to. Things have been such a struggle for me and I wasn't really sure about coming on my own. I've looked at the programmes for months but never got to anything. I've been sat with other ladies and it was so nice to meet new people. **99**

– Older person



The small things make the biggest difference

We know it does not take huge efforts to make someone feel a bit less lonely.

People we work with and alongside tell us that sometimes the smallest gesture can have a positive effect.

For those receiving one to one support the things that made the most difference are:

- Regular visits, someone to talk to and being able to look forward to visits
- Someone to listen, understand and provide some friendship
- Knowing that support is at the end of a telephone
- Getting people out and about, recommending activities, and providing emotional and practical support to attend activities.

66 I got a text this morning... saying, I hope you enjoy your afternoon tea... They care, and they literally show you as well. **99**

– Older person

Volunteering but not as we know it

There are lots of older people giving their time and energy to help Ageing Better Middlesbrough in lots of different ways.

When we talked to them about how it feels to be a volunteer, many older people did not identify with that label. Our learning indicates that the older people we meet are happy to help, but reluctant or unable to commit to a more traditional volunteering role. In fact the term itself often puts people off offering to help.

Many of the people helping the programme started out by attending activities or receiving our support. The more they experienced the programme, the more their confidence increased and the more involved they became.

This has led to people using their time and skills in a variety of different ways, including leading new community groups, editing our newsletter and becoming digital champions.

There is a blurred line between people who need our support and those who offer theirs to the programme. As such, we struggle to separate the learning we have gathered into learning about those who are lonely and need support and those who are helping us. They are often one and the same.



Flexibility is key

Older people are happy to give their time, energy and skills to support us, but the opportunities have to suit them. People like to get involved with opportunities that they are specifically interested in. They respond better when we ask directly for their help, rather than offering volunteering opportunities in a more ambiguous way.

Ad-hoc or dip in and out voluntary activity (sometimes referred to as micro-volunteering) is a much better fit for older people. We have found that people are much more likely to give something back if they feel like they can be flexible without letting anyone down.

People giving their time and skills to help the programme need their own support

The people getting more involved in helping the programme are sometimes giving hours and hours of their time to do something they believe in. They require a significant level of support to be able to get involved in this way and then to maintain this involvement.

Older people have told us that this means one to one time with staff to talk about their work and discuss the range of opportunities and additional support they need to keep giving back.

Even if people have been involved for a while they still need staff support, often on a one to one basis. This helps them to stay connected, motivated and engaged.

Although this support can be resource intensive we have learned that it has significant benefits to the individual and to the programme.

As people begin to experience how it feels to take on more responsibility or share their skills with others it becomes an integral and positive part of their life. For the programme, it means more resources to do the work that we do. It also gives us the opportunity to learn more about what motivates older people and find new ways to encourage them to share their skills and time.

Do not discount older people from digital technology

Many older people want to learn how to use digital technology but need supporting in specific ways.

- Most of the people we worked with said they do not have the confidence to try new technology on their own and needed support.
- Older people want to learn on the same device they are going to use at home.
- Older people felt they took longer to develop their IT skills, which is why the one to one support suited them more.
- People told us they did not want to learn in groups because of their previous experiences. They found group learning difficult to keep up with and not always relevant for them.
- Skills learned on one device did not transfer easily when using another.
- People wanted to learn how to keep a device up to date with things like anti-virus software, as this was a worry for them.
- People wanted support in choosing the right device for them and wanted this support from someone they trusted, not a person working in shop.

“I am increasingly coming across people who, by their own admission, are not ready for digital due to family, health or other issues. However those in a stable position in life are keen and eager to embrace technology.”

– Ageing Better Middlesbrough staff

“I had quite a lot of computer knowledge but then my computer was getting very old and my daughter gave me a laptop that she had ... when I get a new machine it's like starting again.”

– Older person



So far we've worked with **139** individuals, giving them one to one digital support.



“There are many people who are put off buying technology due to the perception of it being very expensive... This perception changes after they realise and experience the value of it, but actually making that jump is a massive barrier and step for older people.”

– Ageing Better Middlesbrough staff

“A couple of times, it's an age thing, but I've forgotten something, and I've rung him (Digital Inclusion Officer) and he's said 'never hesitate to ring me, I'll just refresh your memory'. I have occasionally rung him and said 'I've got so far but now I'm stuck', and he's told me what to do. So I've found that very, very useful.”

– Older person

The next three years

Our ambition is to make Middlesbrough an Age Friendly Community.

We will use the momentum and reputation of the programme so far to achieve this vision. This will contribute to the lasting legacy for Ageing Better Middlesbrough.

We will create events, meetings and workshops to harness the passion and drive of our Action Group, local people and community organisations. We hope to create space to share ideas and work collaboratively together to campaign, take action, drive change and ultimately become a key influencing force for people in Middlesbrough.

We are going to be exploring and tackling some common themes, including transport and bereavement. These are issues that are coming up again and again when we are talking to older people, as well as broadening our reach into the LGBT community and those affected by sensory loss.

We will continue to share our learning locally and nationally, by talking to people and organisations such as yourselves. In this way we hope to foster working partnerships and ensure that together we can create a better place to live for older people.



We would love to talk to you about how we can work together to achieve our vision of making Middlesbrough an Age Friendly Community.

Contact us on **01642 257034** to chat further or email michelle.dawson@middlesbroughandstocktonmind.org.uk

Ivy's story

Ivy worked with a member of our team on a one to one basis for about a year. Her words are taken from an interview she did with us about her experience of our programme.

"I thought should I join it or shouldn't I. I thought in the end yes I would.

"I'll take the chance and just see what it's about, and I'm glad I did because it brought life to me.

"...when I got out in places it was amazing how easy it was talking to people you know, and finding their troubles and thinking 'well mine isn't quite as bad'.

"Even though people said 'I don't know how you've coped'. I've coped by getting out and talking to people about things, and finding out what their troubles were. You don't feel as if you've got as much problems as what some other people have.

"I went away on holiday on my own to Scarborough for a week. I had to give myself a kick up the backside to do it but I eventually done it.

"First day was a bit queer being on my own but then by the time the week was finished I wished I had booked for a fortnight, it was that relaxing and that good.

"I didn't think I would enjoy it but I thought if I just go as far as Scarborough, if I want to come back it's not too far.

"I've learnt how to decorate cakes. I joined the U3A. I went on a trip, I also joined the Methodist Church and go to meetings every Wednesday.

"That's what it's give me you see. With losing family and losing a friend you had for years, you just felt isolated and this has sort of made up for what I've lost."

"...when I look back I think, I was lucky I found them you know."



Geoff's story

Geoff has been a member of our Action Group since 2015. He describes his experience of volunteering with the programme.

"I got involved with a bit of trepidation.

"I never wanted to do fixed voluntary work. I wanted something I could fit in with what I wanted to do. And if things got on top of me I could say no.

"But my wife had died and I said I wasn't going to stay at home moping. I was going to get out and start to do things. I tried to keep a positive attitude.

"The programme has given me a new structure. Not just structure, but also flexibility within it.

"I bought into Ageing Better. I like the staff and if I like people I will go that extra mile. Once I take something on I like to see it through.

"I think I am good at networking and organising. So I'll go out, talk to people and put leaflets and posters up.

"I feel like I have contributed to the programmes awareness of sensory loss, and that slowly positive changes are being made. I feel like I am pushing at an open door.

"And I do feel I have made a difference for isolated people in Middlesbrough. That's good. I love that - when you're a wheel within a wheel. You can be a small cog but as you turn you're turning other cogs. It's nice to see that happen."

AGEING BETTER MIDDLESBROUGH

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