The sports court is now **OPEN** to the public following updated government guidance.

PREVENT THE SPREAD OF CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

Developing social contact models in a time of social distancing: A response to COVID-19
Executive Summary

In March 2020, the majority of social activities and programmes were paused as communities adjusted to the COVID-19 pandemic and authorities and VCSE organisations prioritised humanitarian aid.

As lockdown eases, we are faced with a challenge of adapting to a 'new normal', working with the parameters of social distancing, tackling fear of being around others whilst encouraging social interaction and understanding the impact sudden loss of social activity has had on older people.

It is important to recognise that we are still in the first wave of infection and may have to return to lockdown at any point. It is important that planning is focused on how we live with COVID-19 rather than how we reconstruct after it.

Context

Our previous research has shown the importance of relationships in building resilience - the need for strong relationships with people similar to oneself (bonding social capital) and for connections outside to those different from oneself (bridging social capital).

Both bring their own benefits to resilience, with bonding capital often associated with survival or 'getting by' and bridging social capital tends to be seen as useful for improving one's situation or 'getting ahead'.

The more socially isolated a person is, the fewer social networks they have to rely on during times of need or the smaller their networks may be.

It is likely that direct engagement with strangers will be the last form of social contact to be reintroduced but it is these contacts that are the most essential to the development of new relationships. Without these opportunities, our opportunities to grow our bridging capital are reduced, which is essential for future resilience.

Therefore, it is vitally important that interventions to increase social inclusion are running sooner rather than later.

As the pandemic has continued, it has brought to the fore the inequalities that already exist within our society, reports of coronavirus deaths rates being twice as high in more deprived areas, some BAME groups being twice as likely to die from COVID-19 than non-BAME groups and the unequal social impact of the lockdown on LGBT older people, those in minimum wage jobs, those with limited English and those who are digitally excluded to name but a few.

Therefore, despite the initial rhetoric that suggested that "We are all in the same boat" and that the virus does not discriminate, it is clear that the impact of the virus is likely to disproportionately affect the most marginalised in our communities and their ability to 'bounce back'. Planning for the recovery phase needs to take this into account.

Impact of social distancing on traditional approaches

We are aware from the past five years of Ambition for Ageing that older people across Greater Manchester have traditionally favoured group approaches to reducing social isolation.

59%
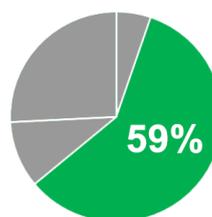
Among the 1385 projects designed by older people to reduce social isolation, almost three fifths of interventions we have funded have revolved around group activity.

Because all projects were developed by older people, this gives a good indication to what older people's preferences are.

Specific challenges

Whilst reviewing the projects developed by Ambition for Ageing in the past we identified the following specific challenges. These can help for a checklist of the key issues that will need to be addressed for future projects.

☑ **Social Distancing:** How can individuals taking part in activities and maintain a distance of two metres.

☑ **Leadership:** Are projects reliant on a small number of key leaders/volunteers who may be at risk of burnout?

☑ **IT:** Does the project recognise digital exclusion, cost of getting online, ability to troubleshoot and 'zoom fatigue'?

☑ **Shielding:** Does the project balance messaging between reassuring the concerned whilst encouraging positive social contact?

☑ **Enclosed spaces:** How will a project manage distancing and wider safety issues inside an enclosed space?

☑ **PPE & Hygiene:** Has the project or funder acknowledged the cost of PPE and factored regular cleaning into all activities?

☑ **Test & Trace:** Is there a plan to deal with temporary closure? Can the project support people and maintain confidence if participants have been asked to self-isolate?

☑ **Formality:** Informal activities will take on an air of formality given the circumstances so what steps have been made to help make people feel comfortable?

☑ **Travel:** With many uncomfortable with public transport how will the project reduce the need to travel?

☑ **Volunteering:** Many new volunteers and members of mutual aid groups are already returning to work – is the project sustainable if this trend develops further?

☑ **Engaging those outside of current social circles**: With social contact within households encouraged and connection between households severely limited how can the project build connections between strangers?

Projects compatible with social distancing

We reviewed a range of projects across Ambition for Ageing areas and found that most of these fall into the following:

Outdoor activities

Outdoor activities may not face as much disruption as others in the 'new normal', given that outdoor spaces are less prone to promote infection provided social distancing rules can be observed.

Indoor projects

We should view our current situation as a transitional phase, with more activities becoming available over time which opens up the potential of projects in enclosed spaces. Whilst not likely in the immediate future, we can start to develop plans and identify the resources needed ahead of implementation.

Projects based in indoor spaces, which are often about eating and socialising, may prove the most challenging to adapt to the 'new normal' as they rely on physical proximity and on groups gathering. These projects will have to rethink their requirements in light of the nature of the space and its particular layout.

Service delivery

Although less empowering than other interventions, service delivery, where an organisation directly provides a service to an individual or a group of individuals will still be relevant in the 'new normal'. It is important in this type of activity that these ideas are implemented alongside older people, rather than seeing them as passive recipients of a service.

Case Studies

The full report provides a number of case studies to demonstrate the types of activities that fall under each of these categories and to suggest potential for similar projects.

These case studies include examples from within the Ambition for Ageing programme, outside the programme and national examples.

Design principles for social distancing community connection

As we are still in the midst of the pandemic, policy and guidance is constantly changing and evolving, making decision-making at a neighbourhood level difficult.

In response to this, we have taken the approach of identifying four overarching key design principles to support the development and sustainment of social inclusion activities in the context of whatever comes next. These are:

Based on hobbies or shared interest

Developing projects based around hobbies or shared interests can provide a familiar and safe space through which to re-enter society. The activity can be less important than the shared interest – for example people who like gardening may also like to talk about or read about gardening if the ability to garden with each other is limited.

Builds community connection

Being part of community life in the widest sense can be a great help. For those able to, just the ability to be out and about in the neighbourhood can reduce isolation but for those who can't even just knowing what's happening can make a difference. The key is to help people understand what's going on locally so that they feel part of a community, even if they are at the edge of it

Realistic goal setting

Do recognise that we may not be able to address all needs at this time, but that we can ease the situation people are in. Be honest with people about what can or cannot be achieved and look for solutions that at least make visible improvements, even if problems cannot be solved entirely.

Getting the messaging right:

The messaging we use should also be influenced by understanding how people perceive risk. There is a trade-off between providing information for people to be able to prepare and not scaring them to the point at which they feel unable to do anything and therefore do not follow the guidance.

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