



# **‘An ordinary conversation’ – what works in street outreach?**

**Strategies and tips for good practice from those working in street outreach**

**A learning event report - Amanda Mainey, May 2019**

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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 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.



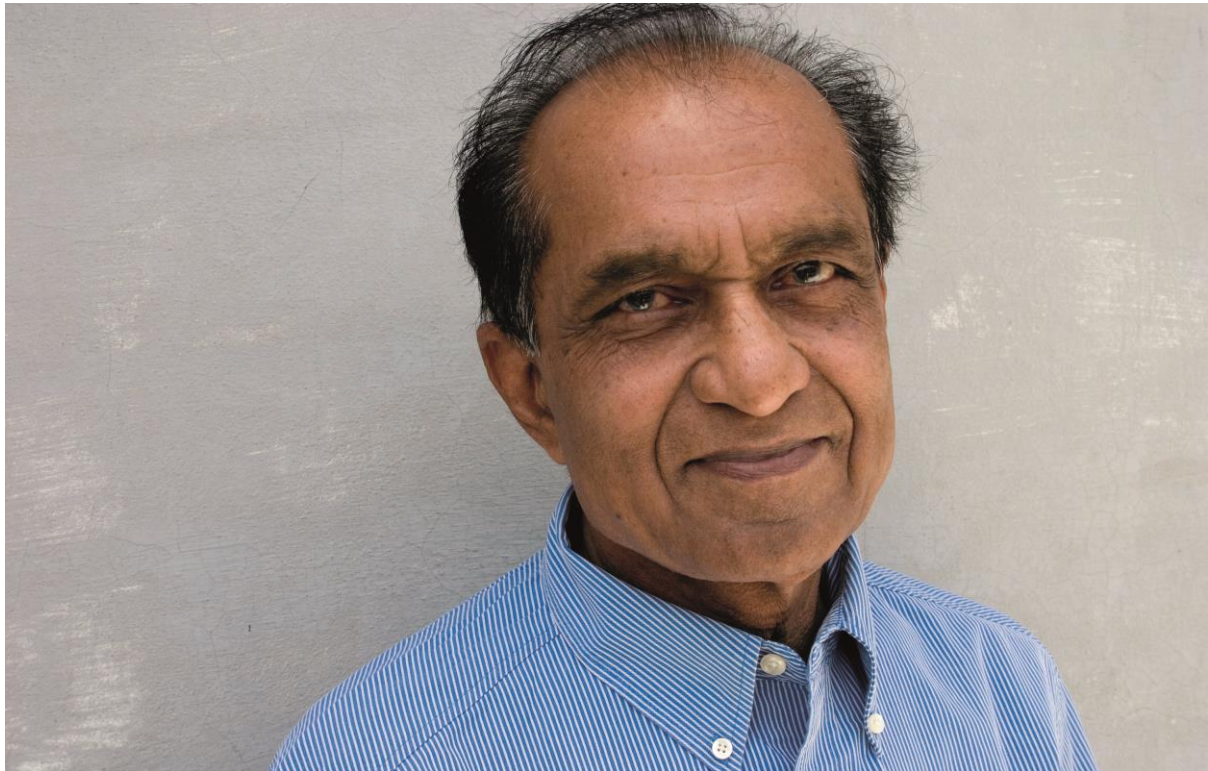
@abc\_camden



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

# Introduction

Ageing Better is a National Lottery Community Fund programme, which aims to develop creative ways for people aged 50 and over to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. The programme runs from 2015-2021 and is delivered by 14 cross sector partnerships across the UK.



Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) is committed to a 'test and learn' approach, sharing what we are learning in our work, and adapting what we do accordingly. In working to identify and support socially isolated older people, we have identified that there are three groups of older people who need specific strategies to engage and support. These groups are:

- The 'under-served', including BAME, LGBT and Bangladeshi communities in Camden, for whom we have contracted specific provision from delivery partners.
- The 'hard to engage', who may have particular support needs around confidence and practical support. Our Community Connectors service provides one to one support to enable these older people to access community activities.
- The 'people no-one knows', who are not on a 'radar', and are often not in touch with traditional services, e.g. are less likely to visit a GP regularly. The ABC Outreach Team was established in order to identify and signpost these older people into social activities in their communities. They do this through various outreach approaches (e.g. door-

knocking and pop-up events) and have specifically developed a street outreach approach to find those who may otherwise be missed. This is the focus of this report.

## Why are we interested in how to do street outreach?

Street outreach with older people appears to be fairly uncommon. In developing this approach the Outreach Team realised they have learned through 'doing' rather than any training or previous experience, and have refined their tactics according to what has worked or not. Reviewing their approach, ABC wanted to bring together street outreach workers from other fields, to improve practice by sharing tips and techniques which may be common across different client groups whom street outreach workers support.

## Learning from each other through an interactive workshop

On 14 March 2019, we hosted an event for those working in street outreach. The two hour workshop aimed to:

- Facilitate peer to peer learning between ABC staff and others involved in street outreach
- Identify similarities and differences between different schemes
- Explore strategies for making the most of (potentially) one-off interactions
- Explore how to better articulate the value of street outreach work (and especially the value of one-off interactions).

Sixteen outreach workers attended the event<sup>1</sup>. The workshop used small group discussions to explore similarities and differences in practice, share learning around how to have effective first conversations and ascertain how workers define the value of street outreach. Attendees also completed an initial written exercise to enable participants to reflect on their practice; 13 were collected after the event.

Feedback on the event was very positive. Those attending reported valuing the opportunity to meet others working in outreach, sharing experiences and reflecting on practice, and would recommend an event like this to a colleague<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This included 12 outreach workers from external organisations and four members of the ABC Outreach Team. In addition, three ABC programme staff and a representative from the National Lottery Community Fund were also present.

<sup>2</sup> Sixteen attendees completed feedback forms. Attendees indicated they would recommend an event like this to a colleague, with all but one indicating a 4 or 5 on the scale where 1 is low and 5 is high.





Many of those attending worked in areas in which street outreach is a more common approach. Attendees worked with: anyone believed to be homeless; rough sleepers; those exhibiting begging behaviours and/or anti-social or offending behaviour; people involved in substance misuse; and those who may have mental health issues. By contrast, ABC's Outreach Team targets anyone over 60 years old, regardless of their circumstances.

## What did we learn?

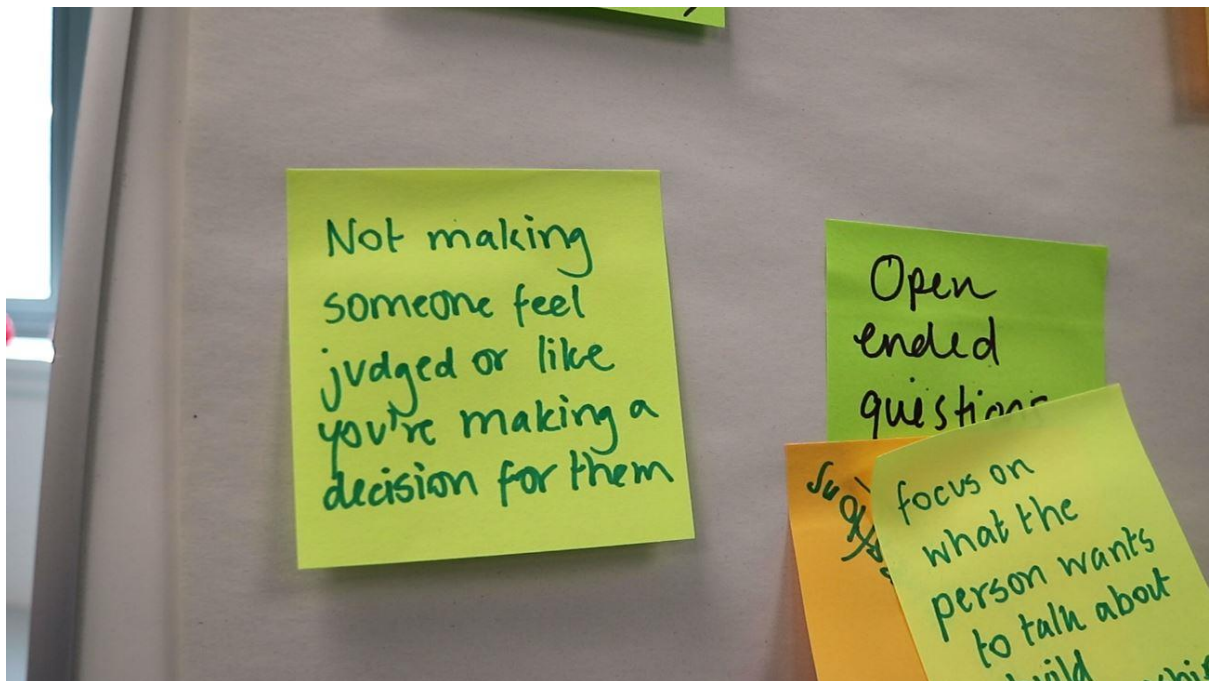
### How do outreach workers identify those to approach?

Outreach workers from all fields use observation and proactively target 'hot spots' to find individuals needing support. Some services use more referrals than others.

- **Identify potential clients through observation.** For those in ABC it is anyone who looks over 60; for others it is anyone who looks like they are bedded down, homeless or exhibiting anti-social behaviours. Sometimes all get it wrong. Workers agreed that not everyone presents in the stereotypical way, *"you can't judge on appearance"* – but outreach workers approach anyone who looks like they could potentially be in their target group, whatever that may be.
- **Research areas where potential clients are likely to be, or "hot spots".** Outreach workers proactively research where individuals needing support have been seen before

or are likely to be and target those areas at different times e.g. tube stations, canals, estates. ABC also selects areas for street outreach near the locations of activities for older people.

- **Act on referrals.** ABC and other outreach services differ in the number and type of referrals they receive. Safer streets workers act on referrals from other agencies, the public (through the Street link app), and referrals made through multi agency working (for example with the Police and Community Presence Officers). They also act on self-referrals. ABC does not receive official referrals as such. However they do hear of older people through word of mouth while talking to others within outreach activities i.e. some individuals may mention a neighbour or family member whom they think may need support.



## Opening lines and first approaches

Workers reported using the same kind of 'openers', about just trying to have a normal conversation and being natural and honest about it. Some of the common approaches identified included:

- Be friendly and smile, introduce yourself and give immediate clarity about who you are (show ID badge, explain what offering, and that you are not fundraising).

- A typical example of an opening line is “Hello, my name is x, I work for the outreach team, I’d like to offer you some support.”
- Some outreach workers spoke of the benefit of having personal budgets to spend on individuals and being able to use this as a way to initially engage them in conversation, offering shopping or something to eat or drink. The ABC Team do not provide food or drinks during street outreach, although this is a key facilitator in their outreach events e.g. pop up events in housing schemes.
- Adjust your approach depending how the individual presents, using your “intuition” or responding to an individual’s needs, e.g. mirroring tone, level of formality, offering to speak a language other than English<sup>3</sup>, or offering an interpreter. Don’t pull out pieces of paper – just have a conversation and focus on the person and what they are saying.
- Dress casually, and not in branded T-shirts. ABC and another outreach organisation reported abandoning use of their organisation’s T-shirts because individuals associated these with fundraising.

## What is the conversation about?

Despite different client groups and support needs, initial conversations with clients during street outreach are broadly similar. Essentially all of the services had a shared commitment to person-centred conversations and talked about the value of being natural and listening to what people say. However, conversations diversify when workers address their organisations’ needs around data collection, GDPR consents and carrying out risk assessments. Statutory services felt they were under more obligations than voluntary services, and this could get in the way of keeping conversations personal. However, these organisations may also have more of a formal structure and system to manage the risks around engaging with vulnerable groups, which other services may not benefit from. In summary, workers agreed that conversations:

- are about the individual and need to be flexible; workers should “go with the flow.” They should be person-centred, prioritising the individual, and focusing on their strengths *“Find out what is really important to the person”*.
- need to allow individuals to be heard. Hearing people’s stories is important to build rapport, as well as to determine their needs and what next steps may be to support them. As one outreach worker stated, the conversation *“evolves from there – becomes responsive- may lead to other information being shown, answering questions- talk/chat about other things”*.

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<sup>3</sup> The ABC Outreach Team includes a Bengali speaking worker. After English, this is the most commonly spoken language in Camden with 13% of the population speaking Bengali according to 2011 Census data (London Borough of Camden (January 2019) Camden Profile.)

- vary in terms of focus. ABC's conversations about what is on offer locally may generate further discussion about the individual's life or circumstance, whereas those in other fields possibly focus more on individuals' situations earlier in the conversation. ABC's conversations may be more cyclical in this way.
- will usually also offer information and signposting, and may lead to direct support provision. While the more specialist outreach teams can directly offer certain services, the ABC team refer those with more complex needs to other Age UK Camden services and are not able to offer direct support.

## How outreach workers create meaningful interactions



Much of the discussion during the workshops focussed on how outreach workers try to ensure that their interactions are positive and meaningful. Workers have distinct approaches and strategies to maximise the value of what may be a brief and/or one-time conversation. Many of these aim to establish a level of trust, which in turn may encourage individuals to access support or other services. Strategies included:

- Be transparent about what you can offer, being clear about parameters e.g. eligibility criteria such as nationality, age, residence in the borough. One worker spoke of the balance between building trust and what action is possible, meaning honesty is vital.
- Use body language and eye contact to engage individuals and make the conversation more person-focused, for example by mirroring body language, sitting at the same



level, whether this is on the ground with a homeless person or on a bench with an older person. Body language can show that you are listening and not in a rush.

- Be aware of and have an understanding of other cultures and backgrounds.
- Bring personal qualities to the conversation. Workers spoke of needing to be natural, friendly, patient, consistent and reliable, open and honest, and empathetic.
- *“Make it an ordinary conversation.”* Remembering it’s not an interview, it’s a normal conversation for that person so focus on them rather than on solutions. Never make individuals feel judged.
- Retain your professional boundaries even while creating a natural conversation - *“you’re not going to be able to do your job properly if you’re being mates with them”*.
- Be resilient. Don’t take rejection personally, accept that not everyone will want help or intervention - *“you can’t fix everything”*.
- Be persistent. This can be within the same conversation or with the same individual over a period of time – *“don’t take no for an answer”*. ABC workers reported that keeping a conversation going may overcome older people’s initial barriers. Street outreach workers continue to talk to individuals who have refused help or shown no interest, aiming to continue until the person engages: *“... keep pushing and pushing to get there... you never give up, you just keep pushing and pushing”*.
- Be respectful of individual choices, and not heavy-handed in your approach. *“I’m a stranger. I have to be really aware of that, and accepting of that, and accepting of their autonomy”*.
- *“Trust builds up over time”*. Outreach workers who see the same clients again, either in the short or long-term, suggested relationships can be established between workers and individuals which may improve outcomes for the client. ABC outreach workers typically only see the same person once and so must maximise the opportunity to engage within a short conversation.

## Communication strategies and approaches

Outreach workers spoke of a number of different approaches they use in their work, all aiming to engage with clients and encourage them to accept support or enable change. These included:

- **Active listening.** Reflect what the individual says back to them, so they feel acknowledged and heard. It is also important to capture and remember such details to reflect back in later conversations if these happen, to build trust and help with engagement. In some cases, remembering details may also help locate the individual again, especially for those without an address.
- **Motivational interviewing techniques,** agreeing priorities together and involving individuals in decisions in order to allow them to feel in control and retain some

autonomy. Talking about where the individual sees themselves in the future can be particularly helpful. This is a method used by those working with homelessness, substance abuse and mental health issues in particular.

- A **'trauma-informed approach'**. One worker spoke of the importance of having an understanding of what a client may have been through, being aware that what a client may project is the tip of the iceberg, and acknowledging their experience by reminding clients they have been through a lot.

## The value of a single conversation



All outreach workers operate with the knowledge that any encounter may be a one-off, and work to maximise the potential of that conversation to enable change for the individual. They agreed that there is an intrinsic value in any conversation on the street, even where they may not see the same client again. We asked participants to explore this in more depth. Small groups worked together to explain the value of what street outreach workers do i.e. what difference it makes to just talk to someone. Key points were:

- Conversation provides a human connection, meeting a basic human need to communicate, and is a chance for someone to share and interact in their own space. For some, conversations with others may be very infrequent.
- This allows individuals the chance to be listened to and feel visible and acknowledged.

- Every conversation has potential to lead to positive change for that person. It gives an opportunity for someone to reflect, either immediately or in the future, and could be a trigger for change. Sometimes this is a process of small steps.

Participants came up with the following descriptions of the value of single conversations:  
*“The conversations we have give people hope and options. It is a chance to have a positive interaction which helps build trust and makes that person feel valued, understood and connected. For those who are isolated this might be the only meaningful conversation they have that day or even week!”*

*“Street outreach works by giving people a valuable, warm experience of human connection, through which they have the opportunity to be heard and to connect with the things that matter to them. This can be a gateway to offering support, and support workers deploy a range of techniques which seek to maximise the potential that someone will be able to make positive changes as a result of that conversation, even if they do not immediately accept formal services”.*



# Summary

The cross-sector event on street outreach aimed to identify best practice and any key areas of overlap or difference. We learned that, despite different client groups and needs, there are a number of similarities in how outreach workers identify and approach clients, and work to create an interaction which has as much potential as possible to enable support or change for the individual concerned. In practice, this means being friendly, upfront about the purpose of the conversation and focusing on the individual. Workers use a variety of strategies to build trust within these conversations, recognising that there is a short time in which to interact. Outreach workers agreed that there is intrinsic value in any conversation on the street, even when they may not see the same client again. The practice which has developed intuitively within the ABC programme reflects that of more established schemes.

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# Appendix A

We are grateful to all those who contributed to the workshop. Attendees came from the following organisations/teams:

- Ageing Better in Camden (ABC)
- Camden Safer Streets Team
- Focus Homeless Outreach Team
- Fulfilling Lives Islington and Camden (FLIC)
- Lambeth Safer Streets Team
- St Mungo's Westminster SOS