



Staying Connected

Guidance for Ageing Better Groups on Adapting to COVID-19



Introduction

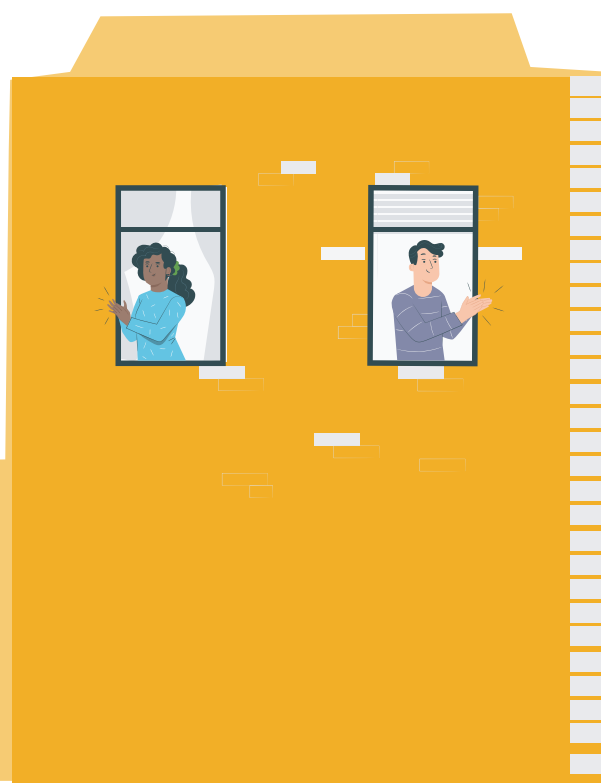
This short guide is for anyone who organises Ageing Better in Birmingham groups. It offers guidance and resources to help groups recover from the disruption of COVID-19 and adapt activity to our 'new normal'.

By helping people connect, Ageing Better groups have made a positive difference in the lives of thousands of Brummies. The pandemic and measures taken to protect us have impacted on everyone, so now more than ever, we must keep connected with each other.

In this document, we share what other local groups have done over the last few months, summarise the latest government guidance and explore the practical implications of restarting activity. There are also easy to use risk assessment tools and links to further resources.

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COVID-19 & Ageing Better

Ageing Better in Birmingham has achieved a lot over the first five years of the programme and the groups and activities you run have been crucial to its success. Providing creative ways for people aged over 50 to be actively involved in their local communities has helped to combat social isolation and loneliness and arguably made Birmingham a better place for everyone.



8,000+ people have taken part in activities designed to build bridges between people

63% of Ageing Better in Birmingham participants have shown an improvement in their overall wellbeing

89% of people taking part show continued or increased engagement in social activities.

The Ageing Better Fund and our Transition Fund has so far supported close to **300 groups** across the city, approving financial support totaling **£443,000** (Aug 2020)

We saw a massive community effort to support each other during the early phase of the pandemic. However, the lockdown has disrupted existing social activity and left many people still isolated in their own homes. It has also triggered a secondary epidemic of anxiety, depression and increased feelings of loneliness.

Our surveys had shown that Brummies were already some of the loneliest, but also show big improvements for people when they engaged in a community-led activity.

Ageing Better Groups help people re-make and maintain social connections that have a positive impact on their mental and physical health. So, as you think about how and when to start up groups again, it's worth bearing in mind the big difference they make in people's lives.



Doing things differently

'COVID won't stop us getting together.'

We asked group leads what they thought were the most important things to think about when planning activity and adapting to meet the challenges of COVID-19.



Focus on connectedness rather than activity, which should be secondary.

Keeping connected and staying active and busy is really important for people's positive mental health.

We should think about how best to adapt what we do, rather than wait for things to be the same as before the pandemic.

Online meetings using apps such as zoom have been invaluable during the pandemic.

Important to check-in via phone and have socially distanced meetings for those who are digitally excluded.

A blend of activity will be essential going forward, with a mixture of online and socially distanced meetings. This will also allow us to be as inclusive as possible.

Creating opportunities for people to connect outside the organised group activity through facilitating informal communication.

Ensure we talk about things other than COVID-19. Facilitating activity that can provide new topics for people to talk about.

Remember, the pandemic is not over, and we could return to local or national lockdown at any point. We all have a part to play in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Practically, this means you will have to incorporate social distancing and where appropriate other infection control measures such as mask-wearing and hand sanitisation into your activities.



You should also be mindful of how the sudden loss of social activity has negatively affected people's mental health and their genuine fears of being around others. Those, and many other factors specific to each group will affect where, how and if you now hold physical meetings.

Below is a helpful list of questions to consider when you are planning to restart activity.

1. Social Distancing: How can people taking part in activities maintain a two metre distance?

2. Leadership: Is your group reliant on a small number of key people who organise it and may be at risk of burnout?

3. IT: Does the group have members who are digitally excluded? Does the group have the skills needed to facilitate online meetings? Are you using the right social tools for your group and its activity?

4. Shielding: Do your communications strike a balance between reassuring concerned members whilst encouraging participation in activity?

5. Enclosed spaces: How will you manage distancing and broader safety issues if meeting inside?

6. PPE & Hygiene: Have you considered whether you may need to use PPE, and any cost of equipment and regular cleaning?

7. Self-Isolating: Can the group enable people to participate if members have been asked to self-isolate?

8. Formality: Informal activities may take on an air of formality given the circumstances (PPE, social distancing, etc.) so what can you do to help make people feel comfortable?

9. Travel: With many uncomfortable with public transport, how could you reduce the need to travel?

10. Engaging new members: With social contact within households encouraged and connection between households severely limited how can you continue to attract new members?



Ideas to stay connected

'There's more than one way to bake a cake'

When physical group meetings paused, many groups found new and innovative ways of putting on activities and staying in touch; some were informal and some organised. The following are some examples of how different groups have adapted activity during and post-national lockdown. Keeping connected and staying safe.

Integreat Theatre

**Ageing Better
Hub**
LGBT

What?
Online socials
and performance

Tools
Zoom

Some groups, like InteGreat Theatre, moved entirely online. InteGreat is a Birmingham based community theatre company for deaf and hearing adults. It's a group where adults from both the deaf and hearing community can perform, socialise and have fun.

Despite the challenges of lockdown, they felt it was essential to keep their Saturday sessions going and decided to try rehearsals online, using Zoom. It was free for up to 40 minutes with a paid subscription available for longer sessions, one-to-one meetings are free with no time limit.

With about a third of their members over 55, the oldest is a woman in her 70's, they were mindful of not excluding people. They helped members with the technology so they could stay in touch and participate.

So while the way they meet has had to change, for now, the group was able to continue rehearsals, socialise and even hold performances by making use of digital technology.

You can find out more here:

www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk/learn-more-get-inspired-by-stories/stories/integreat-theatre-maintaining-togetherness



Ideas to stay connected

Sar Ramz

Coordinated cooking activity and group social messaging, with some socially distanced visits to the digitally excluded.

Ageing Better Hub
City Wide

What?
Cooking, group messaging, visits

Tools
WhatsApp, Facebook Group

Set up as a cooking group, Sar Ramz responded proactively to lockdown by coordinating cooking, crafting and regular quizzes amongst its members; as well as celebrating birthdays and other special occasions. The activity was coordinated through social media via WhatsApp and video. The group lead coordinated the set-up of a WhatsApp group, so people always had someone to talk to or text and to coordinate weekly activity.

The group felt it was important they stayed active and connected to combat the stress of lockdown and promote positive mental wellbeing. The cooking and other sessions were very successful, members also shared recipes and pictures on the group Facebook page. They are also creating a cookbook, 'Sar-Ramzs Lockdown Recipes'. For those who were not tech-savvy, the group lead organised socially distanced meets in members gardens or local parks. So everyone could enjoy social time and not feel excluded.



Ideas to stay connected

Tyburn Walking Football

Ageing Better Hub
Tyburn

What?

Socially distanced wellbeing walks

Tools

Booking system, risk assessment

In response to lockdown, the group had planned to undertake socially distanced sports activity, walking football. The COVID-19 restrictions around sports activity meant they could not do that safely. The lack of social activity began to make members feel low, so the group decided to organise 'wellbeing walks' instead.

They were supported by a fitness professional who has helped them undertake the relevant COVID risk assessments. The risk assessment process was a barrier to them starting the activity. To adhere to COVID-19 guidelines, they have implemented a booking system to limit numbers. Bookings are coordinated by the group lead via telephone.

Walks proved very popular with members who have given some fantastic feedback about the positive effect on their general wellbeing from the social and exercise aspects of the walk.



Connecting with Clay

Ageing Better Hub
Carers

Method

Coordinated craft activity, group social messaging

Tools

Activity packs, WhatsApp and video calls

This group usually met in a cafe and made pottery which was fired by the group lead. There was a really successful group, and they decided to continue activity during the lockdown. They received transition funding for packs of art items which were distributed to members.

They were given guidance from the group lead in a weekly WhatsApp meeting and chatted together about their achievements. This enabled them to continue to use their artistic skills and have a non-COVID related topic to talk about. They stayed in touch using WhatsApp messaging and video calls. They were also in touch by phone for chats anytime.

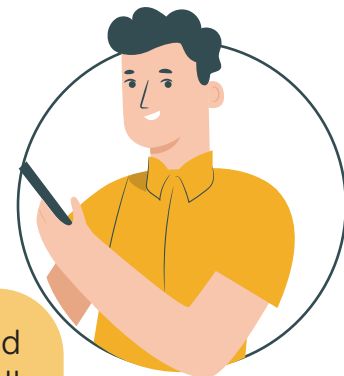


Keeping active and connected was incredibly positive for the group, some were shielding, and all had been self-isolating for months.

Ideas to stay connected

Phone calls & Text

Lots of groups and individual members have stayed in touch using phone calls and text messages. Some of this was coordinated in place of meetings, and some were informal chats between members. For example, BGLAD is an LGBT mental health peer support group, and they have a text group which has help discussions every two weeks when they would have met in person.



There are many more examples of how groups have stayed connected, chat to your network enabler about what's worked well for others. Remember, social media and communications tools each have their pros and cons, so make sure you ask for advice on the best ones to use for the group and its activities.

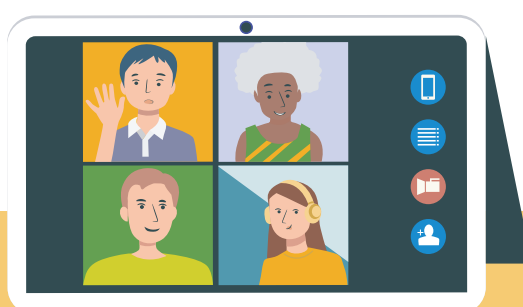
Digital Support

Lots of groups have successfully set up online activity during the pandemic. Still, we know there are a bewildering array of available tools, and not everyone feels comfortable or confident using them.

Pauline Roche is the Ageing Better Digital Consultant. If groups require digital/technology-based support, they can be referred to her via their Network Enabler. The advice can be anything from help on how to move activity online or how to step up a zoon account.

If a member needs one to one support to access online activity, she can also assist. For multiple members who need support, Pauline can develop and deliver a digital skills workshop to help online activity get up and running. Using digital tools can help your members stay connected, especially those who may continue shielding or if we go back into lockdown.

Networks who require support should contact their network enabler in the first instance.



Current Government Guidelines

Government advice continues to change in response to the pandemic. We recognise that this can be confusing at times due to information fatigue and the amplification of misinformation through social media. We have summarised the latest guidance relevant to groups, which was published on the 9th September, below. We advise that you regularly check the government website for up to date information, there are links to the pages you need to monitor at the end of this document.

The primary advice continues to be to limit close contact with people outside of your household bubble as much as possible, and if you do meet other people, maintain social distancing.

While many commercial and community facilities have re-opened, we are not 'back to normal'. Venues operate strict social distancing rules and have control measures in place.

Some of the places that have re-opened;

- Church halls and community centres
- Shops, pubs, cafes, hairdressers, and restaurants.
- Gyms, swimming pools and other leisure facilities.
- Outdoor attractions – drive-in cinemas and animal attractions like zoos, farms and safari parks.



National Guidance on social interaction from 14th September 2020

A household is defined as the people you live with and any support bubble. You can form a 'support bubble' with one other household if you live alone or are a single parent with dependent children - in other words, you are in a household where there is only one adult.

- 1.** You can meet people you don't live with (or have formed a support bubble with) indoors, in private homes or commercial/community venues in groups of up to 6. You should continue to maintain social distancing with anyone you do not live with.
- 2.** You can spend time outdoors, including private gardens and other outdoor spaces, with up to 6 people who are not part of your household/support bubble, following social distancing guidelines.
- 3.** It is against the law to meet people you do not live with in a group larger than 6.
- 4.** However, there are exceptions where groups can be larger than 6 people, including for work, and voluntary or charitable services, funerals and weddings.
- 5.** Local lockdowns with stricter rules may come into effect at any time to halt the spread of the virus. Keep an eye on Birmingham City Councils COVID-19 webpage for up to date information and guidance. (link at the end of this document)

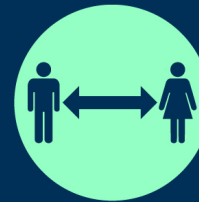
We must keep on protecting each other.



HANDS



FACE



SPACE

STAY ALERT › CONTROL THE VIRUS › SAVE LIVES

To help protect group members and the wider community we should all follow these simple steps; It is critical that everybody observes the following key behaviours:

HANDS Wash your hands regularly and for 20 seconds.

FACE Wear a face covering in indoor settings where social distancing may be difficult, and where you will come into contact with people you do not normally meet.

SPACE Stay 2 metres apart from people you do not live with where possible, or 1 metre with extra precautions in place (such as wearing face coverings or increasing ventilation indoors).

You should also; avoid touching your face, carry tissues with you to catch any coughs and sneezes, and throw them away after.

If you have any of these 4 symptoms:

- high temperature
- new, continuous cough
- loss/change in sense of smell
- loss/change in sense of taste,

**you MUST self-isolate and book a test.
Call 119 or go to <http://orlo.uk/sdgpz>**

Restarting groups in COVID-19 secure community venues

Even with the tighter restrictions on informal social gatherings, voluntary clubs and groups can begin to meet again in COVID-19 secure venues. People meeting in a club or group context at a community venues should socially distance from anyone they do not live with or who is not in their support bubble. Groups members should also limit social interaction with anyone outside of your formal activities even if they see other people they know.

Each community facilities should have measures in place to ensure all users can follow the guidelines on social distancing, including strict adherence to social distancing of 2 metres (or 1 metre with risk mitigation where 2 metres is not viable).



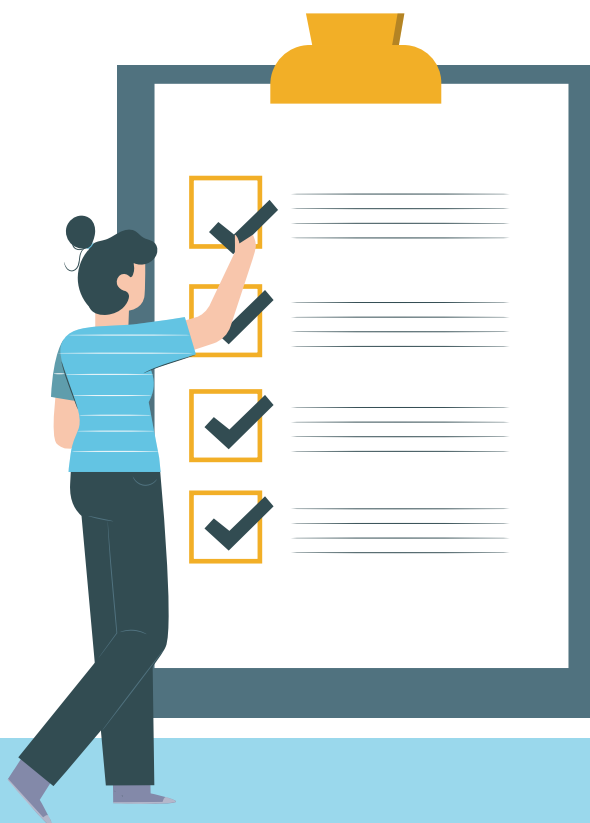
If you meet in a community venue, get in touch with them and discuss if you can restart your meetings there and what measures they have in place to make the venue COVID-19 secure. Venues are responsible for complying with COVID-19 secure guidelines and you can ask to see the risk assessments they have carried out for the venue by contacting the relevant building manager. You may also share any risk assessment you undertake for the activity with them.

If you meet in informal community venues such as cafes, please get in touch with them and see if they can accommodate the group safely.

Thinking About Safety

'Looking out for each other is the essence of community.'

COVID-19 is highly contagious, and we all need to think about how to mitigate the risks of spreading the virus while also recognising the benefits of social interaction. The pandemic is also having an impact on people's confidence and mental health, so when planning activity, you will need to factor in that numbers may be lower. You might also need to find ways to include those who can't or won't attend physical meetings.



People at higher risk of severe illness

The government guidance recognises that certain groups of people are at increased risk of severe disease from coronavirus (COVID-19). That includes all people aged 70 or over and those with a range of underlying health issues.

People over 70 are advised to stay at home as much as possible and, if they do go out, to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside of their household. This may have a significant impact on Ageing Better groups. If you have a high proportion of members in higher-risk groups, we recommend that where meetings can take place digitally, they should do so.

Assessing COVID-19 Risk

Assessing risk will help you choose how best to shape your activity to balance the desire to meet socially and keep each other safe.

We've included two risk assessment tools in this pack to help you.

1. Individual Risk Assessment: is for group members to complete themselves and is designed to help them understand the potential risks to them from the coronavirus. They can then decide if they are happy to meet in person again. (n.b. The individual risk assessment is not intended to replace a medical assessment. If worried, your members should consult their own medical professionals before deciding how best to engage in social activity. Group members do not need to send you their scores or divulge any medical details to you.)

2. Risk Assessment for Groups. We have included an easy to use risk assessment template designed specifically for Ageing Better groups. Created by Sparkbrook Ageing Better Hub, it helps you identify activity or situations that might cause transmission of the virus. You can then mitigate those risks in ways that work for you.

Do not be surprised if some of your members don't feel comfortable attending meetings in person yet. We all perceive risk differently because our situations are unique to us. Try not to judge their choices.



Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

The pandemic is incredibly stressful for people! Fear and anxiety about COVID-19 and what could happen can be overwhelming and cause strong feelings. The public health actions taken (lockdown and shielding) may have disproportionately affected those already at higher risk of becoming isolated and experiencing loneliness. However, these actions are necessary to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

The stress and emotional reactions caused by the pandemic can sometimes cause the following:

- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones, your financial situation or job, or loss of support services you rely on.
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns.
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating.
- Worsening of chronic health problems.
- Worsening of mental health conditions.
- Increased use of tobacco, and/or alcohol and other substances.

Helping others cope with their stress, by for instance leading social groups, can make your community stronger, but it should be balanced with care for yourself. It is essential to recognise the above and try to cope with stress in healthy ways.

There are services and resources listed in this document that can support you or group members if needed.

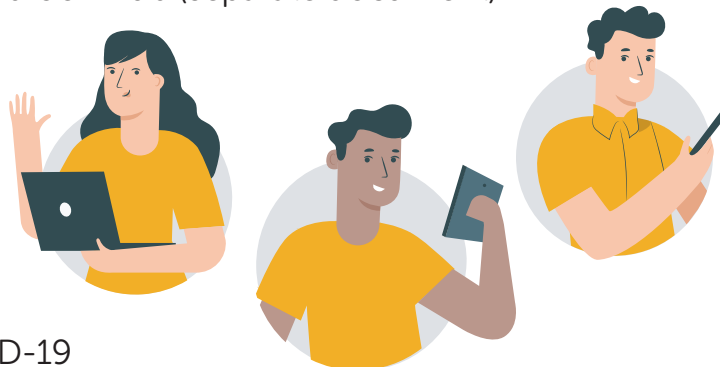
If you as an individual or group decide you don't want to continue any formal activity right now, just checking in with each other might make a positive difference to how someone is coping during this difficult time.



Find out more

Resources

Individual Risk Assessment Tool - United Reform Church (separate document)
Group Risk Assessment Tool – Sparkbrook Hub (separate document)



Links

Mental Health Support & Advice

Mental Health Support during COVID-19

<https://www.bsmhft.nhs.uk/service-user-and-carer/mental-health-support-during-covid-19/>

MIND – Coronavirus and your wellbeing

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>

Mental Health Foundation - Looking after your mental health as we come out of lockdown

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/coming-out-of-lockdown#fear-and-anxiety>

Government Guidance

Meeting People Outside of Your Household (updated 9th September 2020)

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/meeting-people-from-outside-your-household-from-4-july>

FAQs What I Can and Can't Do – Social Contact and Events (updated 9th September 2020)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do#social-contact-and-events>

Staying Safe Outside Your Home (updated 9th September 2020)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-safe-outside-your-home/staying-safe-outside-your-home>

Government Guidance (continued)

Safe Use of Multi-Purpose Community Facilities (updated 9th September 2020)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-multi-purpose-community-facilities/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-multi-purpose-community-facilities>

Local restrictions: areas with an outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) (updated 22nd August)

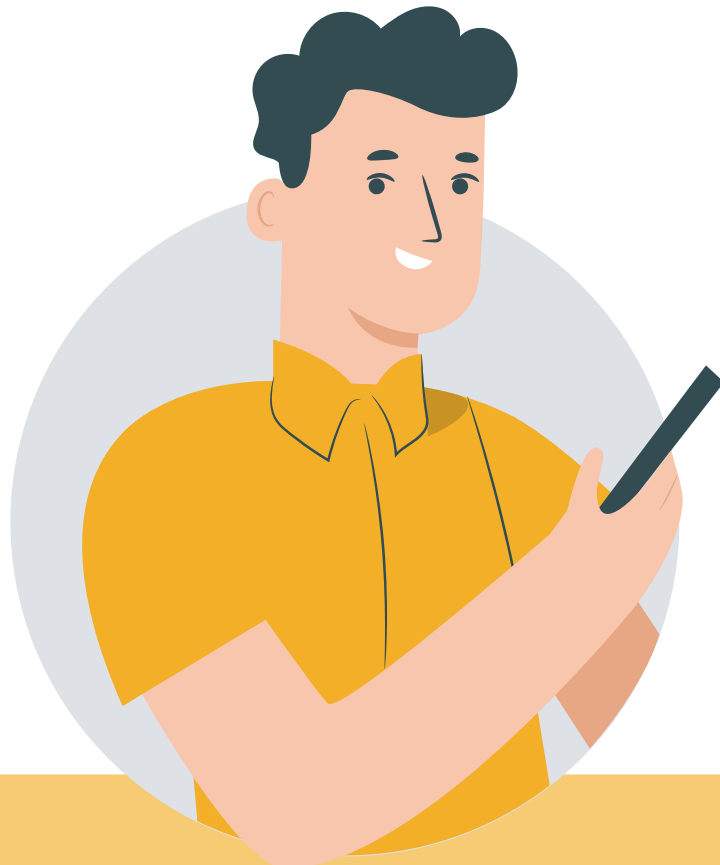
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/local-restrictions-areas-with-an-outbreak-of-coronavirus-covid-19>

Birmingham City Council FAQ on Birmingham restrictions

https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/50231/coronavirus_covid-19/2254/new_coronavirus_restrictions_in_birmingham_%E2%80%93_faqs

Local Birmingham Solihull Sandwell guidance – valid from 15/09/2020

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/birmingham-sandwell-and-solihull-local-restrictions>



With thanks to thanks to

Ambition for Ageing Manchester
TED Ageing Better in East Lindsey

Sar Ramz

InteGreat Theatre

Tyburn Walking Football

Connecting with Clay

BGLAD

United Reform Church

Centres for Disease Control (CDC), United States of America



AGEING
BETTER IN
BIRMINGHAM

Ageing Better in Birmingham 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.

In Birmingham, the programme is delivered by a partnership led by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC).

