



Evaluation of Age Better in Sheffield

The Impact on Social Isolation and Loneliness (2015-21)

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Summary

- Age Better in Sheffield (ABiS) was a £6 million investment between 2015-21 to **understand ‘what works’ to reduce isolation and loneliness amongst people aged 50+** in the city through a partnership working and a range of voluntary and community sector-based interventions.
- **Co-production was at the core of the ABiS approach.** People aged 50+ were involved in designing, delivering, evaluating and make key decisions about the programme and this undoubtedly played an important role in its development and effectiveness.
- The evaluation has shown that **ABiS was very effective at engaging isolated and lonely people aged 50+:** more than half of participants were identified as lonely when they first engaged, and around a quarter were in the ‘most lonely’ category.
- There is strong evidence that **ABiS had a positive impact on isolation and loneliness:** two-fifths of participants reported lower levels of loneliness following their involvement with the programme and this is backed up by the individual accounts given by participants throughout the programme.
- **Engaging people aged 50+ from BAME communities is challenging** and requires culturally tailored approaches that draw on the expertise of local voluntary and community organisations with experience of engaging different with communities across the city.
- Interventions to target isolation and loneliness are most effective when **tailored to participant’s needs and personal circumstances.**
- There are some **key lessons from ABiS** that future programmes that aim to address isolation and loneliness in people aged 50+ should consider.

1. Introduction

Age Better in Sheffield (ABiS) was a six-year £6 million investment by the National Lottery Community Fund to reduce isolation and loneliness amongst people aged 50 or over (people 50+) in the city between 2015-21. It was led by South Yorkshire Housing Association (SYHA) and delivered in partnership with the voluntary sector, public sector, and people 50+ across Sheffield. This report provides a final summative assessment of the **impact of ABiS on social isolation and loneliness**, summarising quantitative and qualitative data and insights collected across the duration of the programme. It draws a number of different evaluation reports published throughout the evaluation.¹

2. What did ABiS do?

ABiS was a **‘test and learn’ programme that aimed to capture learning about ‘what works’** in terms of interventions, systems and strategies to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst people 50+. Throughout the programme local Delivery Partners – voluntary organisations and community groups from across the city – were commissioned to deliver a wider variety of projects. These projects provided a combination of group-based and one-to-one activities and interventions based on the ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’.² There were a broad range of interventions, reflecting different levels and complexities of need, providing a mixture of therapeutic support, practical advice and guidance, and social activities.³

Co-production was at the core of the ABiS approach⁴ to engaging people 50+ and wider stakeholders. The model had four main components:

- **Co-design:** engaging people 50+ to shape what was delivered, and how, at three levels:

the programme, the interventions, and the individual.

- **Co-delivery:** playing an active role in service provision, for example as Delivery Partners or volunteers.
- **Co-evaluation:** collecting feedback and learning, including through peer-research; to develop the programme in response to emerging needs and requirements.
- **Co-governance:** oversight of the programme, through the Core Partnership and project level steering groups.

This co-production approach evolved and was embedded throughout the programme, with some clear benefits along the way. The **co-governance model was a particularly successful feature** of ABiS. It meant that decisions made about which interventions to commission and how resources were allocated took account of a broad range of views and interests, rather than just the ABiS project team. As such, co-governance was found to be a vital component of effective and accountable decision-making. **Co-design and co-delivery were also found to be effective features** of the programme as they enabled people 50+ to take an idea about how isolation and loneliness could be addressed and then be involved in how it was delivered. Given that these were often people with experience of isolation and loneliness themselves, and for whom their sense of agency (i.e., belief that they can make change happen) was limited, this was particularly powerful and very different from other approaches to service delivery.

3. Did ABiS reach and engage with isolated and lonely people 50+?

The loneliness of ABiS participants was measured by Delivery Partners using the De Jong Gierveld

1 Visit the project home page to see the full range of publications - <https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research/projects/all-projects/evaluation-of-age-better-in-sheffield>

2 The Five Ways to Wellbeing are a set of evidence-based actions which promote people's wellbeing: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give. <http://www.fivewaystowellbeing.org/>

3 See for example the following learning case studies:

- Woodward, A. (2021) [Exploring the relationship between bereavement, loneliness and social isolation in older people](#). Sheffield: CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.
- Woodward, A. (2021) [Exploring the relationship between financial exclusion, loneliness and social isolation in older people](#). Sheffield: CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.

4 The ABiS approach to co-production was explored in-depth through two evaluation reports:

- Dayson, C., Bennett, E. and Bashir, N. (2019) [Evaluation of Age Better in Sheffield: Co-production Learning Report 1 - Understanding the Approach to Co-production](#). Sheffield: CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.
- Dayson, C. (2020) [Evaluation of Age Better in Sheffield: Co-production Learning Report 2 - Delivery Partner Perspectives on Co-production](#). Sheffield: CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.

6-Item Loneliness Scale. Responses to the baseline survey (n=1,255) indicated that **the programme was accessed by a largely lonely participant group:**

- 57 per cent of respondents reported a score of four or higher (out of six).
- 24 per cent were in the 'most lonely' category (with a score of six).

The Delivery Partner data can be compared to the ABiS 'hot spot' areas of Beauchief and Greenhill, Burngreave, Firth Park, and Woodhouse where only 21 per cent of people 50+ provided a score of four or higher and only five percent were classified as the 'most lonely'.⁵ This indicates that loneliness was far more prevalent amongst ABiS participants than in the wider target Sheffield population and suggests **that the programme did reach a large number of the loneliest people in key areas of the city.**

This is supported by our qualitative research with ABiS participants⁶ which found that although many people 50+ did not always access ABiS interventions primarily to address isolation and loneliness - they often had more immediate issues that they hoped to address – they did often experience loneliness and isolation connected to experiences of poor physical and mental health.

A number of ABiS Delivery Partners provided interventions that targeted isolated and lonely people 50+ from different BAME populations in the city, and all Delivery Partners were asked to take steps to engage people from BAME backgrounds. This is reflected in the quantitative data, which shows that 25 per cent of participants were from non-White UK ethnic groups⁷ compared to Sheffield as a whole only where only seven per cent of the population aged over 50 were of BAME origin in the 2011 census. An evaluation 'deep dive' into BAME involvement in and experience of ABiS provided a number of examples of how Delivery Partners were able to support lonely and isolated people 50+ from BAME backgrounds whilst also identifying a number

of challenges to delivering support in culturally tailored and appropriate ways.⁸ The deep dive found these challenges can be overcome if programmes *engage with and draw on the expertise of voluntary and community organisations* and other community members who work with and in BAME communities day in day out.

4. Did social isolation and loneliness reduce for people 50+?

The quantitative data (n=608) provided evidence that levels of **loneliness in ABiS participants did reduce following engagement** with the programme. Two fifths of respondents reported lower levels of loneliness in their latest follow-up survey compared to their baseline survey whilst only a quarter reported that they were lonelier (24 per cent).

This finding is supported by our qualitative research with ABiS participants,⁹ which found that **engaging with ABiS interventions improved people 50+'s confidence to take up opportunities to increase social interaction**, which in turn reduced their social isolation and loneliness. We also found that accessing ABiS interventions had a positive effect on the emotional and psychological aspects of wellbeing. For some participants these were necessary steps on the road to greater social participation that would reduce isolation and loneliness in the longer term.

5. 'What works' in reducing isolation and loneliness for people 50+?

ABiS Delivery Partners provided a mix of one-to-one therapeutic and peer-to-peer interventions and group-based activities. Our evaluation findings suggest that these interventions were **most effective when personalised and tailored based** on an understanding of people 50+'s needs and personal circumstances.¹⁰

5 Baseline survey data collected for the ABiS National Evaluation between October 2015 and June 2016.

6 Dayson, C., Harris, C., & Woodward, A. (2020) [Evaluation of Age Better in Sheffield: Qualitative insights into interventions to address social isolation and loneliness](#). Sheffield: CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.

7 The most common BAME group that ABiS participants were drawn from was Asian / Asian UK (16% of participants), followed by Black / African / Caribbean / Black UK (5% of participants).

8 Bashir, N. and Dayson, C. (2021) [Evaluation of Age Better in Sheffield Deep dive: BAME involvement and experience – what have we learnt? Key Lessons and recommendations](#). Sheffield: CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.

9 Dayson, C., Harris, C., & Woodward, A. (2020) [Evaluation of Age Better in Sheffield: Qualitative insights into interventions to address social isolation and loneliness](#). Sheffield: CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.

10 Dayson, C., Harris, C., & Woodward, A. (2021) [Voluntary sector interventions to address loneliness and mental health in older people: taking account of emotional, psychological and social wellbeing](#). Perspectives in Public Health, 141 (4), 237-243 <http://doi.org/10.1177/17579139211017580>

One-to-one therapeutic interventions are beneficial when loneliness is associated with low psychological and emotional wellbeing stemming from trauma and other complex pre-existing issues that have left individuals unable to build social relationships and networks. One-to-one peer-to-peer interventions are beneficial for individuals whose loneliness is linked to low psychological and emotional wellbeing but for whom their issues are less complex. Group-based interventions are beneficial when loneliness is linked to social wellbeing and individuals want to build social networks and relationships and contribute to their community. Participants should be supported to access other forms of support if the benefits of the initial intervention are to be sustained.

Key Learning

The evidence collected throughout the evaluation provides some key lessons that future programmes that aim to address isolation and loneliness in people 50+ should consider:

- Local **voluntary and community organisations are usually best placed to understand the needs of people who are experiencing isolation and loneliness** and how they can be supported, but these organisations require financial investment to undertake this work at scale and on a sustained basis.
- Wherever possible **people 50+ should be involved in the design, delivery and evaluation** of the programme and its interventions, and **they should have a say in how it operates**.
- **Engaging people 50+ from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities is challenging**, but these challenges can be overcome through support for culturally tailored approaches that draw on the expertise of organisations who work with BAME communities on a regular basis.
- Providing **a range of appropriate opportunities for social interaction is key to reducing isolation and loneliness**, but many people aged 50+ require support to improve their confidence and self-esteem before they feel able to participate, and for some this can take a long time.
- Interventions to address loneliness and isolation are **most effective when they are personalised and tailored** based on an understanding of people 50+'s needs and personal circumstances.

Recommendations

Although the ABiS programme has formally ended isolation and loneliness remains an ongoing issue for people 50+ in Sheffield. Collectively, key anchor institutions and public and private sector actors in the city should aim to continue the legacy of ABiS and develop Sheffield as an Age Friendly City by:

- Ensuring people 50+ have **access to a menu of services, activities and opportunities that address isolation and loneliness**. This will require **ongoing and sustained investment in local voluntary and community sector organisations** at the forefront of this work.
- **Embedding the ABiS co-production model and principles in services for people 50+ in the city** wherever this is feasible.
- Recognising that **all services for people 50+ will be most effective when they are tailored and personalised** to take account of people's personal, social, emotional and cultural needs and contexts.

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