



## Keeping our communities connected

*In this blog Mario Ambrosi, Director of Communications and Marketing at Anchor and member of the Housing & Ageing Alliance, highlights the importance of connecting older people.*

Maintaining and building communities for the older people they serve has never been more important for specialist housing providers.

Funding for services is ever-more tightly stretched and loneliness was a growing challenge among older people even before the pandemic. However, at Anchor we're working hard to ensure our housing locations continue to nurture vibrant communities and help older people to maintain their independence, health and wellbeing.

Long before the pandemic, we were all too aware of the impact of loneliness and physical inactivity on older people. With normal life on hold and many of the usual activities that residents were involved in suspended due to the lockdown, we explored new approaches to supporting wellbeing.

In the early stages of the pandemic we quickly understood that many residents needed new ways to stay connected. That was why we established a telephone befriending service which any resident could be referred to if they so agreed. At the height of the pandemic, this service was supporting 800 Anchor residents to overcome loneliness during the national lockdown.

Since then, we've developed our thinking, informed by the New Economics Foundation's "five ways to wellbeing" model. The approach focuses on how people connect, take notice, keep learning, be active and give back - for example through volunteering initiatives.

Using this model, we have reviewed our range of activities to focus on a number of key initiatives which address all five "ways to wellbeing". It is these which now make up the core nationwide elements of Be Well – our evolving approach to supporting wellbeing in our housing service. By doing so, we cover all elements of the NEF framework detailed above, as well as supporting residents' financial health.

- **Be Active:** Our wellness and movement programme for all residents, offering support via face-to-face exercise sessions, online participation and live and recorded sessions and podcasts, including on mindfulness.
- **Be Digital:** Our digital inclusion offer that signposts to local initiatives, offers equipment loans and manages our Digital Champion offer
- **Be Skilled:** Online training portal for residents offering a range of courses to help support personal development
- **Be Connected** (virtual coffee mornings): Weekly online national coffee mornings for social connection including topical speakers and themed events. These are being widely promoted to help combat isolation.
- **Be Wise:** confidential service to support residents to claim the benefits they are entitled to and get the best deal on energy

- **Tackling loneliness:** Promoting the services of charity Reengage, to help reduce social isolation through call companion volunteering opportunities, befriending calls and tea parties.

We've been supporting residents to get online for some years and we've certainly noticed a step-change in people's willingness and desire to improve their IT skills and to enhance their ability to stay in touch with their loved ones through virtual means.

Feedback from our work in this area was extremely positive with 98% of those involved stating that the programme helped to improve their mental wellbeing. Of course, not everyone wants to embrace new technology and we've worked hard to ensure the offer is open to people who aren't online.

For example, our Be Connected virtual coffee mornings can also be accessed via the telephone. We've also made resources available offline for our Be Active wellness and movement programme so people can get together locally to keep fit.

We encourage residents to take part in as many of the activities as they like and set up groups in which they can enjoy these with like-minded neighbours. Some of our residents have even taken on an unofficial role as 'Social Manager' facilitating and encouraging activities at their locations.

One of those who have embraced technology to help them Be Active, is Eileen. At 79, she lives in our housing and is a regular at our weekly Be Active virtual exercise sessions. Having started when the pandemic began, they have kept her physically active, given her links with others across Anchor and helped tackle loneliness. As she says:

*"My long-term inflammatory arthritis means that it is very important for me to keep my body mobile. It is such a joy to be able to Zoom in at least once a week to the Anchor classes and join in with other residents. The group energy is so uplifting and I always feel so much better, not just in body, but in mind and spirits, after a gentle workout. Those of you who haven't tried the classes yet don't know what you are missing!"*

We're acutely aware that many residents choose to live with us as our retirement communities enable them to have a greater independence, both in terms of their health and wellbeing and their home environment. Ensuring residents' voices are influencing our approach is crucial.

We have a wide range of groups through which we engage with residents. That includes our Connected Club of more than 1,000 residents who provide vital feedback on the services we provide, our Resident's Council, Scrutiny Panel and regular Customer Satisfaction Surveys.

A key part of our wellbeing offer is Be Wise, our dedicated financial and benefits advice service. Launched back in 2012, by July 2021 the financial gain for our residents as a result of Be Wise was well over £18m. In the year 2020/21 alone, the financial gain for our residents was £4.4m.

These steps benefit all areas of society through helping to enable older people to maintain their independence for longer and reducing the strain on many of the services they rely on, including the NHS and more costly social care services.

As our population ages, we'll continue listening to the older people we serve and working with partners to support residents' wellbeing.

**Author: Mario Ambrosi, Director of Communications and Marketing at Anchor**

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**The Housing & Ageing Alliance** continues to make the case for concerted, cross sector and inter-departmental action that will:

- *Enable older people to live independently and well wherever they choose, remaining in control of their homes and lives*
- *Create age-friendly homes, neighbourhoods and services that enable people to live healthy, fulfilling lives, involved with families, friends & neighbours and contributing to their communities in later life*
- *Create integrated housing, health & care policies all aiming to enable people to live safely & well at home as they age*