



Doorstep Outreach

A practitioner's guide to first engagement with older people

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
What is doorstep outreach?	4
Why do doorstep outreach?	4
Where does doorstep outreach takes place?.....	5
How to do effective doorstep outreach	6
Doorstep outreach as part of a sequence of activity.....	6
1. Preparation.....	7
2. First round door knocking.....	9
The conversation: Keeping the message simple, ' <i>chit-chatting a lot</i> ' and providing a stepping-stone	10
Meeting speakers of different community languages	13
Doorstep conversations with other residents	13
Safety and security	14
Records and reflection.....	15
3. Following on from the door knocking	16
Doorstep outreach: finding socially isolated older people who 'no one knows'	18
Acknowledgements	19

Introduction



Ageing Better teams aim to proactively find and engage with socially isolated older people 'no one knows', including individuals who may be reluctant to access formal activities, help and support. To this end we have developed outreach practice which involves going out and knocking on peoples' doors.

This report mainly explains the approach taken by the Ageing Better in Camden Outreach Team. It is also informed by discussions which took place at a workshop for outreach workers from Ageing Better programme areas - Camden, Birmingham, Bristol, Hackney and Torbay - in November 2019 where we shared learning about engaging isolated older people on their doorsteps. All these partners found doorstep outreach to be a hugely effective tool although there were variations in approach which responded to local context.

What is doorstep outreach?

In Camden, doorstep outreach involves calling at every door in a sheltered housing or general social housing block or area of a local authority managed housing estate. It provides an opportunity to meet and invite older people and other residents to attend an informal pop-up social event which provides a focus and reason for the door knocking. Key elements of the work are

- Using a systematic approach to find socially isolated older people who 'no one knows'
- Keeping the doorstep conversation simple
- Interacting in a gentle, friendly and responsive way
- Building trust and relationships gradually
- Providing a stepping-stone to fuller social engagement with established groups or activities
- Avoiding intrusion and creating a 'low risk' interaction for the older person who may feel anxious about participating in social opportunities
- Attending to the security of older people and of outreach workers

Why do doorstep outreach?

Doorstep outreach provides a first point of contact. The doorstep conversation can be of value in its own right but is often a first step to relationship building, further engagement with outreach workers and ultimately in social activities and groups in the local area. Our approach, originally developed to respect residents' right to confidentiality and because housing providers cannot share resident contact details, has important benefits:

- It avoids alienating residents by identifying or labelling particular individuals as socially isolated: the team talks to everyone they meet.
- At the same time, it provides the possibility of meeting every older person in a location who may be hesitant to engage in social activity and who may have been socially isolated for some time.
- Improvements in quality of life for older people which can be the outcome of doorstep conversations, justify the substantial investment in time and energy needed to call at many homes.

- Doorstep outreach can build awareness of and trust in an organisation and its activities in the local area.

Where does doorstep outreach takes place?



In Camden, doorstep outreach takes place in sheltered housing and on housing estates which are owned or managed by a housing association or the local authority. The pop-up social event will take place in a communal space in the residents' own building or occasionally in a community room nearby.

It is not carried out at other locations since outreach workers can have no official permission for being there. However, they occasionally deliver invitations to other private homes close to their pop-up social events and while doing so may meet and talk to older people and their neighbours on the street about the event. [Find out more in our report 'What have we learned about street outreach with older people?'](#)

How to do effective doorstep outreach

This section details subtle and complex elements of doorstep outreach which frame an apparently simple doorstep conversation and which make it more effective.

Doorstep outreach as part of a sequence of activity

Camden's doorstep outreach involves a doorstep conversation which is one of a small sequence of activities which together are designed to help outreach workers find older people who may be experiencing social isolation and to begin developing relationships and engagement with them. There are three stages of activity which are described in detail below.

1. Preparation

- Identify the location
- Obtain permission and information
- Deliver letters in advance of door knocking

2. First round door knocking

- Calling at every door
- Doorstep conversations

3. Follow up activity

- Hold an informal social event
- Provide support to residents who need help to attend the event
- Go back to residents after the event in response to need
- Repeat door knocking

DOs and DON'Ts of doorstep conversation

DO keep the conversation simple and informal (focused on making contact and a friendly invitation)

DO invite the older person to an informal drop-in social event (not a meeting, talk, presentation or activity)

DO recognise that this is a first stepping-stone to engagement for those people who are initially likely to say 'no' to attending any groups, activities or events or to the doorstep conversation itself

DO be responsive to the individual involved

DON'T treat the interaction as an interview or opportunity to collect personal information which is likely to shut down interaction or engagement

DON'T treat it as an opportunity to undertake casework or to provide lots of information: this can be done later

DON'T regard the doorstep outreach as an isolated activity: it forms part of a set of activities including the follow up social event and signposting to other groups, activities and services in the local area

DON'T take it personally if an individual does not want to talk: move on to the next person.

1. Preparation

➤ Identify the location for doorstep outreach

In Camden, doorstep outreach only takes place in sheltered housing or on housing estates which are owned or managed by a housing association or the local authority. The pop-up social event will take place in a communal space in the residents own building or occasionally in a community room nearby.

It is not carried out in residential streets with privately owned housing where there are no 'gatekeepers' (see obtaining permission) and where outreach workers have no official basis for being there. However, the outreach workers occasionally deliver invitations to private homes close to their pop-up social events and while doing so may meet and talk to older people and their neighbours on the street. [Find out more in our report 'What have we learned about street outreach with older people?'](#).

➤ Obtain permission and information

Advance permission must be obtained from relevant sheltered housing or local authority estate managers:

- Knowing that the door knocking has official endorsement provides a level of reassurance and protection for residents which is important for building trust.
- It provides the outreach team with security since housing management know when and where they will be working.

The principle is to knock on every door although building managers or caretakers may - without breaking resident confidentiality - be able to warn outreach workers of addresses to avoid because it may be unsafe for them (e.g. where the resident may exhibit anti-social behaviour or has significant mental health problems).

➤ **Deliver letters in advance of door knocking**

Letters of explanation should be delivered several days before door knocking.
Letters should be in clear print (minimum font size 14) and include:

Names and contact details
of outreach workers and
their organisation

**An invitation to a
pop-up social
event** in the
communal area of
the sheltered
housing block
which will follow
the doorstep
conversation (see
below)

A date in advance
of the social event
when outreach
workers will be in
the area to put up
information and to
knock on doors to
introduce
themselves and say,
'Hello'

Camden
ageUK

Ageing
Better
in Camden

Monday 2 September 2019

Dear Estate Resident,

Please join us for free tea, coffee and cake in our pop-up café located on the paved area between Sandall and Southway blocks on Thursday afternoon (5 September) at 1.30pm

Jo and AnneMarie (from the AGE UK Camden Outreach Team), joined by Samia from your estate Tenants and Residents Association (TRA) will be hosting a very informal get together for residents on Thursday afternoon (5 September from 1.30 – 3.30pm) as an opportunity to meet other residents and local neighbours. **If you are looking for opportunities to make the most of your free time, information will be available about free activities and events for Camden residents aged 55+ and TRA hosted events on the estate over the next couple of months.** We are also keen to link people together who would like to share their interests with others. Free tea, coffee and cake will be provided. Our pop-up café has seating and shelter. All welcome.

On Wednesday 3 September, Jo and AnneMarie will be putting up posters around the estate and may knock on your door to say hello and introduce themselves. **If you do not wish to be disturbed, please let us know by leaving a message on the Outreach Team mailbox, 0207 239 0421.** Please also call if you would like us to knock for you on Thursday afternoon to walk together to our pop-up café on the paved area between Sandall and Southway. (Please find directions and additional information on the reverse of this letter).

Best wishes,
Jo and AnneMarie (AGE UK Camden) with the permission of the TRA

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Age UK Camden is a trading name of Age Concern Camden, which is a registered charity number: 293446 and company limited by guarantee. Registered in England number 1969975. Registered office: Tavis House, 1-6 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9NA. ID10079 05/11

A telephone number
that residents may
call to leave a
message if they do
not wish to be
included in the door
knocking.

Timing of the letter is important. It allows residents the opportunity to check with ABC or housing management staff that the outreach work is legitimate or to opt out of the outreach altogether. They already know the name and contact details of the outreach workers before they arrive. It provides an in-advance warning to reduce residents' anxiety when the door knocking takes place.

2. First round door knocking

➤ Call at every door: *'There are no short-cuts'*

This means that every opportunity to establish contact is taken. No doors are skipped because staff or other residents have suggested that an individual will not be interested. Experience has shown that such information may be incorrect (see 'The conversation' below). The only doors which are missed are the few which may be unsafe for the outreach workers.

Outreach workers may only meet a few older people in comparison to the number of doors called at during a session.



➤ Time door knocking to maximise meetings with older people

From experience, best times to engage with many older people are mid-morning or in the early afternoon (not too early, at lunchtime or in the evening). It can be productive to have several door-knocking sessions at different times in the same location.

The conversation: Keeping the message simple, ‘chit-chatting a lot’ and providing a stepping-stone

The aim of the doorstep conversation is to make initial contact. It is designed to be friendly but non-intrusive. It is used to make an invitation to an older person to a follow up social event in their building (or occasionally in a nearby community space) and so to provide them with a stepping-stone to further social engagement.

To make the doorstep conversation effective:

➤ **DO start with a friendly greeting and show clear identification**

The outreach worker says, ‘Hello’, introduces them self and shows their official name badge as identification. This introduction needs to be friendly, confident and informal. Hesitancy, pushiness or awkwardness may create anxiety or be off putting.

➤ **DO reiterate the invitation already made via letter dropping**

This will involve giving details of a nearby pop-up social event which will take place in the next day or two and saying, for example, ‘It would be lovely to see you there.’ The approach should encourage attendance but without pressurising. This may include explaining that other older people living nearby will be attending.

➤ **DO consider language carefully**

Careful choice of language is important in describing the follow up event. For example, the event may be described as a ‘get together with free tea, coffee and cake’ rather than a ‘coffee morning’. An older person may refuse an invitation to a ‘coffee morning’ because it seems institutional or may be interpreted by men as a ‘female’ activity.

➤ **DO be responsive to the individual and spend time when needed**

There is no script although common phrases may be used. The interaction needs to be ‘human’ and responsive and time should not be a constraint. In some cases, it is important to keep the interaction short and to the point so that it is not intrusive. In

others, the individual just needs to talk: they may have particular issues or this may be the first conversation the older person has had for some time. A long conversation may eventually be ended by reiterating the invitation (e.g. 'Please come to our social event. We can chat more over a cup of tea') or by signposting information (e.g. providing numbers for Age UK Camden Information and Advice or counselling services).



➤ **DO provide fresh social contact**

The fact that this contact is being made by outreach workers who come from outside the neighbourhood is significant. This means that the interaction is not coloured by any preconceptions based on existing relationships. For example, a local volunteer caller may believe that there is no point door knocking at a particular home because that person has not attended previous events. Doorstep outreach may therefore encourage positive social experience and engagement which may otherwise not be possible.

➤ **DO offer support to attend the social event**

Where interest is shown, support is offered to attend the event if it is needed. This could involve offering to knock for and accompanying an individual who has difficulty with mobility or who is nervous of arriving on their own.

➤ **DO dress in a casual, neutral way**

Dress in a casual, appropriate and neutral way (e.g. no business attire or revealing clothing) to add to the impression of polite informality.

The doorstep conversation is designed to avoid creating any sense of intrusion or threat. ABC outreach workers:

➤ **DON'T ask intrusive questions or for any personal information**

This means avoiding questions like 'Do you live alone?' or 'What help and support do you receive?' which are likely to shut down interaction and engagement.

➤ **DON'T plan to give information beyond details of the social event invitation**

Information may, however, be given to the resident if it is requested or responds to conversation (e.g. the AGE UK Camden Information and Advice Service telephone number; a flyer to promote local activity if an individual expresses an interest or says they are unable to attend the pop-up social event).

➤ **DON'T address problems there and then**

The outreach team are not there in the role of case workers or to engage older people in any particular service or activity: the conversation is all about the introduction and to build rapport. Eventually someone who has repeatedly said 'No' to help or support may change their minds and be open to a referral (See 'Repeat door knocking' below).

➤ **DON'T go into people's homes or even look in from the doorstep**

There are occasional exceptions, for example, when an older person is unable to come to the door and the door is opened by a caregiver and invites the outreach worker in to meet the older person. In this instance outreach workers only enter a home in pairs.

Doorstep conversations with other residents

Where a door is answered by someone other than an older person, outreach workers use the interaction as an opportunity to raise awareness about older people living in the building/on the estate. Key elements and outcomes of this interaction are

- Outreach workers invite younger neighbours to attend the pop-up social event and the invitation is often accepted.
- Neighbours and sometimes building staff or TRA (Tenant Resident Association) members meet at the social event.
- After older and younger neighbours have met at the event, they feel more able to greet and talk to one another if they pass in the building or neighbourhood.
- There have been cases where doorstep conversations have led younger residents to offer to volunteer as a befriender for older neighbours.

Doorstep outreach can therefore help to create social connections and a positive sense of connectedness in a neighbourhood which goes beyond direct work with older people.

Meeting speakers of different community languages

In many areas there will be households where the language spoken is not English. Make sure you have tools in place for managing this. For example, it is helpful to have outreach team members who are speakers of main community languages other than English. Alternatively, a translation app can be used or copies of the written invitation can be left for another member of the family to translate and so to explain the reason for the outreach visit.

Safety and security

➤ Safeguard the older person

One important intention of the non-intrusive approach to doorstep outreach is to avoid creating any anxiety, upset or sense of threat for the older person. It also provides a model of good practice for the older people who are approached and so may help older people be alert to the contrasting 'pushy' behaviour which may be used by an unscrupulous cold caller.



➤ Stay safe as an outreach worker

There are inevitable risks associated with going door to door. Mitigation of these risks is important for all doorstep outreach locations although the work may be safer in sheltered housing blocks than in general social housing.

Doorstep outreach workers should

- Agree times and locations of doorstep outreach with building management and/or caretaking staff.

- Make office staff aware of details of the session so that they know when outreach staff should be expected back. Smart phone trackers may also be used to keep up to date with the location of outreach workers.
- Always work in pairs who stay in sight of one another and on the rare occasions when they enter a home (see above) go in together.
- Carry a fully charged mobile phone and, ideally, an emergency phone charger.
- Dress in a casual, neutral way (see above) to avoid any unwanted attention.
- Use dynamic risk assessment to decide when to skip a particular door, walk away from a conversation or cease door knocking altogether if they become aware of danger or feel unsafe.

Records and reflection

- **Include time to keep records of doorstep outreach activity and conversations**

Records inform repeat calls at particular homes (see 'Returning to selected homes' below), aid reflection on interactions and demonstrate extent of outreach engagement. After a visit the outreach team note

- Where they have called but no names or other personal details. Note that this information is only used as an aide memoire for future doorstep outreach. It is not shared outside the outreach team and is stored securely.
- Details of any conversation and whether it was a 'special conversation'. Special conversations are those that go beyond simple delivery of information. They may involve discussions of the older persons particular interests, needs or personal circumstances.
- Any outcomes (e.g. If a resident has indicated they will attend the social event, whether they are happy to be contacted again)
- Any follow up action which is needed (e.g. Specific information which they have requested and can be taken to them)

- **Include time and space to discuss and reflect on interactions**

Time and space are needed on an ongoing basis to discuss and reflect on both positive and difficult outreach interactions to

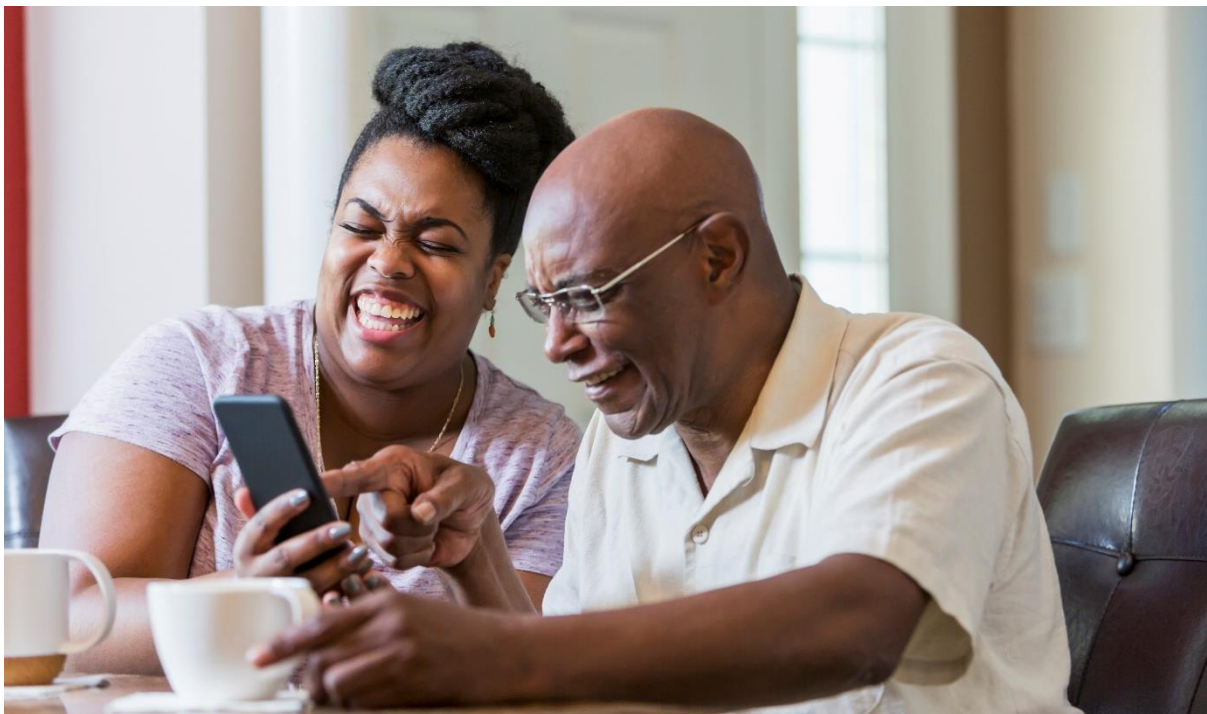
- Respond to place-specific needs to plan future activity. For example, identifying a high level of need might mean that the outreach team return sooner rather than later; they might run a further activity on site because many residents have mobility issues.
- Learn more broadly from experience to develop practice
- Ensure that outreach workers are supported
- Build resilience within the team through sharing experiences

3. Following on from the door knocking

Follow up 1: Hold an informal pop-up social event

ABC's doorstep outreach is always linked to a follow-up social event which takes place in the sheltered housing block. Preceding doorstep conversations are likely to encourage older people to attend since they know that there will be a familiar, friendly worker there to welcome them.

It is designed to be a gentle, welcoming extension of the doorstep interaction and in establishing contact and relationships with outreach workers and between neighbours. It can act as a further stepping-stone to attendance at more organised activities and social events which take place in the area.



To hold a successful follow-up social event

- **DO hold the event one or two days after the doorstep outreach**
- **DO provide support to help an older person to attend the event** when needed (e.g. An outreach worker may accompany an older person to the event because they have mobility issues or are nervous about attending alone).
- **DO keep the event as an informal, pressure free social occasion** without any organised timetable or activity.
 - Keep it as a drop-in event so that residents can come for as short or long a time as they want.
 - Offer plenty of good quality refreshments and think about how to set up the space for example by using bunting and tablecloths to create a welcoming atmosphere.
 - Don't give any talks or presentations.
 - Don't take a register or attempt to capture any personal information at a first event except when a request is made by an individual to return to them with specific information.
- **DO offer information about more organised activities** in the local area but only **in response to interest** expressed during conversation with an older person

In some cases, an older person has attended the social event despite hesitance or hostility during the doorstep conversation. For example, an older person might come along to the event to say that they will not be attending and then stay as a result of their negative preconceptions about the event being addressed.

Follow up 2: Return to selected homes after the social event: *'the cake run'*

If an older person does not want to or feels unable to attend the social event, an outreach worker may pop back to their home in response to an older person's request, interest or need. This can include

- Carrying out a 'cake run' i.e. bringing cake to a resident's home on the day of the event. This possibility is sometimes offered during first round door-knocking. In other cases, where an older person seems particularly vulnerable or the team would like to initiate a second engagement, this return visit may not be offered in advance and a reason for a

‘spontaneous’ repeat call is provided by saying, ‘We had some extra cake and we thought you might like it’.

- Calling back may also be used as an opportunity to deliver responsive information or signposting if a possible need has been identified or discussed during first round door knocking.

Follow up 3: Repeat letter-dropping and door knocking

The initial doorstep outreach described above forms part of ongoing outreach work in a particular housing block or area of a housing estate. Unless an older person has opted out of doorstep outreach, further rounds of door knocking will be undertaken at those homes where no contact has been made or where the team feels that further visits will be beneficial. This can allow a relationship to develop over a period of time including with those older people who are initially reluctant to engage with the outreach team. There have been examples of no response to a first call, a conversation through a door at a second call and an ‘open door’ conversation at a third call.

Doorstep outreach: finding socially isolated older people who ‘no one knows’

Doing effective doorstop outreach requires careful planning and outreach workers need to develop skill, knowledge and stamina for this work. In return, we gain a means of finding and engaging with socially isolated older people who would otherwise remain unknown.

“It’s very uplifting to have three visitors when you don’t even know what a visitor is any more ... “I’m not forgotten, not old and forgotten.”

“Sometimes you just need a slight nudge.”

“Paper through the door is a good thing because some people in the building need reminders.”

The training and resourcing which must underpin this intensive approach is discussed further in the briefing paper for commissioners and funders which accompanies our reports on ABC outreach work in housing.

Acknowledgements



We wish to thank Amy Shepherd who facilitated our ‘Outreach on the Doorstep’ workshop in November 2019 and the practitioners who attended the workshop and spent time sharing the expertise and learning which contributed to this report: outreach workers from Ageing Better in Camden, Ageing Better in Birmingham, Bristol Ageing Better, Connect Hackney and Ageing Well Torbay; outreach workers and community researchers from community organisations in Camden and the London Borough of Camden.

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 Age UK Camden and 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.

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