

'How to' guide – informal get-together for older people

Many older people sit alone, with TV as their only 'company', not wanting to make a fuss or to 'impose' on other people, but being quite lonely. A kind word, a visit, a friendly, smiling neighbourhood can be a huge blessing. Even better could be a small group of local people of their generation who might together be helped to form an informal friendship group – acquaintances who become friends as a result of meeting regularly, perhaps weekly or monthly. That could be a highlight in the week, giving a sense of belonging, of being valued, a chance to contribute – with the knowledge that there are people locally who care how they are and who could respond to an urgent need.

But it'll probably take others in the neighbourhood to make that happen. Could you be one of them?

Here are some ideas and tips that may be helpful:

- Start small, in someone's front room. A gathering of three or four is well worth it. You always decide to find a larger venue in the future.
- Some higher chairs may be essential, as frail older people find low sofas a challenge to get onto and, especially, out of! And is there an accessible toilet?
- Offering transport, even from nearby, may be necessary.
- Often it's about making a relationship first, before inviting the person to join a group where they "wouldn't know anybody", as confidence can be a big issue. And we do need to respect their choices, if they don't feel ready to come out.
- 10.30am to 12.00 noon is a good time for a meeting.
- A tea party with some home-made cakes – what's not to like?
- Together think of a fun name for the group.
- A quiz often goes down well and draws in everyone.
- 'Talk as you knit' is also often popular.
- Try having a current newspaper handy. Pick out a couple of articles or news reports and ask people what they think about them.
- One person each week could be encouraged to 'tell their story'. This can be fascinating and one really gets to know people that way – and they feel they have been truly welcomed. But avoid having one person take all the air time!
- People could be invited to bring something to show the others – a collection of medals or stamps or memorabilia, for example.
- Scrabble, Dominoes or Bagatelle or jig-saws can go down well.
- Anything that gives an opportunity for reminiscence is popular.
- If there's one strong singer, starting a well-known song will draw people in.

- Someone might like to read a poem.
- It might even be possible to arrange to go out together (e.g. for coffee or lunch, or to a garden centre or to the theatre).

So there's lots that can be done as good neighbours. Little of value is ever totally easy. Some older people might be reluctant to engage with others and winning trust can be a slow and patient task. But something like this can be a real lifeline and a joy for all involved – truly a 'win-win' scenario! There's even potentially funding available (a £2,000 grant!) for groups which help isolated older people to come together. Contact Hanna Iacco at hanna.iacco@ageukbirmingham.org.uk or 0121 437 0033 to find out more and for help in applying.