



Joining in, not getting help

Activities not services:
engaging lonely or
isolated older men



Activities, not services: reaching older men experiencing loneliness

Re-engage is a charity that is positive about older age and committed to reducing loneliness so that people can have social lives and friendship groups however old they are.

We bring people together to build meaningful connections and shared experiences in communities across the UK, supporting those aged 75 and over who are facing loneliness and social isolation. Our volunteers help create welcoming spaces where people feel part of something again, with something to look forward to. For many, what starts as a connection grows into companionship and, over time, friendship. People who may have felt alone begin to feel valued, form new friendships, and become part of supportive groups.

As we grow, one of our priorities is to reach a broader range of people. At present, 82% of the people we support are women. While this varies across our activities, more women than men currently take part overall. This insight study is part of our work to better understand older men experiencing loneliness and how we can connect with them in ways that feel relevant, accessible and meaningful.

“I just thought it would be nice to go along to the meeting and see what it was all about. I get ever so lonely, so am interested in opportunities to connect with people.”

Key takeaways:

- ✗ Services offering support can lack appeal, especially if men don't recognise a need for improved social connection
- ✓ Activities based on shared interests, promoted in places men already spend time, may help improve reach
- ✓ Men-only groups or events, along with more male volunteers, may help reduce hesitation
- ✓ Popular interests often include some form of movement or hands-on activities such as walking, gardening, or practical hobbies
- ✓ Accessible venues are important in reducing barriers; online options may help people connect across distances or in smaller groups
- ✓ Working in partnership with other organisations may enable a broader range of activities and help reach more people

See page 8 for a full list of recommendations



This and front cover image from Centre for Ageing Better image library

Gender, ageing, and loneliness and isolation

Re-engage is the only charity focused on supporting lonely and isolated people aged 75 and over, and in the UK that age group includes more women than it does men (56% to 44%¹). It's also commonly reported that women are more likely to experience loneliness, and feel lonely more often, than men².

As shown in Figure 1, right, there is evidence that, later in life, women are more likely to be exposed to several key risk factors for loneliness: in the UK, women aged 75+ are more likely than men to live alone, be widowed, have a disability, and be in poor general health. Female pensioners are also likely to be living on a lower income than their male counterparts³.

However, research suggests that men's social connections may be poorer than women's: men are less likely than women to feel that they have people they can rely on in a time of need² and more likely to feel they're not part of their community⁴. Married heterosexual men tend to rely on their wives to maintain social relationships within and outside the family. Divorced or separated older men have been found to be lonelier than divorced/separated older women, while widowed older men tend to be more isolated than widowed older women⁵.

Isolation has not been found to relate so closely to loneliness for older men as it has for older women – some studies have found that isolated older men speak in terms of being *alone* rather than *lonely*, and enjoyed establishing or maintaining an independent identity⁶.

It's important to note, however, that men may be less likely to describe themselves as lonely, even if they feel that way⁷. Research suggests that masculine gender norms may help explain this. Growing up in the mid-20th century, many of today's older men were taught that to be a man was to be stoic and to provide for others⁸. The emotional intimacy often associated with female friendships was less encouraged.

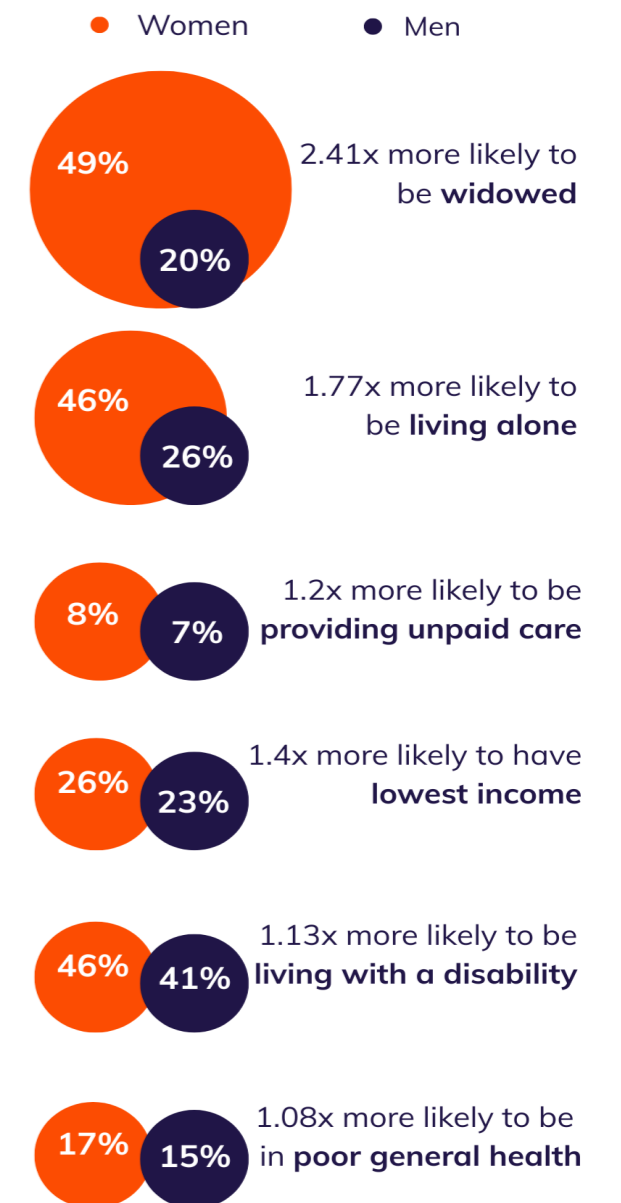
It is difficult to align this idea of masculinity with feeling lonely⁹, and research shows that some older men avoid talking about loneliness to preserve their sense of identity and role at the head of a family¹⁰. Ideals of strength and self-

reliance can also discourage men from asking for help, with evidence showing that men seek medical or psychological support much less often than women¹¹.

With this in mind, we wanted to hear from older men who are already part of Re-engage to learn more about their experiences of finding and joining us, and views on how we can reach more men who could benefit.

While we commonly refer to our 'services' in our materials, in this report we use the term 'activities', reflecting the language and perspective of our study participants.

Figure 1: Several key risk factors for loneliness among people aged 75, shown by sex.



Method

Research volunteers conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 30 older men who were or had been involved in Re-engage (activity groups, tea parties, and call companions) for various lengths of time and in different regions.

Interviewees were asked how they heard about Re-engage and any hesitations they had about joining; what they would change about the

activities they were part of; their interests; and suggestions for encouraging men to join.

In the second phase of the study, we asked the [Re-engage research group](#) for their thoughts, whether from their perspective (men taking part) or from their experiences with Re-engage (across the group). Their input was then considered alongside our interview findings; insights from both phases are presented here.

| Activity | Interviewees | Min. length of involvement | Max. length of involvement | Regions |
|-----------------|--------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| Activity groups | 8 | One month | Two years, 11 months | Wales, Yorkshire and the Humber |
| Call companions | 11 | One month | Three years, seven months | London, East Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, South East, North East, East of England, Wales |
| Tea parties | 11 | Five months | Nine years, three months | Scotland, South East, East of England, North West, East Midlands, London, South West |

Figure 2: Interviewees were drawn from across our activities and regions

Reaching older men

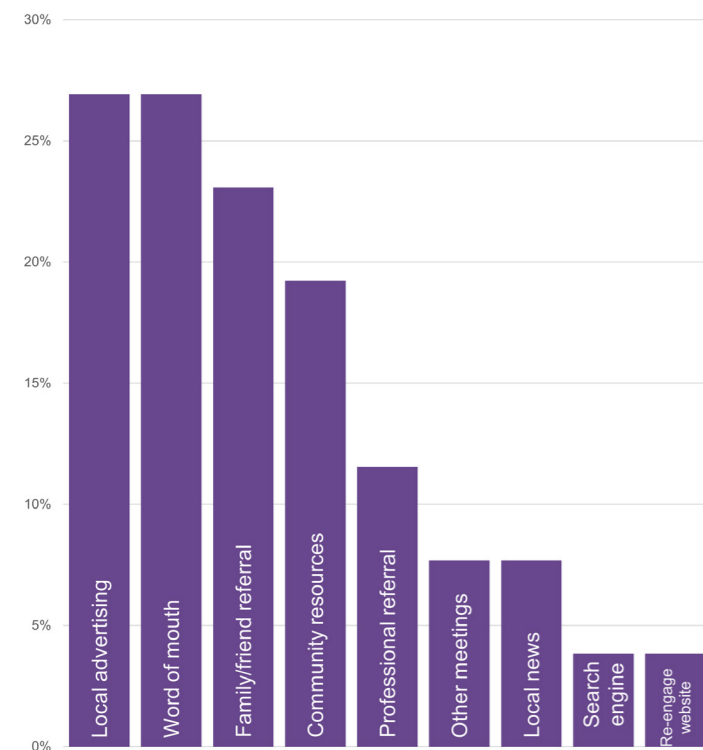


Figure 3: How men had heard of Re-engage

Our interviewees had heard about Re-engage in a variety of ways, but they were most likely to have become aware of us through local advertising and publicity, word of mouth, or referrals from family or friends.

Participants tended to feel that Re-engage should focus its publicity at a community level, advertising in places “where men are more likely to go”, such as leisure centres and local pubs, bowling and gardening clubs, or community spaces such as pubs, supermarkets and community centres. Being visible in these spaces could also support greater awareness via word-of-mouth.

Some said it wasn’t just about being visible, but also about how the activities were advertised. While 40% of interviewees said they hadn’t had any reservations about joining Re-engage, 20% said they had initially been unsure who we were or what we offered.

One interviewee, who’d previously been matched with a telephone befriender as part of call companions, explained that he had initially thought that it was a counselling service:

“Suspicious is probably too strong a word, but it didn’t sound like the right service for me. [But] this wasn’t a counsellor, this was someone offering their friendship and advice, and it was helping him too. The reservations I had dissolved once we spoke for a while.”

Another participant said he’d initially refused the invitation to join a tea party group one Sunday a month, thinking it was “a load of rubbish” and would clash with watching football. He was persuaded by his daughter to give it a go - if he didn’t like it, he never had to go again. When interviewed, he’d been attending tea parties for almost eight years, had made friends with volunteers and other older people, and said without the tea parties, he “wouldn’t have a life.”

In both phases of the study, participants talked about the difficulties of reaching men when publicising activities like the ones that Re-engage offers. Some interviewees felt that it was almost impossible, with one saying: “It is just the mindset of the older men, I’m not sure how you’d change it.” Another suggested activities that men can join in with “that encourage them to chat because they’re busy and don’t realise they’re getting things off their

Designing activities for older men

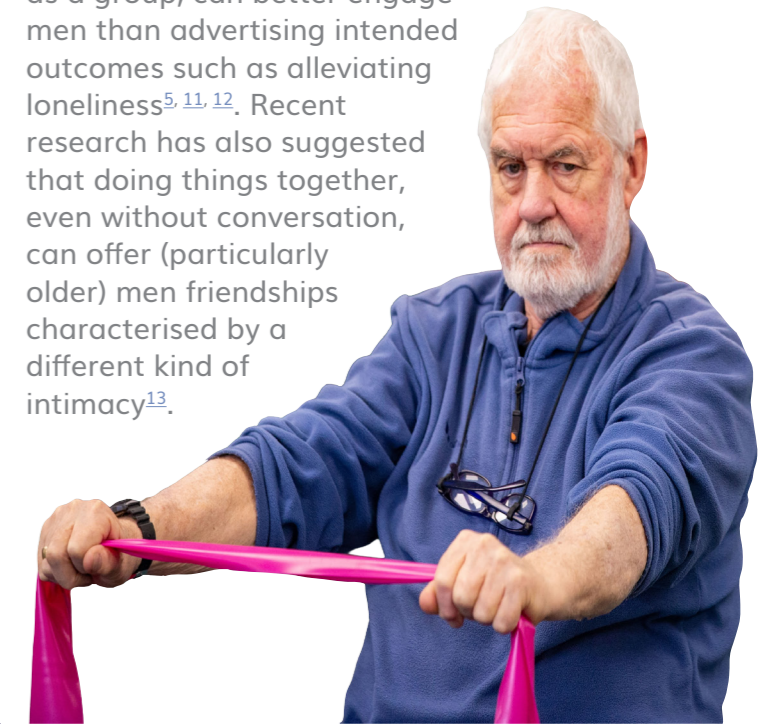
Almost half of our interviewees said they wouldn’t change anything or would struggle to find things to change about the Re-engage activities they were involved in, describing them as “exactly what I need”, saying they’d “bonded” with other guests, or sharing their appreciation of the “very human” connection they’d built with a call companion, whether or not they’d overcome hesitations before joining. Nonetheless, to think about how our activities could better appeal to older men, we needed to hear what research participants would change and how they would go about making activities more accessible and engaging for older men.

The make-up of the group featured in several ways in our conversations: one man said he’d

chest.” Respondents often talked about social connections being secondary or “incidental” to the activities for which men might join a group.

“Someone who’s interested in a specific subject would stop and look at an advert [for that] rather than a leaflet saying, ‘Look, here is a service that you can use if you need to’, because I do think that men in general find it quite difficult to admit that they need support and help.”

This aligns with research suggesting that men may see support services as ‘non-masculine’; focusing on activities, especially where they take the form of ‘lending a hand’ or working as a group, can better engage men than advertising intended outcomes such as alleviating loneliness^{5, 11, 12}. Recent research has also suggested that doing things together, even without conversation, can offer (particularly older) men friendships characterised by a different kind of intimacy¹³.



like his group to include “more people on my wavelength”, while others said it would be nice to see more men in their groups. Research group members suggested setting up dedicated men-only groups, activities or projects.

“This generation, the over 75s, growing up, their dominion was all male. My husband is only really involved in men’s activities.”

One in five interviewees said they’d hesitated to join Re-engage activities on account of their physical health or limited mobility. It was suggested that where groups involved movement, some men might feel uncomfortable or more inhibited by their level of fitness in the company of women.

Gordon's story

Gordon Nichol wasn't one of our research interviewees. The 76-year-old retiree recently joined a new Re-engage activity group, playing pickleball in Edinburgh. Here's what he had to say about joining:

"I was in America for a long time so when I returned, most of my old friends had moved on. Fortunately, I'm active and can still get around, but sometimes I can feel lonely.

"I leapt at the chance to sign up [for pickleball]. I had to get two buses to the centre so it was a bit of an effort, but believe me, it was well worth it. I was made to feel very welcome and it was the best afternoon I've had in a long time.

"Every one of the staff and volunteers gave full attention to us older folks and it was such a great feeling to know that these people really cared about us and gave such heartfelt time and effort for our wellbeing. I was humbled by this. People thrive on being acknowledged and validated and when you're older there's a dearth of that.

"I've been to other groups and it can be quite disheartening because those taking part usually get into their little cliques and it's hard to break in. But with the pickleball group it was so different. It was amazing how welcoming everyone was. I was made to feel at ease from the very start and everyone was friendly."

Activities

The most prominent theme in people's suggestions was offering a broader range of activities at social gatherings (whether tea party groups or activity groups).

Interviewees wanted the groups they attended to go on trips and events, listen to or play music, learn languages, or hear from guest speakers on topics of interest.

To attract more men to Re-engage, research participants suggested sports or activities (such as walking and bowls) and groups organised around interests (such as cooking, woodworking, and cinema). They also suggested focusing on games and hobbies, such as jigsaws and quizzes.

"Sitting around chatting isn't attractive to men. The more activities on offer, the more likely it is to appeal to men."

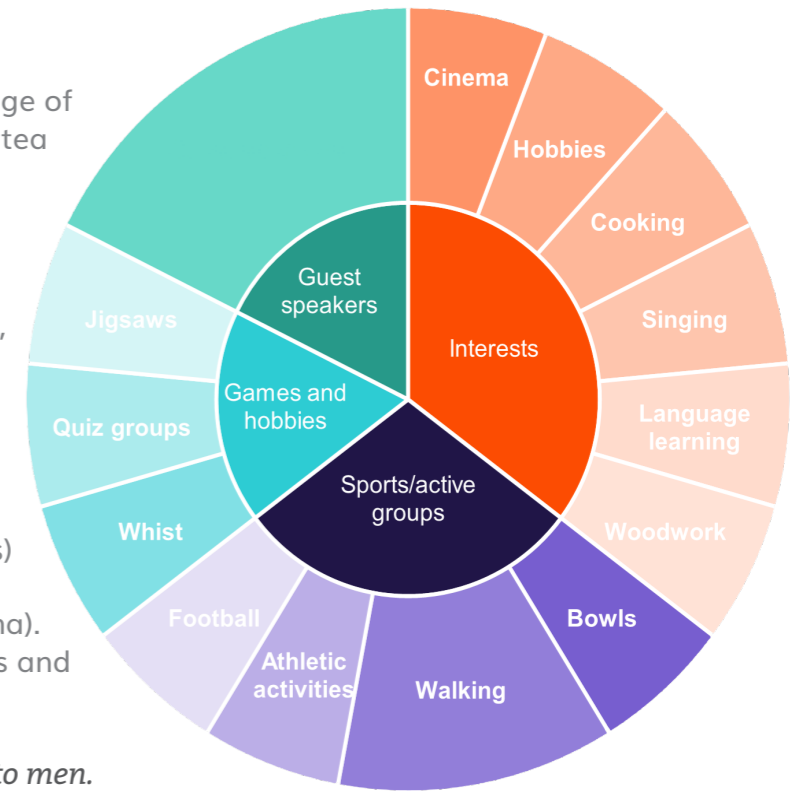


Figure 4: Suggested activities

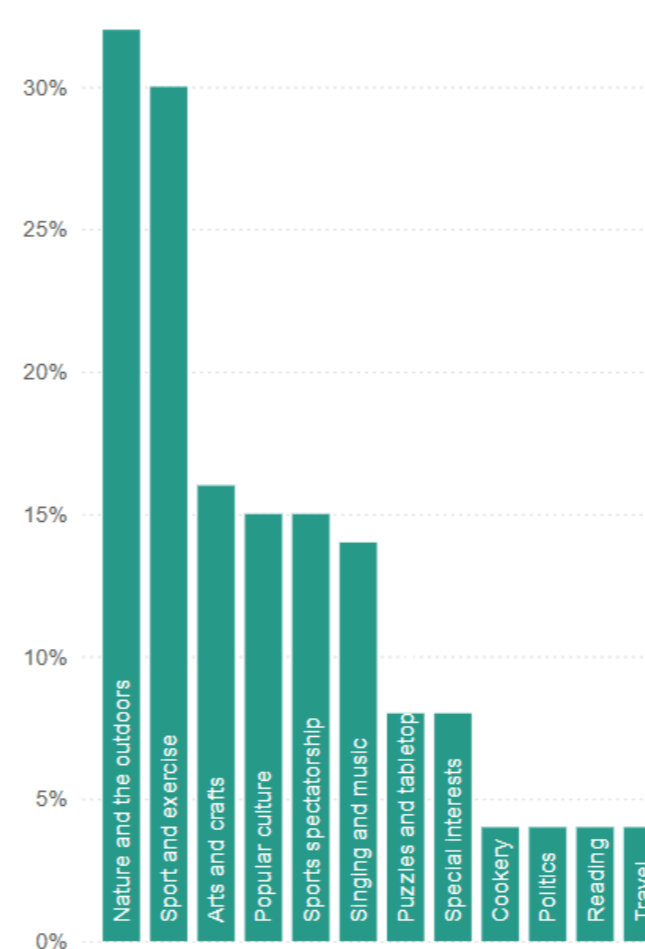


Figure 5: Interviewees' interests

For some of our research participants, the primary factor was the nature of the activities or topics discussed, suggesting that we focus on "traditionally male-dominated" interests: "There is a history group run by a man who also attends Re-engage, that is better attended by men. Maybe if you could offer more engineering, mechanical, historical, athletic activities."

Popular interests among our male interviewees included gardening, sports and exercise, but defining 'men's interests' is not straightforward.

Participants emphasised the potential of online groups for special interest or information-based activities, since they can help overcome some of the challenges faced by groups in towns or villages where local take-up is low.

Re-engage is already adding more activity groups to its roster and broadening the scope of group activities to reflect participants' interests and preferences. Research group members also suggested that working in partnership with other organisations could make diversifying activities more achievable.

Summary and recommendations



Older men might find it difficult to talk about loneliness or social isolation even if they frequently feel lonely or spend more time alone than they'd like to. They might struggle to ask for help or to recognise they would benefit from more opportunities to connect with others and close down conversations about support.



Whether you're a friend, family member, volunteer or community organiser, directly inviting an older man to take part in something might land better than speaking in terms of 'support' or 'services'. If you're a referrer, focus on the chance to enjoy some company and a few laughs.



Make things flexible: where possible, offer 'give it a go' events and drop-in sessions. It can be easier to overcome the feeling that something 'isn't for me' if you can try it without having to commit to staying longer than you want to.



Organising group activities around shared interests - where spending time with others is a bonus rather than the only or main reason to be there - can help ensure that what you're offering appeals to (older) men.



Hands-on tasks, information-sharing, and keeping active tend to be popular with older men - but being open to ideas and building a group's activities with those who attend will be more rewarding all around.



Some men are happy to be in mixed or predominantly female company, while others feel more comfortable with other men. This might be especially true during more physical activities such as exercising. Dedicated 'men-only' events or groups - involving mostly male volunteers/staff - could create opportunities to join in for men who would otherwise say no.



The accessibility of venues is crucial to ensuring that everyone can take part safely and enjoy themselves. Online platforms such as Zoom make it easier for groups dedicated to special interests to grow and meet regularly even where their members are dispersed across the country.



It can be hard for any single organisation to find the venues, volunteers and resources to meet everybody's needs reliably. Partnerships between multiple organisations can help to broaden the scope of what's possible and create larger, stronger, more diverse social networks for everyone.

“On the days when you might feel it's a bit of an effort to go, when you get there, it just chirps you up.”

Ian Sinclair joined a Re-engage tea party having moved to Scotland to be closer to his daughter after his wife of 45 years died.

“I didn't know what to expect, but they were a nice bunch. I enjoyed chatting to people, finding out what they'd done in their lives, and then I just kept going.”

He's keen to encourage others to give it a try and see for themselves. “The men are probably outnumbered 3:1 in our group, so we could do with a few more coming along! What I would say is, don't worry about not knowing anyone. It might seem scary, but you won't be walking into a room on your own. Somebody will always be there welcoming you.”

Ian is full of praise for the volunteers who organise the group. “It's a great thing to have in the local community.”



Good example: Men's Sheds

Men's Sheds support local groups for men, especially those who've retired, to build social connections and improve wellbeing by recapturing a sense of identity or purpose.



The organisation supports local groups to create spaces for practical hobbies. They talk in terms of 'having time on your hands' and their literature focuses on accessing tools, sharing skills and being creative, as well as developing larger community projects.



There are membership and sometimes attendance fees involved, but the organisation says most Sheds allow people to go along for free to see what it's like.



Each Shed can define its own range of activities. While making and mending are popular, people are encouraged to come along whether or not they're a seasoned DIYer. Those Sheds that have machinery and tools - sometimes including computers and 3D printers - are expected to offer training for newcomers.



Around a third of Sheds have begun to welcome women as members, but there is typically an emphasis on being a space for men in particular, including trans men. Anyone aged 18 and over can join and some Sheds run intergenerational mentoring schemes, pairing older men with younger members to share skills and experiences.



The UK Men's Sheds Association doesn't organise transport for members, but some Sheds have informal lift sharing schemes.



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Reducing loneliness in later life

