The LLHW-funded Active, Connected and Engaged Neighbourhoods (ACE) project is developing a unique approach of using volunteers to encourage older adults to get out and about more in their communities.

Activity in older age

Older people are the least active of all age groups. This is concerning given that low levels of physical activity in older people are linked to physical and mental health problems such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, some cancers, dementia and a decline in physical and cognitive function. Long periods spent in the home can also lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation among people in this age group.

Increased community involvement has the potential to reduce the risk of these health problems. It can help older people to undertake daily living activities, keep physically fit, maintain their social networks and enjoy later life more fully. However, older people often cite a lack of motivation and the absence of friends or family to go out with as barriers to getting out and about more in their communities.

The LLHW-funded Active, Connected and Engaged Neighbourhoods (ACE) project is taking a unique approach to this problem. It is testing whether peer volunteering is an effective way of encouraging older people to take part in physical and social activities that are available within their communities.

“One of the major barriers to physical and social activity is not having anyone to go out with”

About Project ACE

Project ACE is a two-year pilot study which has been trialled in two neighbourhoods in Bristol. It was borne out of the LLHW-funded project, AVON Network for the promotion of active ageing, which identified the use of peer volunteers as a very practical, affordable and sustainable way of encouraging older people to be more physically and socially active.
The ACE study recruited just over 50 retired men and women aged between 65 and 85 who spent less than 20 minutes per week doing moderate to vigorous physical activity. The participants were divided into an intervention group, which received the ACE programme support, and a control group that was provided with a booklet of information on physical activity opportunities in their neighbourhood. Fifteen retired ACE volunteers were trained to work with the intervention group, helping the participants to understand the benefits of increased physical activity and of becoming more involved socially with their communities. The participants were then invited to choose from a range of physical and social activities that were available locally. In addition to this initial contact, the ACE volunteers provided on-going support for the participants over the following six months to review their progress, and to help identify and overcome any obstacles they encountered.

"ACE is about connecting people with their communities and getting them involved in physical and social activities"

Outcomes and impact

Project ACE has received positive feedback from both participants and volunteers. As well as improved well-being and confidence, participants showed a marked improvement in functional ability. Poor functional ability – measured in terms of strength, walking speed and balance – can increase hospital admissions, morbidity and mortality. This outcome suggests that simply getting out of the house and making small increases in activity can have important health implications for many older people. Strong volunteer-participant relationships also contributed to the success of the intervention.

The ACE intervention has been adopted by LinkAge, a Bristol-based organisation which is tackling loneliness and isolation in older people across the city. ACE is working together with LinkAge to maintain and further evaluate the programme, making sure that participants receive on-going support. LinkAge has also begun expanding this programme into new areas across the city. Its goal is to reach older people who currently are not active or engaged with their local community, but who have expressed an interest in this type of intervention.

"The participants quickly developed an ACE 'identity' and began to organise their own group activities"

As a low-cost and sustainable intervention, ACE has the potential to be adopted by other community organisations around the country that focus on the health and well-being of older people. Over time this will allow it to successfully transition from a research intervention to a well-developed, evidence-based peer volunteer community programme that can help older people to become more physically and socially active.