AFRICA ADVOCACY FOUNDATION

SAFE SENIORS

Healthy Ageing in Action

Supporting older African and Caribbean adults to age well, stay connected, and live safely in their communities.

Independent Age

MOPAC
MAYOR OF LONDON
OFFICE FOR POLICING AND CRIME

Table of Contents

About This Report

"When we started Safe Seniors, we knew that older people in our communities were being left behind. What we discovered was the extraordinary resilience, wisdom and generosity of the people we worked with — and how much difference the right support, offered in the right way, can make."

This report covers the Safe Seniors, Healthy Ageing in Action programme delivered by Africa Advocacy Foundation (AAF) between 2020 and 2022. It covers two connected phases of AAF's work with older people. The first, funded by Independent Age, the project provided counselling, healthy eating and exercise sessions, peer support, online safety advice and hot meals. This was followed by Safe Seniors, supported by the MOPAC Victims Fund, which put more emphasis on community safety, digital skills and support from Community Champions.

It documents our work supporting older African and Caribbean people aged 60 and over across London to live healthier, safer, more connected lives. The report draws on data, case studies, participant feedback and learning gathered throughout the programme. It is intended for funders, partners, commissioners and communities with an interest in healthy ageing, equalities and culturally responsive services. All names of participants have been changed to protect confidentiality, except where individuals have given explicit consent to be identified.

91%
Felt more confident & supported

4
London boroughs covered

54
Older people supported

16
Champions Trained

Foreword

Growing older should be a time of dignity, fulfilment and continued participation in community life. Yet for many Black and minority ethnic older people, later life can be shaped by loneliness, poor health, financial hardship, digital exclusion and barriers to services. These challenges became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many older people experienced prolonged isolation, anxiety and reduced confidence in leaving home or engaging with their communities.

Africa Advocacy Foundation established and developed Safe Seniors in response to these realities. Our aim was not simply to provide activities. We wanted to create trusted spaces in which older people could reconnect with others, improve their physical and emotional wellbeing, strengthen their digital confidence and feel safer and more independent in everyday life.

This report brings together the achievements and learning from work supported by Independent Age and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime Victims Fund. Together, these investments enabled AAF to test and strengthen a culturally responsive, community-led approach combining emotional support, healthy living, digital inclusion, peer connection and community safety.

The stories and evidence in this report reflect the resilience, wisdom and generosity of the older people who participated. They also demonstrate the contribution that specialist community organisations can make in reducing inequalities and reaching people who may remain distant from mainstream provision.

We are grateful to our funders, staff, volunteers, Community Champions, partners and, above all, the older people who shared their experiences and shaped the programme. Their voices continue to guide AAF's ambition to help more older people live healthier, safer, happier and more independent lives.

Agnes Baziwe
Chief Executive
Africa Advocacy Foundation

87%
Reduced Loneliness

82%
Improved Wellbeing

79%
Increased Safety

Executive Summary

Many older people from Black and minority ethnic communities experience intersecting barriers that affect health, wellbeing and independence. These can include loneliness, long-term health conditions, poverty, language barriers, limited family support, digital exclusion, fear of crime and difficulty accessing trusted information or mainstream services.

With support from Independent Age and later the MOPAC Victims Fund, Africa Advocacy Foundation developed a connected programme of support for older people in South London. The work combined counselling, peer support, healthy eating, physical activity, digital inclusion, online safety, practical assistance and regular contact through trusted volunteers and Community Champions.

The Independent Age-funded phase directly supported 54 older people and 10 volunteers. Thirty-eight participants accessed counselling; 29 took part in virtual cookery and healthy eating sessions; 24 participated in virtual exercise; and 47 engaged in peer support, advisory and online safety sessions. The programme also provided an average of 40–45 hot meals each week to older people who were unable to prepare meals, had recently left hospital, were bereaved or needed culturally familiar food.

The subsequent Safe Seniors programme strengthened the approach by recruiting 16 Community Champions who spoke 10 African languages in addition to English. Champions maintained contact by telephone and WhatsApp, supported digital access, encouraged participation, translated where needed and created satellite groups that brought older people together in homes and community settings.

The evidence shows that the programme's contribution extended beyond attendance. Participants described reduced loneliness, stronger informal friendships, improved emotional wellbeing, greater confidence using smartphones and online services, increased awareness of healthy eating and physical activity, and a greater sense of safety and belonging. Community Champions were particularly important in reaching people who were hesitant to engage with unfamiliar services.

The programme also generated important learning. Digital inclusion requires patient, repeated support rather than one-off training. Trust and cultural relevance are essential to sustained engagement. Older people value opportunities to contribute their knowledge, culture and skills rather than being treated only as recipients of help. Hybrid delivery—combining face-to-face contact, telephone support and accessible digital communication—offers the greatest flexibility.

Safe Seniors has given AAF a strong foundation for future healthy ageing work. The organisation now intends to build on this evidence through Thrive at Home, a preventative programme designed to help Black and minority ethnic older people remain healthy, socially connected and independent in their own homes for longer.

Programme at a Glance

Programme Overview

Safe Seniors ran from 2020 to 2022 across multiple London boroughs, supporting older adults aged 60+ from African and Caribbean communities through a co-produced, culturally relevant model. The programme promoted healthy ageing through community champions, peer connection, wellbeing activities and digital inclusion, delivered through home visits, group sessions and one-to-one support. Trained Community Champions provided peer outreach, practical support and trusted connections.

Delivery & Reach

54
Direct Beneficiaries

3
London Boroughs

40–45
Meals Provided Weekly

24
Joined Physical Activity

47
Joined Peer and Safety Sessions

29
Joined Healthy Eating Sessions

39
Accessed Counselling

120+
Group Sessions Held

16
Champions Trained

Impact Figures

Outcomes were measured across loneliness and isolation, emotional wellbeing, healthy living, digital confidence, community safety and safeguarding awareness. The majority of participants reported meaningful improvements across all five outcome domains by programme end.

87%
Reduced Loneliness

82%
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About Africa Advocacy Foundation

Africa Advocacy Foundation is a UK registered charity established in 1996. AAF works alongside individuals, families and communities experiencing multiple disadvantages, including ill health, poverty, violence, isolation, language and cultural barriers, insecure immigration circumstances and unequal access to services.

AAF primarily supports African, Caribbean and other Black and minority ethnic communities across London. Its services include health promotion, advocacy, practical and emotional support, safeguarding, violence prevention, community development, digital inclusion, training and volunteering opportunities.

Supporting older people has been part of AAF's work for many years. Before the pandemic, activities included peer support groups, shared meals, dance, gardening, group walks, volunteering and health information sessions. This experience gave AAF a strong understanding of how social connection, trusted relationships and culturally appropriate activities contribute to wellbeing and independence.

AAF's approach is community-led and strengths-based. People with lived experience help shape delivery, volunteers and Community Champions provide trusted links into local communities, and programmes are adapted around language, culture, faith and individual circumstances. Safe Seniors built on this experience and tested how the same principles could support older people facing isolation, digital exclusion and concerns about safety.

AAF's distinctive contribution

AAF combines specialist knowledge of health inequalities and safeguarding with long-standing trust among African and Caribbean communities. This enables the organisation to reach older people who may not readily engage with mainstream services.

Understanding the Challenge

Growing older should not mean growing more isolated

For many people, later life brings changes in health, mobility, income and social networks. For some older people from Black and minority ethnic communities, these changes are compounded by migration experiences, language barriers, limited family support, poverty, insecure immigration status, discrimination or difficulty navigating health and social care systems.

AAF's earlier assessments found that many of the older people it supported were living with long-term health conditions, including HIV and other co-morbidities, and some were also living with the effects of trauma, violence or female genital mutilation. A number had no extended family support and depended heavily on community organisations for practical help, information and companionship.

During the pandemic, face-to-face support reduced sharply and many older people became more anxious, isolated and fearful of leaving home. Digital exclusion became a major barrier as health information, appointments, shopping and social contact increasingly moved online. Some older people lacked equipment or data, while others feared fraud, did not understand smartphone functions or relied on others to manage banking and purchases.

The programme evidence also showed that isolation had practical consequences. Participants spoke about difficulty making GP appointments, reduced physical activity, uncertainty about vaccinations, fear of crime and scams, and anxiety about shopping or using public transport. Older people who had previously been independent sometimes became reliant on others for everyday tasks.

Yet the evidence also revealed considerable strengths. Older people drew on faith, culture, humour, family traditions and life experience. They wanted opportunities to learn, help one another, share skills and remain useful within their communities. This shaped Safe Seniors as a programme built not around dependency, but around confidence, participation and mutual support.

What participants said they needed

- regular contact and trusted people to speak to
- culturally and linguistically appropriate information
- help using smartphones and online services
- support with health, nutrition and physical activity
- advice on scams, fraud and personal safety
- opportunities to meet others, learn and contribute
- practical support during illness, bereavement or hospital recovery

Key learning
Loneliness was rarely a stand-alone issue. It was closely connected to health, confidence, digital access, safety, poverty and the ability to participate in community life.

Our Healthy Ageing Approach

Safe Seniors was built around a simple idea: people are more likely to do well as they grow older when they have people they trust, regular contact with others, useful information and opportunities to stay active and independent.
Instead of dealing with loneliness, health, technology and safety as separate issues, we brought them together in one community programme. Participants helped decide what was discussed and what activities were useful. Staff, volunteers and Community Champions then adapted the support to people's needs, language, culture and level of confidence.

Community Champions

Community Champions are people who are already known and trusted within their communities. 16 Community Champions were recruited, collectively speaking 10 African languages in addition to English. They maintained regular contact with participants, providing reassurance and practical support, encouraging people to attend sessions, helping them use smartphones and other digital tools, and explaining or translating information where needed. They also played an important role in keeping people connected and engaged between activities.

Time to Talk and peer connection

Regular group sessions created a supportive space for people to talk openly about their health, wellbeing, safety and everyday challenges. Participants shared experiences and practical advice, recognised that others were dealing with similar issues, and encouraged one another to make positive changes that could improve their day-to-day lives.

Emotional wellbeing

Thirty-eight people accessed counselling to help them cope with isolation, crime, abuse, bereavement, anxiety and other personal difficulties. Alongside counselling, regular contact with trusted Community Champions and opportunities to talk with peers gave participants ongoing emotional support, reassurance and a stronger sense of connection.

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Digital inclusion

AAF provided smartphones and data and offered patient one-to-one support to help older people build their digital skills and confidence. We supported participants to join online groups, stay in touch with family and friends, find information and access services more independently. We also provided practical guidance on recognising scams and fraud and staying safe online.

Community safety and safeguarding

We facilitated open discussions about scams, abuse, personal safety and where to seek reliable help. We trained Community Champions in safeguarding so they could recognise concerns, provide appropriate support and help older people understand what action to take and who to contact if they felt unsafe or worried.

Co-production and cultural relevance

AAF designed activities around participants' interests, cultures and faiths, adapting sessions in response to what people told us they wanted. We used body mapping, storytelling, recipes, poetry and group discussions to provide different ways for people to participate, share their experiences and shape how the programme was delivered.

Programme Delivery & Reach

The programme developed across two linked funding phases, each with a different focus. Independent Age funding enabled AAF to respond to the immediate needs of older people experiencing significant disadvantage. Building on this work, MOPAC Victims Fund support enabled us to develop the Safe Seniors programme, with a stronger focus on community safety, digital inclusion and support through trusted people within the community.

We adapted our approach as circumstances changed. During periods when face-to-face contact was restricted, we kept people connected through online sessions, regular phone calls, WhatsApp groups and doorstep support. As restrictions eased, we introduced face-to-face digital skills sessions and small community-based groups. This flexible approach allowed participants to engage in ways that suited their needs, confidence and circumstances.

Independent Age-funded Support

Area	Recorded reach	Contribution
Overall participation	54 older people; 10 volunteers	Direct support, contact and participation across activities
Counselling	38 participants	Improved confidence and emotional wellbeing
Healthy eating and cookery	29 participants	Shared learning, healthier traditional meals and social contact
Virtual exercise	24 participants	Activity, flexibility and techniques for managing stress
Peer support and online safety	47 participants	Social connection, fraud awareness and shared experiences
Hot meals	Average 40–45 each week	Support during illness, hospital discharge, bereavement and hardship

MOPAC Safe Seniors Development

AAF recruited and trained 30 Community Champions to provide ongoing support within their communities. Four Champions established small local groups where older people could meet regularly, while others maintained contact through phone calls and WhatsApp. Champions provided practical help with digital devices, translated or explained information where needed, and connected participants with programme activities and relevant services.

We provided 20 smartphones, complete with SIM cards and protective covers. Eighteen were allocated to older people who did not have suitable devices, with the remaining phones supporting programme delivery. Alongside providing the phones, we worked one-to-one with participants to build their confidence in using them and to help them stay safe online.

Through our regular Time to Talk sessions, we created space to discuss the issues that mattered to participants. Sessions covered healthy eating and long-term health conditions, digital skills, online and community safety, wellbeing, body mapping, accessing services, transport, shopping and managing energy costs.

"Before Safe Seniors, I was invisible. Now I have friends, I go out, I feel alive again. This programme gave me back my life and my confidence."
— Mary, Safe Seniors Participant

Changing the programme when needed

We did not stick to activities simply because they were in the original plan. We changed the timing and format of sessions, dropped activities that people did not find useful and increased practical support when that was what participants needed most.

The Difference We Made

The programme's contribution was visible in changes to confidence, connection, wellbeing and everyday independence. The available evidence is primarily based on participation records, feedback, observation, session notes and participant testimony rather than a controlled health evaluation. The findings should therefore be understood as credible programme-level evidence of change, not proof of reduced hospital use or clinical outcomes.

Reduced loneliness and stronger social connections

Peer groups, Community Champions and WhatsApp contact helped participants develop friendships and feel part of a community. Participants used group chats, met for tea and walks, shared information and continued conversations beyond formal sessions.

Improved emotional wellbeing

Thirty-eight participants accessed counselling during the Independent Age-funded phase. Feedback described increased confidence and greater ability to share difficult experiences. Regular contact and peer support also helped people recognise that they were not alone.

Greater digital confidence

Older people who had little experience of smartphones learned to join online sessions, use messaging, access information and communicate with family and peers. For some, digital confidence also supported GP contact, online shopping and greater independence.

Healthier everyday choices

Healthy eating discussions encouraged participants to adapt traditional meals, read food labels, identify healthier swaps and share affordable shopping ideas. Walking, household activity, swimming and gentle exercise were promoted as realistic ways to remain active.

Improved safety awareness

Participants received information about online safety, scams, fraud and safeguarding. Champions were able to reinforce messages in familiar languages and provide ongoing support when concerns arose.

A renewed sense of purpose

Participants did not only receive information. They shared recipes, cultural knowledge, faith, poetry, personal histories and practical advice. Several expressed interest in becoming Champions themselves or supporting others.

Stronger community capacity

The Champion network created skills and relationships that extended beyond scheduled sessions. Champions connected with individuals and existing local groups, shared information and became a resource for older people in their communities.

"I live by myself, so it gets lonely. Being part of the seniors' programme has helped me understand some of the most useful ways of using my phone. We organise group chats, meet and have tea and go for walks. I can get out of my home without fear."

Programme participant, aged 73

"I used to depend on other people for quite a lot. Learning how to use my phone properly has made a big difference. I can keep in touch with people, find information and do more things for myself."

Programme participant, aged 77

"Having people to talk to regularly helped me a lot. I could share what I was going through without feeling judged, and I realised that other people were going through similar things too."

Programme participant, aged 60

"I enjoyed coming because I wasn't just being told what to do. We shared our own ideas, recipes and experiences. It made me feel that I still had something useful to give to other people."

Programme participant, aged 60

Stories of Change

The following stories are drawn from participant testimony and programme records. Names have been changed and, where necessary, details have been combined to protect confidentiality without changing the substance of the experience reported.

Mary's Story

Older resident, South London

Mary, 74, had been largely housebound since her husband's death, feeling isolated and anxious about leaving home. After joining the Safe Seniors programme through her local Community Champion, she began attending Time to Talk sessions and a gentle exercise group. "I didn't think anyone cared, Now I have friends. I feel safe again." Mary also gained confidence using a smartphone to video-call her grandchildren, something she had never imagined possible.

Technology as a route to independence

Joseph had previously relied on other people whenever he needed to access online information or communicate with services. Through repeated support, he learned to use a smartphone, join virtual meetings and communicate through WhatsApp. His Champion helped him understand unsolicited calls, protect personal information and use the phone safely. These skills reduced his reliance on others and made it easier to stay in contact with friends, family and community support.

Learning and contributing

Amina joined healthy eating discussions because she enjoyed cooking and wanted to learn how traditional food could be prepared more healthily. She shared recipes, shopping tips and ideas with other participants. The sessions recognised her as someone with knowledge to offer, not simply someone receiving help. This strengthened her confidence and gave her a renewed sense that her skills and experience mattered to others.

The Champion who kept people connected

One Champion supported several older people who spoke limited English and had little confidence using technology. She translated during sessions, helped participants connect their devices and made regular calls between meetings. Her role went beyond technical assistance. Because she was known and trusted, participants were willing to discuss hardship, health concerns and fears that they might not have raised with an unfamiliar service. She became a bridge between isolated older people, AAF and wider support.

Learning for the Future

Trust comes before participation

Many older people were cautious about unfamiliar services and new technology. Engagement improved when support came through known community members who spoke their language and understood their circumstances.

Digital inclusion requires time

Providing a device is not enough. Older people need repeated, patient and practical support, opportunities to practise and reassurance when mistakes occur

Hybrid delivery offers flexibility

Telephone contact, WhatsApp, online sessions, home-based satellite groups and face-to-face activities each reached different people. Future services should retain a flexible mix rather than rely on one format.

Cultural relevance strengthens health promotion

Participants engaged with healthy eating and wellbeing when discussions respected traditional foods, faith, family practices and cultural identity. Generic messages were less effective than practical, culturally meaningful conversation.

Older people want to contribute

Participants valued opportunities to teach, encourage and support others. Future programmes should create clearer routes into volunteering, peer leadership and intergenerational work.

Community Champions need structured support

Champions were central to the model, but effective delivery requires clear roles, safeguarding, befriending skills, supervision, expenses and opportunities for continuing development

Partnership access must be planned early

The programme experienced difficulty securing some planned external speakers. Future delivery should formalise relationships with health, community safety, adult social care and voluntary sector partners at the outset.

Outcome measurement should be strengthened

Future programmes should use simple baseline and follow-up measures for loneliness, wellbeing, digital confidence, falls risk, physical activity, service access and independence. Hospital and GP use should only be claimed where participants consent and reliable data can be collected.

From Safe Seniors to Thrive at Home

Safe Seniors demonstrated that culturally responsive, community-led support can improve connection, confidence and access for older people who may remain distant from mainstream services. It also showed that loneliness, health, safety and digital exclusion need to be addressed together rather than through separate short-term activities.

AAF intends to build on this learning through Thrive at Home: a preventative healthy ageing programme designed to help Black and minority ethnic older people remain healthy, socially connected and independent in their own homes for longer.

Thrive at Home will retain the strongest elements of Safe Seniors—Community Champions, peer networks, culturally relevant health promotion, digital inclusion and practical support—while developing a more structured pathway around individual wellbeing plans, healthy eating, physical activity, home safety, access to services and early identification of risks.

The proposed programme will also strengthen partnerships with health and social care services. Its aim will be to prevent avoidable deterioration and help older people manage everyday needs before they develop into crisis. Any future claims about reduced hospital attendance will be supported by appropriate baseline information, participant consent and reliable monitoring arrangements.

Safe Seniors has therefore provided more than a record of past delivery. It has given AAF an evidence-informed foundation for the next stage of its healthy ageing work and a clearer understanding of what older people value: trust, dignity, practical help, cultural understanding and the opportunity to remain connected and useful.

Proposed Thrive at Home priorities

- personalised wellbeing and independence plans
- Community Champion and peer support networks
- healthy eating and culturally relevant nutrition
- movement, strength and falls prevention
- digital health and access to services
- home safety, safeguarding and scam awareness
- support following illness or hospital discharge
- intergenerational learning and volunteering
- stronger links with primary care, social prescribing and adult social care

Future direction
AAF's ambition is to help older people live not only longer, but better: with greater health, purpose, safety, connection and independence.

Our Commitment

Africa Advocacy Foundation believes that every older person should have the opportunity to age with dignity, maintain good health, remain connected to their community and continue living independently for as long as possible.

The Safe Seniors programme has shown what can be achieved when older people, volunteers, community organisations, statutory agencies and funders work around a shared vision of healthy ageing.

AAF remains committed to developing culturally responsive services that reduce inequalities, strengthen communities and recognise the knowledge, resilience and contribution of older people.

Together, we can help ensure that growing older is accompanied not by exclusion and isolation, but by opportunity, connection and hope.

"Growing older should never mean growing more isolated. Every older person should have the opportunity to remain healthy, connected, valued and independent within the community they call home."

Acknowledgements

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