Ageing Better: Using the 'age-friendly' concept to drive system change in communities and places- Methods Note

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Introduction

Purpose of the Methods Note

This paper sets out the methods used by the Ageing Better national evaluation team to conduct research on age-friendly activities. The paper accompanies a research report exploring how the Ageing Better partnerships took forward the concept of age-friendly places or communities. The report explores the involvement of people over 50 experiencing, or at risk of, social isolation and loneliness, and the potential qualitative benefits of these approaches in supporting communities to age well.

Following an introduction to the programme, this Methods Note summarises the research approach and details the data collection methods used. It also provides a statement on research ethics and data protection, and concludes with a glossary of terms associated with the report. This paper was written by Ecorys, the independent national evaluator of the Ageing Better programme.

The Ageing Better programme

Ageing Better was a £87 million, seven year programme funded by The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund). It started in 2015 and ran until March 2022. The programme funded voluntary sector-led partnerships in 14 areas across England.

The partnerships are:

◆ Ageing Better Birmingham

◆ Bristol Ageing Better

◆ Ageing Better in Camden

◆ Brightlife (Cheshire)

◆ Talk, Eat, Drink (TED) (East Lindsey)

◆ Ambition for Ageing (Greater Manchester)

◆ Connect Hackney

◆ Age Friendly Island (Isle of Wight)

- ◆ Time to Shine (Leeds)

- ◆ Leicester Ageing Together

- ◆ Ageing Better Middleborough

- ◆ Age Better in Sheffield

- ◆ Ageless Thanet

- ◆ Ageing Well Torbay

The Fund commissioned Ecorys UK, Bryson Purdon Social Research LLP, and Professor Christina Victor from Brunel University's Institute for Ageing Studies to carry out a national evaluation of the programme.

Research process

Research aims and questions

The overarching aim for the research report was to inform external policy and practice about age-friendly ways of working to improve places for people over 50 by sharing how partnerships work in an age-friendly way, and the difference this makes to places, systems and people over 50 initiating action.

Specifically, the research questions were:

◆ How have Ageing Better partnerships made use of the 'age-friendly' concept/framework?

◆ How can adopting an 'age-friendly' approach inform local policy and practice?

◆ Have local services, strategies and approaches changed in response to 'age-friendly' activities?

◆ What did Ageing Better change in practice?

◆ To what extent are these changes embedded for the longer-term?

The research on age-friendly approaches draws on evidence collected through desk research and qualitative research with Ageing Better stakeholders. Qualitative evidence provides insight into a cross-section of stakeholders' views and experiences. The qualitative research considered whether Ageing Better brought about the intended outcomes in the programme's Theory of Change. The Theory of Change was updated for Years 6 and 7 as the pandemic took hold, to reflect the programme response and associated changes to project activities and potential outcomes. The qualitative evidence also explored both the processes involved in designing and developing activities, and the changes informed by 'test and learn' approaches, including the co-production of activities with people over 50.

It was not relevant to use quantitative data from Ageing Better participant surveys in this report, as they did not provide evidence to help answer the research questions[1].

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[1] The national evaluation developed a Common Measurement Framework (CMF) to capture participant survey data on common outcome measures for the programme[1], to monitor the Ageing Better Programme during delivery and to build a dataset on participant outcomes. Guidance on the participant survey and outcome measures was available to participating organisations.

Although a counterfactual study was also conducted at a programme level, it was not possible to use this evidence specifically for age-friendly projects.

Qualitative evidence gathering

The following methodology was used to construct the research report on age-friendly-related approaches:

Desk research

◆ A call for evidence exercise was undertaken, which invited partnerships to supply relevant evidence on age-friendly activities to the national evaluation team. This activity was voluntary and was complemented by information shared by The Fund's learning team.

◆ An evidence review was then undertaken, exploring evidence on age-friendly-related approaches produced by individual Ageing Better partnerships. The review of evidence from Ageing Better partnerships' local evaluations, website content, and other materials assimilated programme-level learning to inform the primary research.

◆ A review of the wider evidence base on age-friendly-related approaches was undertaken to situate Ageing Better evidence within broader policy and practice. This review identified key policy developments, initiatives and stakeholders working in the age-friendly field. The findings of this review and the stakeholder consultations helped identify ways in which the evidence from Ageing Better could contribute to the wider evidence.

◆ The desk research above was used to identify key lines of enquiry for further investigation through the primary research. This approach ensured effective deployment of resources by honing-in on key areas of emerging evidence.

◆ A team briefing was held to reflect on key learning from the evidence review. The team briefing also introduced semi-structured topic guides to be used for the primary research to ensure question validity and consistency across the consultation process.

Primary Research

◆ Interviews and workshops were undertaken with 33 stakeholders in total. This included:

  ◆ Five stakeholders with a policy remit covering age-friendly

  ◆ 12 partnership and 2 learning leads from 12 Ageing Better partnerships

  ◆ 12 people involved in delivering projects

  ◆ Two volunteers and participants

◆ The sampling framework used a snowballing approach to reach projects and volunteers through the partnership lead organisations.

◆ The primary research was undertaken remotely, through Microsoft Teams video and audio consultations and telephone interviews.

◆ Team debriefs were held at a mid-point and following completion of the primary research in order to reflect on immediate learning and inform the analysis.

Analysis and reporting

Notes from all primary research were written up and collated in an Excel worksheet to support secondary thematic analysis. The write ups contained detailed notes and verbatim comments, which were recorded (with appropriate permissions) to ensure data accuracy.

This secondary thematic analysis involved looking across the evidence and highlighting any that:

◆ Described emerging themes relevant to the focus of the study and the key research questions being addressed

◆ Identified commonalities and differences in perspectives across interviewees and different stakeholder groups

Data limitations

As with any study, there are certain limitations to the data being presented. This research report was primarily concerned with the difference age-friendly actions can make to communities and partnership working. The qualitative data is based on interviews with a small number of people involved in the projects and used a snowballing approach to identify key stakeholders with learning to share. The snowballing approach does not attempt to be representative of all people who took part in relevant projects.

Research ethics and data protection

Ecorys strictly adhere to academic and industry standard procedures to ensure the ethical underpinning of all our work. All Ecorys researchers working on this age-friendly research were DBS checked and cleared[2] and had completed external training on research ethics and working with vulnerable adults before their involvement began. All research was conducted within Ecorys' safeguarding policies for vulnerable adults.

All individuals who took part in an interview or focus group provided their informed consent after we shared information with them on how their data would be processed and reassured them that their views would be confidential. Stakeholders were asked to provide consent for anonymised quotes to be used in reporting. All data used in the report was anonymised and individuals were not named. However, projects and partnerships were named.

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[2] A Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check enables employers to check the criminal record of someone applying for a role. Enhanced checks are available for people intending to work with vulnerable individuals or groups. See: https://www.gov.uk/dbs-check-applicant-criminal-record.

Glossary

Age-friendly – This term refers to a wide range of services, structures and institutions that embrace the inclusion of older adults. However, the 'age-friendly' concept is most often associated with the Framework for Age-friendly Cities and Communities[3], which was developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to support cities (initially) and then communities more generally to adapt to the context of population ageing, and to reframe the ageing of their populations as an opportunity. In the UK, implementation of the WHO framework is supported by the Centre for Ageing Better[4] which defines an Age-friendly Community as *'a place where people of all ages are able to live healthy and active later lives, [which] make it possible for people to continue to stay in their homes, participate in the activities they value and contribute to their communities for as long as possible'*.

The WHO has identified eight domains for Age Friendly Communities: outdoor spaces and building, transport, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, and community support and health services.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) – An approach based on the principle of identifying and mobilising individual and community 'assets', rather than focusing on problems and needs (i.e. 'deficits')[5].

Age-friendly business – Businesses that are accessible and navigable for older people[6].

Community – This can refer to a geographical area or a community of interest. This group might be geographically related, such as a retirement community, or a community of interest dispersed across a wider area (in the context of Ageing Better, this includes a range of marginalised groups: Black, Asian and minority ethnic, LGBTQ+, carers, those living alone, and men).

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[3] The WHO Age-friendly Cities Framework https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/age-friendly-cities-framework/

[4] Centre for Ageing Better, Age-friendly Communities: https://ageing-better.org.uk/age-friendly-communities

[5] Frost, S., Learning Network Development Manager for the Altogether Better Learning Network (2011), *Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)*.

[6] Age UK (2017), *Age-friendly business: valuing and including older consumers in supermarkets and service companies*. Available from: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/rb_feb17_age_friendly_business.pdf

Co-production – This is an approach that can be applied to a wide range of different contexts. It involves professionals, citizens and other stakeholders sharing power to achieve something together, recognising that they all have valuable contributions to make.

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (or questioning)[7] and others.

Local (context) – There is no agreed definition, although this refers to a geographic area. It can range from hyper-local (a group of houses, a street, or a village) to a neighbourhood or ward level, and local authority (LA) area. This would not extend to a whole 'region'. The English regions, formerly known as the government office regions, are the highest tier of sub-national division in the country. Between 1994 and 2011, nine regions had officially devolved functions within government. Although they no longer fulfil this role, they continue to be used for statistical (and some administrative) purposes[8].

Partnership – Partnership refers to the individuals and organisations (partners) that oversee and support the delivery of Ageing Better in each of the 14 programme areas. Each partnership selects a variety of projects that best meet local needs.

Project lead – Paid staff from local organisations who coordinate larger micro-funded projects. Project activities are led by micro-funded group leads/volunteers/participant volunteers.

Social isolation or loneliness – There is no single agreed definition of social isolation or loneliness. In general, social isolation refers to the number and frequency of contacts with other people that a person has, and loneliness refers to the way that a person views this contact (for example, whether it is a fulfilling connection). Social isolation is an objective state, whereas loneliness is subjective.

Systems change – Seeking to address the root causes of social problems. Refers to an intentional process which seeks to alter the components and structures that cause systems to behave in a particular way[9]. Operationally, systems change is associated

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[7] Definition from the Cambridge dictionary, see:
https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/lgbtq
[8] See:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/administrativegeography/england
[9] Lankelly Chase and NPC (2015), *Systems change: A guide to what it is and how to do it.* Available at:
https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/systems-change-a-guide-to-what-it-is-and-how-to-do-it/
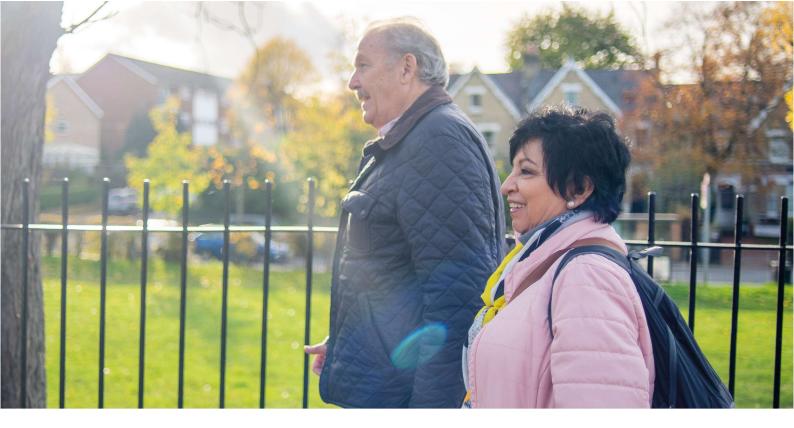
with creating a new power dynamic between individuals and organisations, which aims to empower people to help create solutions to local problems.

Test and learn – Test and learn gives partnerships the flexibility to try out a range of approaches. It also means recognising and sharing when things haven't gone as intended, as well as when they have been successful, to create practical learning for others. Using this learning, the programme aims to improve how services and interventions to tackle loneliness are delivered, and ultimately contribute to an evidence base to influence future service development'[10].

Volunteering – Any activity that involves spending time doing something unpaid that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than (or in addition to) close relatives. Central to this definition is the fact that volunteering must be a choice freely made by each person[11].

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[10] Ageing Better and the Big Lottery Fund (2018), *Knowledge and Learning Programme Briefing*, p.2.
[11] NCVO definition. See: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/volunteering-policy.