Intergenerational working – learning from Ageing Better

Introduction

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme. It is collecting information and insights from across 14 partnerships to identify learning that will be useful for other programmes and organisations delivering activities aimed at reducing social isolation in people aged 50+.

We have grouped our national learning around Ageing Better into three themes:

- CONTEXT - We know from Ageing Better that the reasons for social isolation are many and varied and happen for a myriad of reasons including macro issues such as inequalities and deprivation as well as personal circumstances. These often occur in combination meaning people's situations are complex.

- CONNECTIONS – The people who are most socially isolated (where isolation is entrenched and embedded) will need some level of one-to-one support to help address their isolation

- ECOSYSTEM – The Ecosystem is fundamental to addressing social isolation as it is the space where individuals connect with the community. It works preventatively to keep people socially connected and steps in when social isolation occurs. It includes interventions that people 'need'; activities and groups people 'want' to engage with; opportunities and provision for people to set up their own groups and community development, that includes age friendly activity

This paper focuses on our learning around intergenerational activity. It fits into our national learning in the following way:

Developing the ecosystem – developing the connections and activities which have involved or been delivered through a mixture of age groups which also contribute to helping to create an Age Friendly environment

This paper summarises the learning produced by a number of partnerships on this theme and at the end we provide links to their specific learning reports.

Context

Why intergenerational?

One of the frequent calls we hear from the people we work with through Ageing Better is that they don't want to be referred to as "old" and that activities badged and targeted at older people can often be a turn off.

We would also recognise that working with people aged 50 + represents a large number of people and is in effect an intergenerational cohort in itself being made up as it is of a variety of age groups each with their own shared history, culture and interests.

What we have learnt from Ageing Better is that we have to keep at the heart of what we do that people are individuals and so in order to reach and engage as many people as possible we need to ensure as wide a variety of types of activity and delivery as possible. Working in an intergenerational way is another way to provide choice for people and for them to be involved in a way and with an age group that is right for them.

Currently in society we often tend to segregate communities by age, which allows each generation to see itself as a separate entity rather than as an integral part of a larger community. Just 5% of the people living in the same neighbourhood as someone under 18 are over 65, compared to 15% in 1991[1]. Those age groups also often have more in common than is generally acknowledged e.g. feeling lonely and isolated at times and experiencing a range of life transitions.

Ultimately it is important that in developing a greater sense of community and social cohesion together with the effective support networks and connections to prevent social isolation and loneliness there needs to be an understanding of and reach across different generational groups.

Partners told us that whilst differences in language and cultural assumptions between people of different generations can sometimes be barriers, sensitive facilitation including allowing plenty of time for one-to-one conversations - can help create successful projects and challenge assumptions from both younger and older people.

Linking older adults with younger people can provide advantages for both age groups. For example, such relationships can:

- Provide an opportunity for both to learn new skills
- Give a sense of purpose to both age groups

---

[1] Generations Apart Report http://www.if.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Generations-Apart-Brochure.pdf

- Discover they have more in common with each other than often assumed

- Help to alleviate fears young people may have of the elderly and vice versa

- Help young people to understand and later accept their own ageing

- Invigorate and energize older adults

- Reduce the isolation of older adults

- Fill a void for young people who do not have grandparents available to them

- Help keep family stories and history alive

"we have often found that the lack of responsibility that both generations enjoy (neither have dependants to worry about) can create a sense of fun, which allows for laughter, risk-taking, and creativity. This latter point is perhaps the most powerful lesson we have learned. Younger generations are learning to take risks, to make decisions, to take on responsibility and to develop a sense of purpose to their lives. Doing that in a real environment where someone else is relying on them is far more powerful than as a hypothetical exercise. And we know that for older generations (most especially those living within a care environment) the longer older people can feel that they are valued, useful and purposeful, the better their quality of life."

Why not intergenerational?

Intergenerational activities are an important element to consider as they can add to the range increasing the appeal and offer to a wider range of people but they aren't right for everyone.

Intergenerational activities do not appeal to everyone and can cause anxiety for some older people. They may be daunted by the idea of interacting with younger people, particularly if they have not done this for many years. They may also feel worried about having 'nothing to give' or not being able to relate to younger generations. They may also feel concerned about being able to 'keep up' with the energy of the younger people.

Staff and volunteers in intergenerational projects may need to spend time building up participants' confidence and convincing them that they will make a valuable contribution to the project. This could particularly be the case when working with the severely socially isolated whose self-confidence and self esteem are likely to be low.

> **Key message** : Intergenerational activities can be beneficial to both groups. They can help build confidence, challenge assumptions and prejudices and help tackle social isolation and loneliness in both groups. Intergenerational activities may not be appropriate when people are severely socially isolated and confidence and self-esteem is very low.

Providing a focus and structure to the activity

An additional advantage of an intergenerational activity can often be that they

appeal to participants who enjoy being part of a specific activity rather than just meeting up "socially". We have explored in an earlier learning report how this can be a particular appeal for older men.

It is important to be very clear about what the project involves, why it is being undertaken and why it is a valuable activity to participate in. Lack of clarity about the structure of a project or what is expected of participants can deter some people from participating.

It is valuable for intergenerational projects to find a balance between being structured and unstructured, for example having a loose project structure with overarching aims and objectives, within which specific activities can be flexibly co-designed by participants around their knowledge, skills, interests and ideas. This ensures a person-centred approach is maintained throughout and that people still have input into the direction and shape of the project.

Participants will have different levels of confidence participating in activities with younger generations and for this reason it works well for different levels of participation to be offered. Progressing through these different levels of participation can be a useful way to build participants' confidence. Participant engagement was also fostered by activities being built on week-by-week, rather than repetition of the same activity.

Torbay's Grow Gap So Fly Project aims to bridge the Inter-generational gap by helping to build mutual understanding and communication through peer-led groups piloting ideas for activities such as a young and old men's woodwork group, drone flying, skills swapping and also one-to-one matched mentoring.

Sound Communities Hear and Now Project brought older and younger people together in local history groups, care homes and communities to record, produce, broadcast and archive local stories and memories across Torbay.

We also found it was beneficial to create opportunities where skills could be shared across the generations.

Cheshire's project (Fabweld 50) allowed retired engineers to pass on skills gained from their career which in turn allowed them to feel a valued part of the project and community. The project identified that many of the retired engineers found retirement difficult and that they missed the social aspect of work and team working. Being part of the project allowed them to continue to work alongside others in an engineering environment.

The project also allowed the participants to pass on skills and knowledge to younger apprentices and learners within the Welding Academy. A particularly successful element of the project has been the formation of intergenerational relationships. The over 50's on the course communicated and socialised with younger learners and provided advice and support to them.

Some of these messages are echoed in the findings from Sheffield's Skills Swap project. Skills that were acquired through a lifetime of employment can get left behind once they aren't used regularly and this creates a sense of not feeling useful. People want to volunteer using their skills and 'be useful' rather than just participating in generic volunteering opportunities. Those who had previously held academic/teaching roles welcomed the idea of sharing the benefit of their knowledge with those undertaking similar learning. For example, one event participant (a retired Registered Nurse/Lecturer) stated she would "love" to work with those undertaking nursing/healthcare training to give the benefit of her knowledge and keep learning herself on current practice.

> **Key message** : As well as having structure it is important to also try to incorporate flexibility so that you can be responsive to peoples' changing needs. Joint planning and design sessions where old and young work in small groups together to plan how the project should look can really help connect people and add to their sense of belonging together as a group, taking pleasure and pride in their plans and then in their achievements.

Working with education partners

A number of Ageing Better areas have partnered formally with schools or colleges in order to deliver intergenerational activities. Ageing Better projects told us that they had underestimated the length of time required to plan such projects with an educational establishment. They found it difficult to contact the right people in schools and to arrange time away from lessons. This was made easier if the topics were directly linked to activities in the National Curriculum.

We also found it was important to be aware of and have an appreciation for the variety of pressures on schools and colleges and so be as flexible as possible. This means being willing to vary the length and duration of sessions and the timing of it to best work with the school day.

When working with schools, colleges and universities, be aware that their time will be restricted by exams and term dates. Projects should plan around this in advance to ensure the activities are not too disrupted. Schools also plan their activities up to a year in advance and so it can be beneficial to have early discussions with Headteachers or school leaders to find out when in the year would be most useful for them to have an activity.

"Perhaps one of the toughest challenges we faced was gaining the agreement and commitment to participate in the project from the schools and colleges we approached. This seemed a real uphill struggle at times – far greater than we had anticipated. Schools have so many demands and pressures placed on them that they have little time left to give attention to an unknown representative with a new project proposal"

> **Key Message**: Delivering activities in schools often takes more time than would be expected. Connecting the intergenerational activities to topics covered within the national curriculum can bring added value for schools and encourage a positive working relationship.

Working with care homes

Intergenerational projects can have particular resonance for people living in a residential care setting as the move usually means leaving familiar surroundings, friends, activities and even pets behind them. It can also often mean losing any sense of being part of a community. When someone has dementia, the impact of change can be even more isolating (80% [2] of people living in a care home have a form

---

[2] Alzheimers Society 2014

of dementia or severe memory problems). This can lead to withdrawal, reduced participation in activities and fewer opportunities to participate, thereby compounding the problems of loneliness and isolation.

One project in Leicester worked with older people living in care homes and young volunteers to engage regularly as a group in meaningful and purposeful creative 'tactile textile' activities. This enabled those in the homes to feel less isolated and more involved and connected with both the surrounding local community and their care home community whilst providing the environment for each to learn more about each other.

"For our regular activity sessions with visitors from the local community we generally took a group away from a central lounge or their own bedrooms to a separate designated space. This enabled residents to know that they were doing something which was especially tailored for them. All attention was focused on them and on the activity, generally without interruptions, and this brought a real sense of togetherness and 'mini-community' to those involved. "

Echoing the earlier point about the advantage of having clearly focussed activities each activity was carefully tailored to accommodate both parties and thought was put into incorporating themes and associations, which could link the generations and encourage conversation through simple thought-provoking exercises, quizzes, music or poetry. Through activities and conversations with the young people, residents were able to share knowledge, memories and skills. Both parties learn what they can do, and those who are more able help others – in a natural and unassuming way.

Whilst it is important to have structure to sessions, it is also important to also try to incorporate flexibility so that you can be responsive to peoples' changing needs. Joint planning and design sessions where old and young work in small groups together to plan how the project should look can help connect people and add to their sense of belonging together as a group, taking pleasure and pride in their plans and then in their achievements.

One project explained that they had found it helpful to have a discussion with care home staff regarding the benefits of the activities for people and then for them to 'refer' beneficiaries initially. Then, through a combination of their developing understanding of how sessions benefit different people and their knowledge of individual residents they could include others on an on-going basis.

A project in Leeds also had the aim of connecting older residents of a care home with their local community by becoming penpals. Pupils from a school in the same community wrote letters to the residents and the residents replied. Three times in the school year the pupils met their older pen pals face to face. The approach was to create meaningful relationships between the penpals and by providing purposeful meet ups and skill sharing, the aim was to increase the care home residents' feeling of worth and use in the community as well as to improve their self-confidence so that they felt more comfortable interacting with people outside the home.

The project noted that many of the residents had become very isolated and lost a lot of confidence as a result which meant that they spent more of their time than initially planned with the residents to build their confidence with writing the letters and interacting with people outside the home.

Key message : It is important to put the necessary time and work into establishing good working relationships with the care homes and their staff. It is important to take the time to build and nurture the relationships with the care homes properly, so

it is worth starting small and building up. Once staff see the benefit of the work they will start involving more residents and connecting more people up to the opportunity.

Working with college and university students

One of the recurring themes highlighted in feedback from Ageing Better projects was that of the increasing awareness of not just loneliness experienced by older people but of loneliness experienced by people of all ages, including students. A Leeds project - Caring Together – looked at linking these two groups together.

The students who participated all felt that the project took them out of their normal connections and made them gain knowledge of the local community that they otherwise would not have had. They also found their volunteering roles gave them a greater insight of the issues facing older people.

The students mostly felt that their mental health improved as a result of participating and that was partly to do with:

- Having people outside of university to talk to about their issues

- Having an outlet in which they put other people first. That not everything, in the words of one student 'was about me.'

They found it was important to have a mix of potential volunteering experiences such as being an aid to participation, one to one support and telephone support also allowed individuals to opt for a role in which they felt most comfortable.

'I thought that it was going to take a while to get to know the student and had a list of things to ask and talk about when she visited in case it became awkward but it was nothing of the sort. She is so natural and easy to speak with. She also talks about her family down south a lot and I find myself thinking about what they are doing as she makes me feel like part of the family. I feel less on my own now and think that I should have wasted less of my time in the past and got out and done more things."

We also heard that the age of the young people involved can affect the nature of the impact that the intergenerational activity has on the older people. For example, Bristol's Rocking The Boat project worked with young people aged 16-25 and they felt that this age group enabled genuine friendships to be built up between the generations, in a way that cannot always be done when the intergenerational activity involves younger children. It may be more likely to involve the sharing of experiences/worldviews and building connections with local neighbours, compared to children of nursery/primary school age where the value of the intergenerational work is different.

Addressing Seasonal Loneliness

Summer holidays can be a time when people experience 'seasonal loneliness'. This can be due to normal activities stopping and also the feeling of 'being left behind' whilst other people go on holidays and days out. Mixing the generations has a positive impact on the loneliness experienced by older people. This effect is

increased when the older people are volunteering with children's activities, and able to use the skills and experience they have to help a younger generation.

Feast of Fun across the Generations has been a popular project in Middlesbrough, providing children and families with fun activities, trips and meals during the school holidays with older volunteers.

Parents were very positive about having older people volunteering to help with the holiday clubs, suggesting that it is good for social integration. Older people enjoyed the opportunity to gain a sense of belonging and to make use of their skills as well as remaining connected to changes happening in the world from a younger persons perspective.

Whilst seeing numerous benefits to volunteering, some of the older people did experience challenges when helping at the holiday clubs. Early mornings and transport were cited as obstacles to volunteering, and some found it hard to keep up physically with the children, however this did not prevent them from enjoying helping at the holiday clubs.

It is evident that volunteering with inter-generational projects can give older volunteers a sense of purpose and a feeling that they are making a positive contribution to their community. Whilst children are fairly unaware of the age difference of volunteers, they appreciate the skills, experience and patience older people have, and enjoy having them participate in holiday clubs. Creating inter-generational activities can provide an experience of the different generations of family life and can give people a strong sense of belonging.

Key message : When designing inter-generational activities, it is important to listen to older people to discover their strengths and skills, and also understand any limitations, for example mobility. This will allow older people to participate more fully and all generations to gain as much as possible from the experience.

Further information

- Ageing Better in Birmingham - Bringing Different Ages Together

- Bristol Ageing Better - Learning for Life Together

- Leicester Ageing Together - Brief toolkit for Intergenerational Gardening and Intergenerational Learning

- Age Better in Sheffield - Intergenerational Skills Swap

- Ageing Better Middlesbrough – Feast of Fun - Intergenerational Learning

- Ageing Better in Camden - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKCBO1fqhZs&feature=youtu.be

- Age Friendly Island (Isle of Wight) film https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IdQIp3V9gA

More information on the Ageing Better Programme together including insights from across the programme are available at Ageing Better