



Connections project, Time to Shine, Leeds

Ageing Better



Ageing Better: Learning from our COVID-19 response to enhance future delivery: Method note

Purpose of the method note

This paper sets out the rationale and methods used by the Ageing Better national evaluation team, to conduct research on the programme's COVID-19 response. Following an introduction to the programme, the paper sets out the background context for the COVID-19 thematic work. The paper then summarises the research approach and concludes with a statement on research ethics. This paper has been written by Ecorys, the lead independent national evaluator of the Ageing Better programme. The paper accompanies a more detailed report on learning from the

Ageing Better response to COVID-19, as a way to reach people over 50 at risk of, or experiencing, social isolation and/or loneliness.

The Ageing Better programme

Ageing Better is a £87 million, seven-year, programme funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, (TNLCF). The programme started in 2015 and is running until 2022, following a 12-month extension from the initial six-year term, to take account of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the programme's work. The programme funds 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

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

Research context

The COVID-19 learning paper builds on a series of rapid reviews. The aim of the research series was to summarise key features and insights from Ageing Better partnerships' responses, in reorganising their support to reach people over 50 most affected by the pandemic. The learning paper summarises primary research undertaken with Ageing Better stakeholders (partnership leads, project leads and (participant) volunteers). The research was designed to plug gaps in the review of wider policy and practice, and products (including self-reported data) published by the Ageing Better partnerships, to inform delivery during the pandemic and potentially beyond. The research took place in a rapidly evolving context, between

early August- early October 2020, and the paper was produced during October, before the second national lockdown was announced.

The national evaluation team produced the rapid review series in line with good practice, which recommends a continuous process of evaluation and learning to enable flexible or adaptive management in complex, evolving environments. This supports components and/or actors within the system to learn and evolve and can inform the systems responseⁱ. This resonates with the value and importance of evaluation in helping TNLCF understand how the Ageing Better programme has responded to complex and rapid change during the pandemic. These insights are essential to inform policy development that can make real and meaningful change in society for the longer-term.

Programme context

The research took place within a complex programme context:

- At the start of the pandemic in early 2020, some partnerships were winding down their project activities and focusing on strategic work. As the pandemic took hold, TNLCF secured a programme extension for a year, to enable Ageing Better partnerships to support recovery efforts from the pandemic. Partnerships rapidly responded and mobilised staff and volunteers to support the COVID-19 recovery efforts.
- The Ageing Better programme is based on person-centred, ‘test and learn’ principles. This ethos underpinned the COVID-19 response, with activities ranging from strategic partnership developments to adapting grass-roots delivery mechanisms, to reach further into communities at speed. The Ageing Better response represented diverse local solutions to change. This diversity can be challenging to evaluate.
- The pandemic affected partnership areas to varying degrees. Whilst all areas endured three national lockdowns, some partnerships were able to restart activities as restrictions were relaxed. However, several areas also endured extended local lockdowns, such as Birmingham, Leicester, and Greater Manchester.
- At the time of the research, partnerships faced additional uncertainty about the likelihood of further lockdowns, and unknowns around the speed or efficacy of a vaccination programme. This made planning community initiatives extremely difficult. Ageing Better partnerships were unable to follow their normal cycle of planning, testing and learning as the environment was constantly changing, and partnerships were adapting at speed accordingly.
- The partnerships noted challenges and limitations associated with adopting a remote support offer. Challenges and limitations included practical support options which cannot transition to an online environment, and digital access issues, particularly for some people with higher level needs and disabilitiesⁱⁱ.

Barriers such as the affordability of purchasing digital devices and regular data bundles for internet access were also a concern.

- Partnerships also noted challenges and considerations for planning longer-term community recovery and renewal. Resourcing blended delivery models is complex and expensive and requires further investment and research.
- Partnerships were also mindful about the longer-term effects of lockdowns on people's confidence and mobility to attend face-to-face activities. The economic downturn also affected people's livelihoods, and there remain uncertainties about whether some local amenities and services will survive the pandemic.

The research and Ageing Better's longer-term response should therefore be viewed through the lens of a constantly evolving and uncertain environment.

Research process

Rationale for Approach

Qualitative approaches were applied to this thematic evaluation to gather stakeholders' reflections on the rapid changes taking place within the COVID-19 context. Qualitative evidence provides a rich body of evidence demonstrating a cross section of stakeholders' views and experiences. This approach enabled the national evaluation team to develop an in-depth understanding and explore nuances that could not be investigated using quantitative methods. (Before the pandemic, the Ageing Better national evaluation collected quantitative data from participants to measure change, and to complement qualitative evidence. The quantitative data collection was paused at the start of the pandemic, as it became apparent that the data would not be comparable with pre-pandemic results, given the rapid changes and level of uncertainty faced by communities). The COVID-19 learning paper is therefore a thematically driven qualitative research study.

Evidence gathering

The COVID-19 learning report drew largely on qualitative research with stakeholders from Ageing Better partnerships. The following methodology was used to construct the COVID-19 learning report:

Desk Research

- An initial rapid evidence review was undertaken, drawing together Ageing Better evidence on the COVID-19 response, produced by individual Ageing Better partnerships. The rapid review of evidence from Ageing Better partnership's local evaluations, website content and other materials assimilated programme-level learning, and pinpointed gaps for primary

research. This approach was used to situate the primary research within a robust evidence base and support the analysis of emerging learning from partnership activity.

- The paper draws on the wider review of the evolving evidence base on the COVID-19 response provided in the preceding rapid response papers, to situate Ageing Better insights within broader policy and practiceⁱⁱⁱ.
- 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 rapid evidence review and rapid response papers, to provide a baseline and confirm priorities for the primary research. The team briefing also introduced the semi-structured topic guides to be used for the primary research, to ensure question validity and consistency across the consultation process.

Primary Research

- Primary research was then undertaken with each of the 14 Ageing Better partnerships across England, through interviews and focus groups with around 55 stakeholders: people managing, delivering, volunteering and participating in the programme^{iv}.
- The sampling framework used a snowballing approach to reach projects and volunteers through the partnership lead organisations.
- Team debriefs were held at a mid-point and following completion of the primary research, to reflect on immediate learning and inform the detailed analysis.

Analysis and reporting

The qualitative data was written up into an analysis table, and contained detailed notes and verbatim comments, which were recorded (with appropriate permissions), to ensure data accuracy and reliability.

The qualitative analysis explored the extent to which Ageing Better brings about the intended outcomes in the programme's Theory of Change^v. 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 analysis also explored both the processes involved in designing and developing activities, and the outcomes achieved from 'test and learn' approaches, including the coproduction of activities with people over 50.

Research Ethics and Data Protection

Ecorys and our partners strictly adhere to academic and industry standard procedures to ensure the ethical underpinning of all our work. Specifically, we follow the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines (SRA), the Government Social Research Unit Code of Practice (GSRU) and the Market Research Society Guidelines (MRS). We also ensure all our staff undertaking research or wider work with vulnerable adults over 18 are DBS checked and cleared^{vi}, and complete external training on research ethics and working with vulnerable adults. All research is conducted within Ecorys's Safeguarding Policies for vulnerable adults. Ecorys's Statement on Effectively Involving Older People in Research is adhered to by our partners.

All individuals who took in an interview or focus group provided their informed consent after we provided information about how their data would be processed and reassurance 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. The primary research was undertaken remotely, through Teams video and audio consultations and telephone interviews.

ⁱ HM Treasury. Magenta Guide 2020. Supplementary Guide: Handling Complexity in Policy Evaluation https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879437/Magenta_Book_supplementary_guide_Handling_Complexity_in_policy_evaluation.pdf

ⁱⁱ Please refer to the rapid response papers and longer report for further details <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/ageing-better#section-2>

ⁱⁱⁱ Rapid response papers 1-3 provide the backdrop for the longer learning paper on the Ageing Better COVID-19 response. <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/ageing-better#section-2>

^{iv} Unless otherwise stated, insights are drawn from primary research with Ageing Better stakeholders.

^v The Theory of Change was developed through an iterative process, including discussions with funded partnerships and TNLCF stakeholders. Outcomes are identified for volunteers and participants; and the system, services and infrastructure

^{vi} 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. <https://www.gov.uk/dbs-check-applicant-criminal-record>