Working with community assets – 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 from 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 which includes age friendly activity.

This paper focuses on our learning around working with community assets. It links into our national learning in the following ways:

1. Developing the ecosystem - Working with community assets helps people set up their own groups and helps create the opportunities with which people 'want' to engage
2. Making connections - Taking a community development approach is part of the mix of activities that helps reach the people who are socially isolated and can start to address social isolation issues

This report is based on the learning and insights from the East Lindsey, Greater Manchester, Leeds, Leicester, Middlesbrough, Sheffield, Thanet and Torbay Ageing Better areas who attended a workshop to explore this theme.

At the end of this report we provide links to specific learning reports from Ageing Better areas on this topic.

Ways of working with Community Assets

Working with community assets has been a key component since the inception of Ageing Better. Ageing Better has an underpinning ethos of working in a strengths based way which necessarily involves building on community assets. The exact method of implementation and delivery, however, varied between Ageing Better areas dependent on their own context.

Some areas made explicit use of and adoption of the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) model. This follows closely the principles and practices developed by the ABCD Institute[1] and is based on the work of John Kretzmann and John McKnight. This approach involves a constant cycle of discovering strengths, mapping and mobilising the community.

Other areas adopted community development principles (encouraging people to come together and take action on the things that matter to them) and asset mapping (identifying the assets and strengths in a community). Regardless of the model used, we identified that Ageing Better areas applied the following principles when working with community assets:

- People focused – delivery is led by people. At the heart of the delivery is the principle of always looking to build on "what is strong not wrong".

- Community led - people involved in the work are "asked" not "told" what they would like to get involved in or deliver. So delivery and activity happens in a "bottom up" not "top down" way.

- Relationship driven – people in a community working together. This way of working incorporates principles of co-facilitation and co-design and it starts and builds upon the existing resources.

- Place based – keeping the development locally focused whilst being aware that the size and context of the "place" will vary.

Key message: Working with community assets means being people focused, building on positives and strengths and finding ways for the community to work together. It is also often place based allowing people to come together within a recognised geographical area although the size and context of that place will vary.

Finding assets

In Ageing Better we found it was important to think about the assets present in a community in its broadest possible sense. This, of course, covers the skills, knowledge and interests of individuals but also includes wider community assets within the voluntary and community sector as well local businesses.

---

[1] https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/

We found that the speed, variety and type of connections made when working with community assets varied considerably between different communities. It is important to understand both the community and its history before you begin working in and with it. In some communities there will already be the social networks and connections just waiting to be activated. In others there will be a wide range of factors that mean it can take much longer to mobilise activity. These factors can include community demographics, history with other organisations or initiatives as well as a loss of shared spaces etc.,

Each community is different as are the people in those communities. People in communities will naturally take on different roles. There will be those who are natural connectors, others natural befrienders, and others perhaps drawn to take on leadership or organising roles. There will also be those people for whom connecting comes less easily or naturally. There will be groups of people where a slower and steadier approach is needed and where a seed of an idea needs to be planted and left to grow. It can take time to build confidence and help people to recognise that everyone has something to give as well as to understand what their personal contribution and assets really are.

Connecting to people requires a specialist set of skills. We found those working with community assets needed to:

- care about and be interested in people and, in turn, the community.

- be compassionate, authentic and genuine.

- have a flexible and adaptable attitude.

- be willing to step outside their own comfort zone and encourage others to do the same.

Although we heard that it could help to employ someone from within a community as this gave a fast-track understanding to some of the issues, we also heard that it was useful to have someone from outside bringing a fresh perspective. What mattered most, however, was the ability of any paid staff to listen, connect with and build those connections.

Our session also highlighted, yet again, the important role food plays in making connections. Food can be a super-connector particularly in situations where there were opportunities for people to bring and share food together. We have produced a more detailed guide to the role of Food in building connections as part of our wider learning work and a link to this is available at the end of this document.

Key message: Each community is different and the speed with which each community and the individuals within those communities move is different. Connecting to people requires specialist skills which include the ability to listen, connect with and build trust in the community. Food can play an important role in drawing people into activities and helping to facilitate connections.

Meeting the community's needs

We found through Ageing Better that working with a community should itself lead to engaging with people with specific needs. These specific needs could include financial issues, health problems, caring responsibilities or any number of factors that put them into, or close to a crisis. When people are in this position, this immediate need has to be "solved" or addressed before they are able to

contemplate becoming more widely involved in their communities.

Through Ageing Better, areas have often been able to support people in, or close to crisis, through their wider programme of commissioned services. For example, Ageing Better areas commissioned specialist or specific services to support people with financial or mental health issues. In places where this was not possible it was important to signpost people to those activities or agencies which could help.

Working with community assets often involves identifying the strengths and then building momentum and connections around these strengths. This can sometimes be described as "going where the energy is". However, there is a considerable risk with this approach that important sections of the community will be missed.

It is important as with all community work to make sure activity reaches all sections of the community. We found it was important to place a clear equality focus on community work and to focus on reaching all sections especially those who could easily be missed e.g. people with literacy issues or physical or learning disabilities.

We heard how this asset based approach can have particular resonance when working with people referred by or part of the health service as it starts from people's individual strengths rather than their diagnosis.

Key message: It is important to support people who are in difficulty or crisis by having a wide range of services available to support people either directly or through partner organisations. A wide range of tools are needed to reach out into the community and help those people who may otherwise be missed.

Challenges with finding assets

There can be challenges with both finding and engaging community assets. We heard that there can be "gate keepers" in a community who have been comfortably doing the same thing for many years becoming quite complacent and feeling that they know what is best for the community. This can lead to a jarring with those organisations trying to take a community development or asset based approach.

In other situations it may be that the *"well has been poisoned"* in that there is a history and context to the approach, some of which is negative. This could be negativity around how funding or activity was delivered previously or anger over "consultation fatigue" which was never actually taken account of. It is helpful to have this out in the open to allow the potential for people to work through it. Although this is not always the case, we heard it was often communities who had had received regeneration money or initiatives in the past which were often the worst affected by this.

There are also challenges when working with established groups especially those with protected characteristics (e.g. LGBT+). Some groups may be happy with a small amount of input and support but then be very happy to continue doing their own thing. It can be hard as a worker to step back and recognise that although you think the group would perhaps benefit from more structure or support, that they are happy and comfortable with their own approach.

It is also difficult to put clear geographic boundaries on asset based ways of working. Although some Ageing Better areas have used designated areas such as wards, others have tried to work within more natural communities and others have worked on a much larger geographic scale but linked to communities of interest e.g. BAME groups

> **Key message**: There may be local barriers to working in an asset based way. This could include organisations used to working in a particular way or recent history making people sceptical about engaging. It is important to understand both the community and its history before you begin working in and with it.

Approaches to working with community assets

We head that all the approaches taken to finding and mobilising community assets used through Ageing Better combined three core types of activities:

- *Reaching people* – as set out above this includes making use of natural connectors and existing assets within the community.

- *Supporting people to take action* – this includes developing new groups, helping people to rediscover an old passion, discovering a new passion or reaching out and connecting to others in the community.

- *Linking to other assets* – this includes not only linking to existing programmes, activities or support structures but also mobilising other partners such as businesses.

Through Ageing Better several areas were also able to offer micro-funding. This allowed smaller groups to receive starter funding. It was also used to undertake small improvements in the local community which in turn could help people create a sense of place.

Our learning session identified how important it was to have and create "bumping spaces". These can be a wide variety of places where the aim is to connect to and with people. Ageing Better created these opportunities in a number of different ways including regularly travelling on buses to talk to people and also making use of local shops. We also heard how important it was to work in a community development way in Independent Living Schemes or Sheltered Housing as people were often isolated and unconnected when living there.

Throughout our Ageing Better learning we have heard how important use of language is and we heard how it again has relevance here in supporting people to take action within a community. We heard that "volunteering" was a term that people often found off putting as it sounded formal and requiring commitment. Other terms like "membership" were more helpful in encouraging people to connect and take part as it indicated flexibility and allowing people to dip in and out of activities.

We also found terms like "mutual support" worked better than "giving back". People often have difficult and complex lives, and so the notion of needing to "give back" risks alienating people. This was also linked to insights shared by areas about not advertising about needing specific roles fulfilled but instead speaking directly to people about what they love, what they care about and what they have to contribute.

Establishing new groups or connecting people to existing groups is often a product of working in an asset based way. We identified how existing groups and newly established groups often need support with the practicalities of running a group including arranging insurance, as well as understanding the need for particular roles, such as a treasurer. This can be provided via formal training but in some areas it was delivered through informal support and mentoring.

We found it was also valuable to link different groups together so as to provide support to each other. It was also identified that in many instances groups have not

evolved or been set up to cope with people or larger numbers of people who may have additional needs e.g. dementia which needs consideration when supporting people to attend.

When new assets, such as groups are created, it needs to be undertaken with a view to their future and on-going sustainability. This includes thinking about how the group or activity will be sustained such as the level of any financial contributions to be made by group members as well as establishing what will happen if someone becomes ill or wants to step away from any roles within the group. More detail on establishing and "opening up" groups will be available in a future learning report.

Our learning also highlights the importance of linking with wider programmes or networks and opportunities as well as community spaces and assets that are underused. This includes recognising the value of businesses and the support they can offer e.g. provision of free venues, access to training or specialist knowledge and expertise such as book keeping.

> **Key message**: Working with community assets will involve reaching people and supporting them to take action. Micro-funding and supporting people to establish groups are key parts of supporting this to happen. Community assets include wider programmes and local businesses who can often provide additional support to help make activity happen on the ground.

Measuring the impact

Working with community assets is complex. The communities themselves are dynamic and there will always be a wide range of external factors influencing any community. When approaches are working well they are flexible and are driven by the strengths in the community. This means sometimes the work will be short term and light touch. On other occasions it will be long term and in-depth. It may also be like dropping a stone in pool with many ripples of impact.

To help build a case for this way of working we found it was important to:

- *Showcase the wider evidence* – there is substantial evidence of the impact of community development work. Ageing Better is helping to contribute to this evidence base (links to wider work are at the end of this document). You can use this to show how your approach follows these models and guidelines – other people have shown this to work.

- *Make use of natural experiments* – all areas receive a complex range of support and interventions but you can compare the extent of assets in communities you have worked in with those you have not.

- *Draw on the wider research* – look to fields including Behavioural Science. This research is helping us to understand and explain different types of behaviour and this can help explain why these approaches can be effective.

- *Collect some evidence yourself* – make use of databases that help you track the people you connect with and the work that you do to help show who you have reached.

- *Create opportunities for people to share their stories* – use conversation points, videos or other creative tools to help people bring to life the type of work that has been done and to capture the ripples and impact of the work that is undertaken.

- *Work with others* – there is an opportunity to share similar tools across

different organisations and different places. This will help further contribute to the evidence base. In Ageing Better we found there was a particular gap in organisations who were using similar qualitative tools and questions.

Further information

- Ageing Well Torbay - Community Building - connecting people and place to build community & reduce social isolation

- Time to Shine (Leeds) – Community Connect Community First Yorkshire

  Community Connect

  Street Links

- Leicester Ageing Together – Community Connectors Close Encounters

- Greater Manchester Ambition for Ageing - Asset Based Approaches and Inequalities

- Ageing Better Middlesbrough – Spotlight on Social Isolation and Supported Living

  Engaging Marginalised Communities - as easy as ABCD

- Bristol Ageing Better - Community Development for Older People in Bristol

- Ageing Better learning Report - Role of food in building connections and relationships

More detail on our wider insights from across the Programme to date together with an overview summary of our learning to date are available at Ageing Better