

Communications work during Covid-19

– 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+.

The focus of our work within Ageing Better is on reducing social isolation and loneliness, working with a range of partners to find innovative ways of connecting people aged 50+. Covid-19 and the restrictions it brought meant that instead of encouraging and supporting people to go out and meet people, partnerships had to adapt to find other ways to establish those vital means of connection. We explore the ways in which Ageing Better areas rose to this challenge in our national learning reports.

This paper explores our learning and experiences of developing and adapting effective communications work in response to the challenges posed during Covid-19. The initial focus is on the impact for staff in maintaining internal comms plans whilst working from home and goes on to consider some of the external communication challenges. We identify examples of what has worked well to carry forward into ways of working in the future. It is based on the insights from all our Ageing Better areas and their communication leads.

The move to homeworking

When Covid-19 hit in March 2020, people were asked to work from home and for the majority of the Ageing Better core Programme teams this continued through much of 2020 and into 2021.

An initial priority was to ensure people had the equipment required to work effectively from home with offices closed and face to face meetings transferred overnight onto online platforms.

Some of the challenges included:-

- Technical issues around home internet access.
- Missing the casual chats about work which help oil the wheels, resolve little issues quickly and which were also good for morale.
- Too many online meetings with increased screen time being tiring.
- Unskilled use of communication apps - people sending information on the wrong platform - not being thoughtful about what was being shared and where.

Positives of the change to homeworking

There have, however, been a wide range of positives for both individuals and organisations from the move to homeworking and the adaptations required.

It is now possible to hold “all staff” online meetings when previous face to face meetings couldn’t include the whole team. As a result, team members are now meeting and talking to people they wouldn’t have spoken to before.

We heard that staff feel that they are better connected to the “top tier” of the organisation due to receiving more regular updates from senior managers. In addition, sharing more ‘work’ updates in meetings has meant people are more aware of the rest of the wider team’s work and delivery plans.

The necessity of trying to find solutions and a new way of working has also meant that things have been done differently. This encourages a certain amount of creativity and flexible thinking, both of which are positive, and teams hope that this is a culture that will remain.

Digital technology has also worked. People commented that they have generally been more productive at home without the distraction of office activity. Time and money have been saved as a result of not having to travel expensively to attend meetings. Other comments include appreciating more flexible working because of not having to be in an office as well as not missing the commute!

“Imagine if this had happened 10 years ago. Not only is technology supporting staff, it also allows our media group to keep going and our magazine is still being produced - the elders in the media group are producing excellent articles for the magazine, learning new skills, enjoying a book club, attending talks that we’ve put on - it’s brilliant that the media group work over the past 5 years now allows a group of residents to continue coming together and contributing during this time.”

What next?

Covid-19 will continue to have a huge impact for some time to come and there is uncertainty surrounding what we will return to and what the “new normal” will look like.

The positives from our adapted ways of working noted above for both an individual and organisation indicate that we are unlikely to see a mass return to office working and that some degree of homeworking will continue.

With that in mind, the following sections explore what has worked in Ageing Better areas during Covid-19 and what has the potential to be built upon and developed in the future.

Internal Communications

Effective online meetings

Think quality rather than quantity in terms of meetings held online. Long meetings are tiring and can become unproductive. It is important to plan the agenda and establish whether all of the items need or are best suited to being covered online.

If a long meeting is appropriate make sure you plan breaks. Breakout sessions can work well but again these still need to be planned in advance in order to be as effective as they can.

Recognise that the chairing of online meetings is a “new” or different skill to develop and support. For example, online meetings can be more challenging for the chair in terms of managing contributions from all participants, keeping an eye on the chat function whilst keeping the meeting focused and productive. Learning from the wider Ageing Better Programme was that it can often be helpful to have two people involved in larger online meetings - one to facilitate and one to keep an eye on the “chat” and other technical issues.

One of the advantages of online meetings/presentations is that they can be recorded and so have a potentially wider audience or life span than a face to face meeting.

Online meetings have also developed their own meeting etiquette to support effective communication - like being on mute when not talking. It is important to acknowledge this etiquette and to remember to “induct” any new team members into the team or organisation’s way of working.

What worked for us....

- We have a TTZ - Time to Zoom - every morning at 9.30. We don't have to go, but it's often a very nice thing to do. We have a smile and a laugh, share 'Today I'm doing...', and it only lasts 15 minutes.
- We meet once a week and go ‘round the room’ to give everyone concise sharp updates.
- We do a quick round of 'best thing in the last week' as part of our meetings.
- We have adopted a mix of meetings where the start is “information sharing” or more formal business but then there is space for a more relaxed sharing.
- Arranging informality - We still host our monthly all-staff sharing, but on Zoom. We have utilised the platform to reduce the amount of presentations and introduced breakout rooms with activities to get to know our colleagues a bit better. Previous topics have been ‘name one thing everyone has in common’ and a quiz where we run polls for the whole of the organisation and the breakout teams have to guess which option the majority of the organisation chose (e.g. pineapple on pizza: yes or no, would you rather be too early or too late etc.) This provides a topic to kick start a conversation but it’s understood that it’s fine for people to go on and talk about what they want to.

Building in a social element and team spirit online

People worked on ways to develop morale and team spirit when we couldn’t meet face to face as well as finding different ways to communicate information. A key

insight was the importance of adding some variety and a social dimension. Having clear, focussed, well managed work meetings was highlighted as well as acknowledging the importance of and creating opportunities for the more informal sessions.

What worked for us....

- Developing a weekly internal bulletin containing updates from all our programmes. We interview a different staff member every week, which is really useful in getting to know colleagues in a different way. The bulletin also had a 'pet corner' as a reward for those who reached the end.
- Wednesday Teams call where we catch up over our lunch break. We try to keep it non-work related.
- Planning our team meetings for a Monday morning each fortnight - we make sure we take time to chat about the weekend, how we all are etc. We often share details of what we've planted, baked, sewn, what sport we've done, how friends and family are.
- Informal Zoom meetings, quizzes and craft workshops.
- Utilising programmes such as Microsoft Teams has been great to encourage the more informal interactions that would usually take place in the office.
- Team WhatsApp allows for more 'friendly' non work-related chats.
- Arranging a summer theme day which included online activities such as a treasure hunt. Each person had to find 3 objects in their house that met the criteria for a chosen category - they had a minute to go and grab them from around the house/garden and then talk about them on Zoom.

Communication platforms

As noted earlier it is important that people have the equipment required to enable them to work effectively at home. We heard how staff could feel overloaded by information particularly where an organisation was using a number of tools or ways to communicate with staff. It is important to consider how many are really needed and try to identify the ones that will be most effective for your staff team. Then be consistent in the use of communication platforms within the organisation e.g. Teams or Slack for instant messages.

What worked for us....

- We used to have a WhatsApp team and people would post all times of the day with jokes etc., An advantage in using Slack now is that you have to log on to view any messages and so that means it's a choice to log on and that helps with setting the boundaries between working and not working which can be a very real issue with homeworking.

Communications aimed at participants

The focus of Ageing Better comms work in the 5 years leading up to March 2020 was aimed at encouraging people to get out and about in their local area, taking part in and setting up groups and activities that appealed to them and making the social connections we know are so important. In lockdown 1, face to face activities ceased and the focus moved to providing emergency support in terms of provision of food and medical supplies as well as emotional support. For the communication teams this meant utilising every channel possible to get key messages out.

We were very aware of the digital divide and the fact that many of the people we wanted to be “talking to” either didn’t have or couldn’t access the internet for a wide range of reasons and therefore teams had to use a range of hard copy communication channels as well as e-channels. Arranging delivery of hard copy material has been a challenge in the pandemic.

What worked for us....

- Having an established user base meant that we could email out e-newsletters much more regularly than usual. This was an easy way of reaching a lot of people at once.
- Producing hardcopy mailouts detailing what support was available was a vital way to try and reach those not online.
- Using leaflets and posters and usually doorstep delivering them.
- Adapting what had been an e-magazine into a paper magazine.
- Using Facebook which was particularly effective in the early days of the crisis. Even where our target audience wasn’t using Facebook, we found that family and friends were using Facebook and would pass information on or contact support themselves on behalf of someone.
- Making links with traditional media outlets such as print, local radio and television to get information and messages out.
- Working closely with other local comms teams - NHS, Public Health and local authority etc. to produce targeted publications such as supplements in a free newspaper, which was then delivered to every house in the locality.
- At the height of the crisis, one area produced a daily newsletter for all partner organisations to ensure everyone knew what was happening and allowing them to pass on information through their own channels.
- One area launched a campaign to encourage local citizens of all ages to reach out to people over 50 around them. Linking with the lead organisation for recovery activity locally meant they could get messages out to all those organisations reaching the most vulnerable on the ground.

Messaging challenges

As the pandemic unfolded and the levels of restrictions changed, comms teams were having to adapt and respond to both user needs and the evolving environment. This meant responding quickly to last minute changes and the constant uncertainty.

Teams told us that despite the uncertainty they have tried to plan ahead wherever

possible, even if they were “loose” plans - “trying to plan for every outcome so we are one step ahead has helped”.

With less activity taking place on the ground there has been an additional difficulty for comms teams as there has been less activity to communicate with members about.

A challenge has been trying to get the message right and in particular to gauge the balance between pragmatism and optimism without crossing the line and perhaps encouraging people to have false hope or lose confidence and trust in the agency itself.

But significantly this has also been a time when the importance of comms work has been front and centre. The need for key messaging and the move to embrace a wider range of media has shown how vital effective communications are and how important the skills required to do it well.

What worked for us....

- Maintaining a focus on people - telling stories and weaving in statistics and messages.
- Being prepared to learn new skills.
- Test and learn in practice - being prepared to try things, review and adapt.
- Monitoring ebulletin open rates - to try and increase the rates trialling sending them out on a different day or with reduced but better targeted content.
- Finding new ways of re-iterating the same core message without turning people off.
- Co-production is a key tenet of Ageing Better activity and comms teams have continued to work with people aged over 50+ to tell their own stories and experiences through articles, blogs, interviews and films during this period.
- Partnership working - for example with [100% Digital Leeds](#), who do a lot of work with groups and organisations with community hubs and volunteers to distribute.

Online events

Of necessity we saw a move away from face to face events to online. We have found that these have a range of advantages in that they are quicker and cheaper to organise. For Ageing Better this has particular resonance as we are at a point in the Programme where sharing our learning as widely as possible is a key focus. Online events have greatly extended the potential audience - with no travel considerations - and it's clear that we are reaching a wider geographical range of people who would not have attended events previously.

There is also greater potential to have key stakeholders and specific presenters attend events or meetings. Being able to record presentations or events also means that they have a life beyond the actual event itself which can be particularly helpful for wider comms work.

Online event management has also developed so that events are not only effective in disseminating key messages and learning but also in supporting input from

participants. Linked to our comments about online meeting planning, it is important to plan online events well and with breaks. In practice an online event shouldn't be longer than a couple of hours. The downside of greater reach, however, is that there does also seem to be a greater "drop out" rate on the day but without the impact on room hire and catering budgets.

Online events offer increased accessibility for many e.g. easier to attend for people with a range of mobility or health requirements and platforms now offer captioning for people with a hearing impairment. They also raise different accessibility issues for others which need to be considered and adapted for e.g. interpretation, visual impairment etc. They do also require significant staff resource to ensure both effective facilitation but also technical support to participants.

Online events have shown that they are effective, and a number of areas will be continuing to use, with some looking at the possibility of delivering hybrid events in the future.

What worked for us...

- Thinking about how to make online events more accessible - set up a working group to extend user input.
- Collect accessibility requests at the point that someone registers for an event.
- Send out presentation slides in advance to assist accessibility.

Organisational culture and importance of wellbeing

One of the key insights from communication leads and from their work during Covid-19 was how quickly this comms work had evolved into wider wellbeing support for staff. There was also an increased awareness of how important this function was.

Another key insight was just how committed teams and individuals were to making a success of the new way of working. This was the result of a range of factors and motivations but a key one within Ageing Better partnerships was their overarching commitment to the purpose of the Programme and to the individuals they were working with. The work being undertaken at home, albeit via adapted means, was to develop and maintain those essential connections and ultimately to mitigate the impact of the imposed isolation and loneliness on all involved.

A key message we heard was just how vital senior managers were in developing and setting the culture around the importance of staff wellbeing within an organisation through buy-in, endorsement and investment. One CEO wrote specific messages (online) to all staff reminding people of the importance of looking after themselves. This buy in from a Manager/CEO is important in establishing the culture and showing that those "informal" chats are important and so legitimate to take place during work time. In another area, staff have access to a professional counsellor.

As we moved into winter and shorter daylight hours giving clear messages to staff that it was ok (and for Managers to be seen to do this themselves) to take flexitime in order to go outside and take exercise during daylight hours was also highlighted.

"It's a win win (as well as good practice) - the happier and healthier people are, the more productive they will be"

Further information

- Time to Shine (Leeds) - [Blog about self-isolation](#)
[Shine Magazine - Lifestyle, learning and laughter during lockdown in Leeds](#)
- [Covid-19 Transition Phase](#)
- [Covid-19 Learning from Ageing Better](#)
- [Role of Connectors during Covid-19](#)
- [Bridging the Digital Divide](#)
- [Telephone Befriending](#)
- [Use of language](#)

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