

Commissioning – learning from Ageing Better

Introduction

Ageing Better is a 7 year 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+.

Ageing Better has learned a huge amount over 7 years of delivery. We have captured much of this learning to help people across the third and public sectors design projects and programmes that will support people aged over 50 experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

In most partnerships, a third sector lead acted as a commissioner of services to address social isolation and loneliness. For most, this was a new way of working providing the people and organisations involved a greater insight into some of the realities and challenges of commissioning. This included an understanding of some of the difficult decisions that have to be made, the balancing of different priorities and the challenge of being committed to an issue (social isolation) but not necessarily to a single project or provider.

We have sought to capture this learning in this paper. We acknowledge, for some commissioners, this information will be familiar. But Ageing Better has afforded us an opportunity to capture what works in helping to tackle social isolation, including commissioning to address the issue. We hope commissioners will be reminded of the good practice they already undertake and can take some insights and learning from the Ageing Better approach.

About Ageing Better

There is no one Ageing Better model, allowing each of the 14 partnerships to respond to the specific location and people they are working with and so adapt to their local context. Each area had the freedom and flexibility to design local solutions to tackling social isolation in their communities. This led to a diverse range of projects, partners and approaches across the programme.

Ageing Better programmes each had a third sector lead agency with the resources and responsibility for commissioning delivery partners. The programmes were guided

by a governance structure that included people aged over 50 and wider partners. In most areas, Ageing Better leads acted as commissioners, working collaboratively to understand social isolation and loneliness in their communities. Areas went through an initial period of strategic planning, helping them understand the issues and identify the gaps in their geographic locality/community. They procured services, which allowed them to pilot new ways of working, to “test and learn” with the ability to flex so as to ensure there were specific services to meet local needs. They also went through a continuous process of monitoring and evaluation which included specific review points.

Underpinning Ageing Better was a commitment to co-production. This meant a continuous engagement with people aged 50+, within individual projects and strategically as part of programme management and the governance structure. This commitment to co-production in turn required an ability to change the activities and interventions on offer so as to best meet the evolving needs of the local community.

Ageing Better national learning can be segmented into three clearly defined areas: **context**, **connections** and **ecosystem**. These three interconnected segments build a picture of the macro and micro factors, services and support systems, that help us to better understand loneliness and social isolation in people aged over 50.

- **Context** - There are a range of risk factors that can occur, often in combination which lead to people finding themselves becoming socially isolated. These include mental health issues, lack of confidence or self-esteem, as well as life’s transition points (e.g. retirement, illness, bereavement) together with environmental and physical factors that act as a barrier to someone being able to connect with their community and support systems.
- **Connections** - Understanding someone’s unique situation is key to engaging with them as individuals and identifying the barriers they face in making 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. This support is person centred and holistic and involves taking the time to develop a relationship with the individual and at their pace to build trust.
- **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 from becoming socially connected and steps in when social isolation occurs. It includes interventions that people ‘need’ as well as the 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 Ecosystem will vary from place to place and recognises the importance of people working together as no one organisation can “fix” social isolation and loneliness. It also recognises that as important as specific interventions are, they need to be part of something wider.

In the remainder of this report we share some of the learning relevant when commissioning activities to address social isolation and loneliness or more widely to support the health and wellbeing of people aged over 50, many of which will have relevance for the wider community. We would also recognise that resources are

often constrained and that there are different pressures in different places - one size does not fit all. Few places will have the luxury of fully adopting the Ageing Better approach. But the insight gained from Ageing Better is that commissioning and delivering in this way, will lead to people being more socially connected and with improved wellbeing which in turn has a huge range of positive health benefits. Implementing some elements, even if the whole approach cannot be adopted will make a difference to communities.

Planning

Taking the long-term approach

Within Ageing Better, we have learnt the importance and impact of having long term funding. This is a direct consequence of the time required to build trust as well as to develop both effective networks and partnership working. The reasons for social isolation and loneliness are complex and multi-faceted, and so necessitate a range of interconnected interventions in tackling social isolation and loneliness.

Together with this long-term commitment is needed an understanding of the following

- the context of the problem which you are trying to solve.
- the partnership approach required to do so.
- the local ecosystem within which it sits.

The important feature is the long-term commitment to the issue or subject. The activities themselves and the delivery partner/s might change over time but the community benefits from the long-term commitment.

Throughout this report we reference the important role co-production plays. This is important not just at the start in order to ensure that commissioned services deliver what people want and need. If genuine co-production is happening then delivery will change over time - reflecting changes in the local context, the community and the specific issues being tackled. Listening to the community and keeping a dialogue going will mean that activities and projects can also evolve.

Prevention and wrap around support

Thinking preventatively and investing resources can help prevent people from falling into social isolation and loneliness. Building on elements that already exist, taking a strengths based approach and working in a person centred way, can help people link up to services at the right time, build resilience and social connections and help to prevent further escalation and need for emergency provision.

In Ageing Better we have learnt that there is much more needed than “just” creating or supporting existing groups for people to attend and to think about the wider elements beyond the actual activity itself. This includes transport to, as well as the physical accessibility of the venue together with considerations as to how inclusive the venue or activity is in terms of culture and for participants with any sight or hearing impairment. Through Ageing Better delivery, we have learnt and identified the specific elements and resources involved in managing and facilitating the environment within which vital social connections and friendships can mature.

This includes an understanding of the elements of the “wrap around” support required to make those groups and activities effective e.g. in creating a Warm Welcome. To be successful or appear “natural” a large number of elements have to be in place and facilitated. For example, a skilled facilitator is key to running

effective sessions (either group or one-to-one). Facilitators set the tone for the engagement, for how the session will look and feel and can help make everyone feel welcome, listened to and valued. They can help prevent cliques, adapt the environment to meet people's specific needs and provide ongoing contact if someone misses a session.

We have also learnt the importance of having activities and groups that can be accessed via a range of delivery methods - both face-to-face, telephone and online in order to meet differing and changing requirements.

Procurement

Understanding the Ecosystem

The reasons why people become or find themselves socially isolated are complex and multi-faceted, often building over time. Changing this will take time, skilled professionals and often the involvement of multiple different agencies to help address an individual's requirements. This also links to the point made above regarding taking a long-term approach.

No one organisation or agency can "solve" social isolation, so it is vital for organisations to not work alone or to try and replicate what others are already doing well. Organisations looking to tackle social isolation should have as broad a network with as wide a range of organisations as possible who either have specialist skills (money advice, language skills, digital or mental health support) or a track record of working with particular client groups. This network will help identify the people who need support as well as maximising the numbers and types of activities and groups that individuals want to join in order to make social connections and friendships.

The key learning from Ageing Better is the importance of the local ecosystem, how it interconnects and ensuring all parts of it are adequately supported. This is true even where funders or commissioners are only funding one small part of it. The ideal scenario is where an individual "investment" has an appreciation of the other elements required and of its impact on the wider ecosystem locally and are able to work in collaboration with other funders to address all parts of the system. Part of this includes identifying any gaps (or duplications) in the system and looking to provide support to ensure they interconnect.

Valuing and investing in coproduction

Coproduction and codesign have been at the heart of much Ageing Better activity - recognising the value of the lived experience of people aged over 50 both in the development of, understanding of and the shaping of solutions for the programme.

Where you are looking to reach, support and work with a specific group of people in the community ideally requires an approach that is co-produced, long-term, and flexible. This then allows you to respond in a timely way to what you are hearing and learning from the people you are working with and adapt to that changing context based on insight, communication and data. Test and learn together with co-design and co-production supports delivery to be more effective.

There is an increasing recognition across the sector about the value of this way of working but there needs to be commitment to true coproduction and time needs to be taken to develop the relationships and processes to do this meaningfully. Funders and commissioners need to allow this time to be built into projects and proposals.

Competition vs collaboration

Ageing Better identified a lead partner in the voluntary sector who was then responsible for distributing (usually through commissioning) the funding to a much wider sector of delivery partners. This had many advantages. There was a single point of contact (with the Funder) who could, in turn, support and resource a network of projects with a much wider (or in some situations very specific) reach into communities, often through grassroots organisations.

However, any kind of commissioning process also introduces competition into the system. But we know that to effectively tackle issues relating to social isolation and loneliness requires collaboration between partners. Working with a lead partner with a clear aim of developing a partnership approach can help navigate and manage this.

Where funding has opened up competition we have found it is important to have in place tools like regular delivery partner meetings, shared objectives, performance management and communication of each partner's role and impact of their delivery on the overall outcomes and objective. Having these tools helps support organisations to work more collaboratively.

Using a wide range of approaches

A further advantage of taking a long-term approach and delivering through a network of delivery partners is that we have been able to develop a wider range of approaches which include :-

- As well as the importance of long-term funding we also found **microfunding** to be an effective tool in enabling partnerships to reach underserved (often grassroots organisations) communities and helped put people aged 50+ in the lead in terms of developing the projects and assets most important to them.
- Within Ageing Better, we have seen the impact of adopting **community development** principles - encouraging people to work together on the things that matter to them and their community.
- Working with people who need support either because social isolation is entrenched or they are experiencing a difficult life event is most effective when it is **person centred and holistic**. Support focuses on the individual, taking the time to establish what they want to do or achieve rather than making any assumptions. The aim is to identify an individual's personal barriers and then work towards achieving a personalised set of goals. Building a relationship of trust in order to achieve this takes time. Meeting the person in a place that feels "safe" for them is crucial.

Every person's outcome will be different, with the journey out of social isolation and loneliness being different for everyone. For some, support will result in greater wellbeing but for others either their situation will not change fundamentally or their physical decline will continue. Valuing and respecting these different end points is hugely important and a continuing element of working in a person centred way.

- The **role of a connector** in facilitating this one-to-one relationship and support can be vital. A connector helps make connections - within Ageing Better it is an approach to help identify, reach and connect with socially isolated people and through a person centred approach, connect them to activities and support that is right for them in their local area. It is important to allow a relationship of trust not dependency to build which even at the start is looking and planning an exit route. This is often managed by offering either a time limited intervention or a fixed number of sessions of support.

There will need to be a substantial amount of flexibility around the length and method of contact.

- **One size does not fit all.** We have learning around working with particular groups of people e.g. older men, carers, LGBT+ and BAME etc. containing important insights. It always has to be remembered however, that any “categorisation” covers a huge diversity of people. Always remember that people are individuals.

Reciprocity and peer support

People often want to provide mutual support and contribute. Creating opportunities for reciprocity in small and large ways engages people more deeply in those activities and builds on people’s individual strengths. We have seen the impact that coproduction and codesign has brought in terms of designing and influencing the activities and commissioned interventions themselves - finding out what communities actually want and need and developing these with them.

In particular we have seen that peer support or peer mentors have had real impact. This can be in relation to their having specific skills or life experience (digital support and mental health peer support) to share as well as having an ambassadorial or “people like me”/identification role.

People aged over 50 have been involved throughout the programme in a variety of roles including as members of Programme Boards, as Community Researchers, on commissioning panels etc., bringing commitment, skills as well as their own lived experience.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Building in flexibility and review points into contracts

The most effective co-production commissioning needs to build in flexibility to allow a service or contract to flex or adapt to meet the needs of the people it is aiming to deliver for.

The long-term approach advocated for earlier doesn’t necessarily mean long term funding for the same organisations or for the same activity or intervention. Within Ageing Better, the commitment to long-term funding in a geographical area to solve a problem jointly through a lead organisation throughout was important.

Communities, the wider context and learning are constantly evolving, and funding needs to be agile in order to respond to these shifting demands. Ageing Better has learned the value of structured review points which allow time for delivery partners to take stock and for commissioners to review progress towards agreed outcomes.

“**Test and learn**” provided the mechanism to amend delivery in the light of evidence so as to better deliver on outcomes. For us it had the added advantage of operating in tandem with our co-production and co-design aims. It was a further way of ensuring that the voices of the people we were working with were further magnified/empowered as it meant that a) there was a clear focus on them and b) if projects found that the way of operating could be improved or wasn’t achieving as much as it could then there was both a clear impetus and mechanism to amend.

We heard how closely co-production and test and learn worked together in order to both involve older people and deliver for and with them. Test and learn allowed people the flexibility to change things where they weren’t working and to include

participants in that process through a co-production approach in looking at how and why they didn't work.

This further contributes to the co-production cycle as individuals can see that things are changing as a result of their input and voice so encouraging greater engagement and commitment.

Part of test and learn included making incremental tweaks in operation so allowing delivery to be shaped to best deliver on locally identified outcomes. Here individual projects were encouraged to reflect and where needed to tweak their delivery. This is practical on-the-ground problem solving - giving people the framework and permissions to spot an issue, think of a solution and implement it.

On a more formal basis, it has also included setting or using particular milestones within the programme to pause and undertake a more **formal review** and assessment of recommendations to amend delivery, look at the programme as a whole and the elements to continue and recommission to the end.

We also found that specific milestones and points in the programme were useful in providing both the incentive and the time to pause and reflect on what had been learnt and review the direction of travel. Recommissioning was one such key milestone as it also proved a focus and incentive for other stakeholders to also concentrate minds. Additionally, it allowed learning to be shared more widely in a structured way as part of a round of commissioning. Areas were able to share the learning to date and then highlight what they hoped to explore next through subsequent rounds of commissioning.

Over time community needs will change, so too the activities being funded should also evolve. As already mentioned, any longer-term funding benefits from structured review points where all parties are clear that the activities may be refocused (or stopped) based on what will work best for the community.

We know some of the success from Ageing Better has come from creating both the time and the conditions for people to adapt delivery in response to what they were seeing happen and learning. It is important therefore to ensure that review and evaluation is not left until the very end and that there are regular points throughout the programme when review, reflection and any necessary action can take place.

Be strategic and proportionate with the data collection

Some organisations, with the best reach into the communities you want to target, may often lack the resource capacity for complex data collection. It is important to be proportionate in considering how much data is asked for and whether it is appropriate for some organisations to collect less than others.

Targets and data collection remain important, acting as a positive tool and reference point to help people think about what they have achieved and who they have reached. Test and learn allows (and necessitates) a shift in focus away from just looking at targets to using targets and outputs as a way of understanding what worked or didn't and why. Helping people constructively think about who they were reaching.

It also requires a shift of focus from Key Performance indicators to focusing on what would make a difference for the community or individual being worked with.

Further information

More information on the Ageing Better Programme including insights from across the

programme are available at [Ageing Better](#)

- [Tenets of Ageing Better](#)
- [Connector role projects](#)
[Key messages - Connector role](#)
- [Groups](#)
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