



7 years, 7 key lessons from Ageless Thanet

Executive Summary



Introduction

Ageless Thanet, run by Social Enterprise Kent, set out seven years ago to make Thanet a great place to grow older.

Since then, we have been working to reduce loneliness and social isolation in the 50+ community in Thanet. The project worked across five key areas: Wellbeing, Life Planning, Ageless Entrepreneurs, Age-Friendly Business Scheme, and Volunteering.

Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund as part of the Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better programme, we were one of 14 areas nationally who explored the best ways to reduce social isolation and loneliness and improve the wellbeing and quality of life of people over 50.

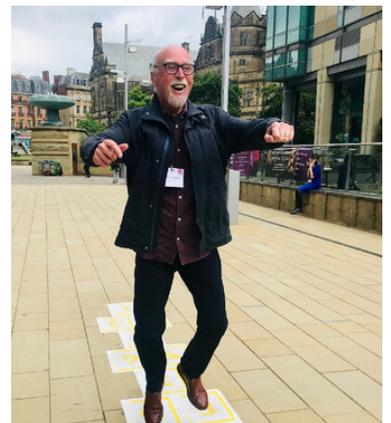
This executive summary draws on our series of learning reports which showcase what we have achieved, what we've learnt and what we think would be beneficial for others to know if they were setting up similar projects. We've condensed this into the following seven key lessons and accompanying examples.

How was the project evaluated?

As part of the Ageing Better programme, our insights through the project were being fed into Ageing Better's national learning. It was important we had robust evaluation in place to discover whether the project was having a positive impact.

We collected both quantitative data (questionnaires) and qualitative data (case studies). We needed to get a relatively large number of people to complete both the baseline questionnaire at the beginning and the follow-up questionnaire at the end in order for the data to be academically validated.

For the first five years of the project we commissioned the University of Kent's Centre for Health Service Studies to conduct our local evaluation. This ensured our data was independently and academically validated. Download the full series of reports at www.agelessthanet.com/learning



Ageless Thanet's impact



£75K Was distributed to community groups, individuals and organisations



9275 Reward Cards distributed



Over **£1.8m** in income maximisation



4756

People have taken part in a wellbeing activity

86%

Said their feelings of being part of the community increased



65%

Reported an increase in their confidence



75%

of volunteers saw a reduction in feelings of loneliness



77%

Reported an increase in their quality of life



83% of Ageless Entrepreneurs increased finance knowledge



267 Telephone befriending calls in the first 100 days of COVID-19

73%

Reported an improvement in their mental health and wellbeing



Over **10,000** volunteer hours



7 years, 7 key lessons

1

Co-production

For us, co-production meant working with over 50s who have experienced isolation or loneliness to design and deliver services in equal partnership. It was about "doing with", rather than "doing for or to". Co-production happened right across Ageless Thanet, from our governance panel to our volunteer activities. Putting older people in the lead held us accountable and ensured our plans reflected older people's views and best interests, meeting the needs of the people they were designed for. Having older people as part of the strategic decisions being made on our governance panel empowered them to make a difference to local services, keep up skills they'd built through their careers and build a sense of pride in the project.

“The first thing I got involved with was finding a location where we could just have a casual club of like-minded people. We thought about having games brought along. Some people donated games, and then I applied for funding to get new games. The funding came from the Ageless Thanet Community Fund. Ageless Thanet has connections and tendrils with so many other things - it's so trusted and relied upon to be the place for over 50s activities in Thanet. If I hadn't got involved with Ageless Thanet I would have moved here, and would be wandering around aimlessly with my dog, looking for other dog walkers to talk to.”

– Pam, Ageless Thanet Club founding member



2

Understand and remove barriers

Talking to beneficiaries to understand their barriers and find ways to remove them boosted participation and outcomes. We encountered a range of different barriers and some were more easily removed than others. For example, we found that accessibility in terms of cost and travel could make all the difference to whether people took part in our activities. So, we looked for a venue for our wellbeing hub, the Feelgood Factory, that would be easily accessible by bus and negotiated free parking for participants in the council car park.

While all our initiatives were aimed to reduce loneliness and social isolation, some of our programmes needed to tackle fundamental barriers before we could address this. The main trigger point for people being referred to our life planning service was financial. For people to be able to move forward and reduce their loneliness this had to be addressed. Resolving financial issues dramatically improved people's wellbeing and enabled them to focus on physical and social activities.

3

Be flexible by design

Many older people were carers for partners, friends, children or grandchildren. They also had their own health and social needs. Our volunteering programme aimed to encourage more people in later life to take up opportunities to share their skills, knowledge and experience with their communities through volunteering. We also wanted to increase their confidence, supporting them to recognise that they have a voice that can shape the communities in which they live. So, we built a volunteering programme with a difference – one that placed the emphasis on benefit and enjoyment for the volunteers.

Our approach aimed to meet potential volunteers face-to-face and spend time with them to understand their skill set, hobbies and interests. We then jointly found or designed volunteering opportunities to work around the interests, time, skills and confidence of the individual. Our volunteers offered a varied range of activities such as digital support, language classes and walking groups, making a huge impact.

“ I volunteered to assist at wellbeing events which included, setting up the venue for an evening ukulele course, making refreshments and socialising with group members. Engaging with other people, socialising with my peers and gaining the knowledge that I am still a person with something to offer. My mental well being has improved. ”

– Glenn, Ageless Thanet Volunteer



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Incentivise and build relationships

One of the things people told us they would really value was having discount cards for local shops and services. We researched and developed a reward card scheme which was a key driver behind the uptake of Ageless Thanet services. People may have signed up for a reward card but they ended up with so much more. Thanks to our reward card scheme, we connected with 9275 older people and 4665 of them also signed up to our Ageless Thanet newsletter, meaning they were able to receive information about everything on offer including volunteering opportunities, life planning services, wellbeing activities and ageless entrepreneur courses.

It became a tangible way for us to engage with and involve both businesses and older people in the project. In total, we worked with more than 480 businesses, who were also offered free Age-friendly Business Training. Our visibility in the community and business engagement has helped us to achieve our aim of making Thanet a great place to grow older. Another way we did this was through our 50+ Festival, a free and fun event for everyone to find out what was available to older people.

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Have respect

At Ageless Thanet we believed that everyone has something to offer. Sadly, we found through our volunteering project that many older people had experienced discrimination while attempting to volunteer in the past. While older people's needs may differ from others, they bring to volunteering roles a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience. Ageless Thanet volunteers were more likely to be living with medical conditions (43% have a long-term health condition or disability) than younger people. However, any barriers they faced to volunteering could usually be solved with simple accommodations such as printing documents in a larger font or ensuring that chairs were available.

Thanet is a diverse area and we wanted to ensure our support and activities reflected the needs of the whole community. Ensuring we had diverse representation on our governance panel and considering the specific needs and interests of different communities helped us to reach out to and involve people with a range of backgrounds and experiences.

“Despite a significant proportion of the older population being LGBT, there is little awareness of their particular needs and concerns. The group seeks to provide a safe space for older LGBTs to meet socially; to combat isolation experienced by many older LGBTs; to provide a bridge between the different generations of LGBTs; to ensure that all members are supported when confronted by discrimination and prejudice of any form; and to liaise with other organisations.”

– Roger, LGBT 50+ Group



6

Challenge stereotypes

Part of our mission when we started Ageless Thanet was to challenge the stereotypes around older people – what they're interested in and capable of – and to ensure they could feel they were just as much a part of their community as anyone else. Alongside offering a surprising range of volunteering and wellbeing activities, from belly dancing to tai chi, our Community Fund provided a great way for us to do that.

The majority of applications we received for the £1,000-£3,500 funding were from small community groups or individuals. The fund was designed so that we could fund organisations and individuals that weren't necessarily already working with over 50s and that didn't have to be constituted community groups. We also provided support to apply for the funding, making the process more 'human' for the applicants, some of whom had never applied for funding before. This made for a diversity of projects and stimulated businesses to consider older residents as part of their services. Many report that they now feel able to apply for further funding.

7 Work with others and have fun

The Ageless Thanet project could not have achieved all it did without our key partners – Your Leisure, Citizens Advice Thanet, Thanet Community Development Trust and Action with Communities in Rural Kent. We also benefitted from the support of the national Ageing Better programme, GP surgeries, NHS services and a range of amazing community groups and individuals.

Our social prescribing service enabled us to work with GPs to reach the people who most needed our help to reduce loneliness and isolation. A survey from 2013 by The Campaign to End Loneliness, reported that more than three quarters of GPs were seeing one to five lonely people a day and one in ten said that they saw between six and ten lonely people a day. This often led to people booking appointments with GPs when they really needed other types of support. Our approach was always to treat people like individuals and not as a problem to be solved. We found that when the individual was involved in the process, interventions were much more likely to be successful.

Finally, one of the biggest things learnt was that working with over 50s is a huge amount of fun! Reducing loneliness and isolation in older people is serious work but creating environments where people were relaxed and enjoying themselves meant they made connections and improved their mental and physical wellbeing themselves. Our staff and partners are proud to have been a part of Ageless Thanet knowing that we have made a real difference to people's lives. As we carry our learning into new contracts, we hope the legacy of Ageless Thanet will continue through our volunteers, partners and everyone who's experienced things the Ageless Thanet way - 'Making Thanet a Great Place to Grow Older!'

SEK Social Enterprise Kent

Social Enterprise Kent, the lead organisation of the Ageless Thanet project, is a Community Interest Company (CIC), registered with, and regulated by, the CIC Regulator. We have been in operation for over 30 years, with the overarching vision of "Improving Lives, Supporting Communities".

Our key aims:

- To provide support for people, particularly in areas of deprivation or for those most disadvantaged, to gain skills and employment
- To support the creation, organisation and management of social enterprises and small enterprises; and to develop a way of making this sustainable
- To support in the regeneration of deprived areas in Kent, by creating jobs and skills

If you would like to find out more about SEK, we would love to hear from you.

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