

Learning from COVID-19

Working in the sector: adaptation, flexibility and engagement

2021



Thematic Bulletin 3: 'Community sensitivity', 'collaborative work' and integrating delivery

This is the third and final thematic bulletin from a more detailed learning report on 'Learning from COVID 19 – Working in 'the sector': adaptation, flexibility and engagement' from the TED in East Lindsey Programme. Other thematic bulletins in this series include:

- Drivers of Adaptation: Appreciating needs, preferences, and their fluidity
- Rapidly responding, forward planning

In this series of thematic bulletins the focus shifts slightly more to providers. Here consideration is given to encapsulating the challenges of COVID 19 for providing services and portraying 'adaptation' in 'the sector' as a learning legacy for future sustainability. Social adaptation has been referred to as:

*"a state of adjustment between an organism or a social group and its environment as is favourable to existence and growth, or the process by which such unity comes into, and continues in, this favourable relation. The environment is both physical, or material, and social, or spiritual. Adaptation may be passive or active. Passive...comprises biological and somatic changes. Passive spiritual adaptation includes psychic development under the pressure of social institutions such as language, law and education. **By active material adaptation is meant the purposeful modification of the organism or group to suit its environment to make it favourable for life...**" (Woolston, 1917)*



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About TED in East Lindsey

Talk, Eat, Drink (TED) Ageing Better in East Lindsey is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better aims to develop creative ways for people aged 50 and over to combat social isolation and loneliness. It is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

Ageing Better learning nation-wide has captured the fast moving and unprecedented nature of the COVID 19 pandemic. TED have been adapting and reviewing the programme's service offer to fulfil its original aims and objectives, building both relationships and communities. Recent reporting from TED during the COVID 19 pandemic has focussed on resilience in East Lindsey's communities and individuals and the role of 'digital inclusion' during COVID 19.

The main report and this series of thematic bulletins seeks to underpin that 'adaptation' can be manifest, 'played-out' and/or impact differentially at a variety of levels (within and between: providers, aspects of provision, different individuals and groups of stakeholders). 'Adaptation' in providers is integrated with, and embedded in, the experiences of people aged 50 and over in the district. Our learning shows the parameters between 'providers' and 'beneficiaries' also frequently blur, with people aged 50 and over interchangeably and, sometimes, simultaneously, being both 'providers' and 'users' of services.

For the purposes of this bulletin 'the sector' includes organisations, communities and wider stakeholders who work and/or engage with people aged 50 and over, providing a range of services. This includes, but is not limited to, the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), statutory sector, and private sector providers. It applies to services provided by both employed staff and volunteers but also draws on findings from holders of the TED Age-friendly Business Award.

Background, context and landscapes of delivery

Documenting organisational characteristics, pressures and challenges (as well as profiling service-user needs) can be deeply problematic particularly when taking account of knowledge management issues in attempting to encapsulate and portray 'up-to-date', 'authentic' and 'valid' snap-shots of 'real-time' provision. Telling the story of community needs, contextual and organisational change is therefore fraught with complexities which include potential (partial) duplication of 'evidence', conflicting sources of information and varying systems and procedures within and between organisations (Senior et al, 2003; Bird, 2007).

Recently a major ongoing study (led by the Nottingham Business School at Nottingham Trent University in collaboration with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and Sheffield Hallam University) has sought to provide 'real time' information on the impact of COVID 19 on the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, utilising monthly barometer surveys as part of a mixed methods approach.



At the time of writing the study had reported for October 2020, concurring that:

“as the pandemic unfolds it is increasingly clear that the impact COVID-19 is having on the organisations within the sector is uneven, shaping the experiences of organisations and individuals in quite different ways. Some organisations are struggling to survive, hit by losses of income from fundraising or shops, whereas others have found new income streams and been able to expand services; some organisations have found it hard to adapt to the new socially distancing rules, whereas others have been able to use digital approaches to create new and exciting services.”

The TED in East Lindsey story is similarly complex, but it is possible to document key headlines. The iterative ‘test and learn’ ethos continues, shaping ongoing service design. In practice this iterative cycle is not necessarily ordered or always a completed ‘loop’ – a journey in which all stakeholders are engaged throughout (similar to the observing, acting and reflecting components of action research). In this thematic bulletin we look at the role how ‘the sector’ have operated with what we call ‘community sensitivity’ during the pandemic. It demonstrates examples of ‘collaborative work’ and how delivery can be integrated, exemplified in concepts such as ‘wrap around support’, ‘holistic’ and ‘person-centred’ delivery.

‘Community Sensitivity’, ‘collaborative work’ and integrating delivery

“It would be a real shame I think for groups that work with older people and charities that work with older people who have got initiatives now that have developed as a response to COVID that we’re not looking at how to make best use of tying those together” (PMG member, October 2020)

Elements of this theme are covered elsewhere in the full learning report on adaptation. The pandemic has presented a wide range of stakeholders with challenges that have included ‘community sensitivity’. The term encompasses recognising and appreciating peoples’ needs and preferences in an ongoing nature (the ‘demand aspect’), and adapting service delivery during reductions in place-based and face-to-face/group activities as well as working with the short term, uncertain, contexts. Against, and potentially because of this, the sector has too shown capabilities to future plan.

“COVID has almost sort of made us a lot more joined up as there’s a lot more communication, there’s a lot more learning about what other organisations are offering” (TED in East Lindsey Programme Manager, October 2020)

‘Collaborative work’ takes the form of formal ‘partnerships’ between providers (e.g. through service level agreements), but also a wider range of relationships between various stakeholders. This includes people aged 50 and over as providers, users and designers of services.



In the context of partnerships the nature of these arrangements can vary considerably, as Adam Crawford has similarly noted in distinctions between ‘multi-agency’ and ‘inter-agency’ work:

“We can distinguish on the one hand between multi-agency relations which merely involve the coming together of a variety of agencies in relation to a given problem, and, on the other hand, ‘inter-agency’ relations, which involved some degree of fusion and melding of relations between agencies” (Crawford, 1999: 119)

This distinction may better be understood as a spectrum along which examples of relationships and practice can be situated. In the case of commissioned delivery partners and other strands of programme activity, pre-existing programme aims (before COVID 19) remained clear and central during COVID 19. Embedded clear priorities continue to be instrumental for ongoing collaborative adaptation:

“We have worked with partners to help develop a different ‘virtual’ offer which so far has included an online quiz, access to the Sporting Memories ‘Sporting Pink’ (newsletter) and online sporting memories video clips. Initially the target beneficiaries were men already attending CHAPS sessions in Mablethorpe and Skegness. We are now aiming to engage with a wider audience and have already been able to engage with the husbands of the (Magna Vitae) Fitness Food and Friends participants as well as wider work through social media engagement and participants of the ‘Men Do’ project (ran by Carers First another programme delivery project).” (Magna Vitae, CHAPS project case study)

These can be appreciated in TED in East Lindsey’s prior learning reports that encapsulate the relational nature of resilience. Collaborative work was taking place before the pandemic and formal arrangements were in place in the form of delivery group meetings (bringing representatives from commissioned delivery partners together) and multiple stakeholders forming a high-level Programme Management Group. The full report, of which this bulletin is taken from, has documented how the sector quickly established systems and processes in shifting to more remote and ‘blended’ ways of working. **Services were able to overcome practical concerns whilst collaborating which included the ability to obtain and record consent (in verbal and written forms) to share personal information, in line with General Data Protection Regulation.**



However, the development of bespoke systems and processes (within and between) providers of services also leads to complexities and challenges for harmonising formal routes of communication and also documenting engagement with people aged 50 and over:

“We also have established relationships with, and understand, other service providers in meeting the diverse needs of people in East Lindsey and Lincolnshire. These understandings provide scope for addressing unmet need and coordinating approaches... avoiding duplication of provision and ensuring funding is targeted and maximised. More recently our relationships have extended to include TED staff being involved in the Lincolnshire Resilience Forum. This has been particularly valuable, and has enabled us to contribute TED insight and learning whilst representing the perspectives of people aged over 50 in our communities.” (Director of Communities, YMCA Lincolnshire, July 2020)

In the same way in which Friendship Group members were keeping in contact with each other providing support and 'checking-in' without additional guidance or direction, **commissioned delivery partners were working with each other, demonstrating independent innovation at a grassroots level which resulted from historical relationships in communities prior to lock down. Showing 'community sensitivity', delivery partners and the programme as a whole have been cross referring (formally and informally), continuing engagement and providing support in ways that reflect the interest(s) of ageing populations:**

"Whilst I was phoning one of the participants from the Fitness Food and Friends group she asked if I would give a call to an elderly man she knew from her church. He had recently lost his wife and was depressed, didn't have any family and no one was calling him. So, I gave him a ring which he was very pleased about and gave him the bereavement number and the number for the Wellbeing team. I asked he if would like me to phone him again and he said he would really like that. I've therefore added him to our Fitness Food and Friends list so that we can encourage and support him" (Magna Vitae, project feedback)

The diversity of providers and initiatives in East Lindsey give practical examples of 'collaborative work', but this has created complexities in terms of how to share best practice with multiple stakeholders and the most suitable mechanisms for enabling this. Other complexities include how to design and align 'formally' defined signposting tools, communications and forums/groups with 'informal' (sometimes undocumented) collaborative work and link this to strategy, policy and future funding.

This also links to the other themes of this report, but during COVID 19 **TED in East Lindsey have demonstrated clear benefits of collaborative work, not only for ageing populations, but also for providers, their staff and volunteers. This (increasing) ongoing reach, recognising multiple voices and capitalising collectively on opportunities in relation to bids/funding, services (design and provision) and wider community engagement.**

Key Learning Points

- **The TED in East Lindsey programme, with partners in other sectors and beyond the district have opportunities to further explore approaches to refining a 'best practice' online repository.** This ongoing potential requires knowledge management considerations (specifically on refinement of purpose and duplication issues) and resource implications, such as if resource is possible to provide dedicated coordinating staff to update/maintain and manage online content as well as monitor uptake of use.
- **TED in East Lindsey continues to identify and bring together stakeholder representatives as community advocates reflecting on the scope of available knowledge, its uses and relevance to the AB/TED terms of reference, representing community interests.** The informal relationships are crucial in understanding and validating formally identified partnerships and supporting inter-agency approaches which can be extended to future joint bidding and lobbying on 'high-level' decision-making.
- **Existing accountability and planning mechanisms – such as the Delivery Group Meetings and Programme Management Group can continue to be utilised to promote this work and engage strategy, funding and local experience.**



About East Lindsey



T.E.D.

Ageing Better
in East Lindsey

East Lindsey is a large, sparsely populated district within the county of Lincolnshire, which includes the popular coastal seaside towns of Skegness and Mablethorpe.

East Lindsey has a higher than average ageing population with 29% of people aged 65 and over. High numbers of older people move to East Lindsey in their retirement years and many have multiple chronic health conditions and few social and familial connections in the region. Public transport across East Lindsey is poor and therefore accessing services can be challenging, especially for older adults.

The overarching aims of the TED Programme are to:

- Reduce social isolation and loneliness
- Help older people to become better connected with volunteering, social, leisure and health improving activities
- Provide opportunities for older people to influence the design, delivery and evaluation of both the services and businesses available to them

We currently have over 1800 registered TED members, and over 100 businesses across East Lindsey hold an Age-friendly Business Award.

Further information...

To find out more about TED or to get involved visit our website www.tedineastlindsey.co.uk or start a conversation and share your views online: Twitter: [@ted_EastLindsey](https://twitter.com/ted_EastLindsey)



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