Hybrid delivery – early insight 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+.

Ageing Better has test and learn at its heart. Since the inception of Ageing Better we have had a strong commitment to share what we are learning. This includes what is working but also what we have tried and where it has failed. Much of our learning is collected in a reflective way. This means across the 14 partnerships we identify common strands of activity and reflect on what we are learning.

Since March 2020 and throughout Covid-19 we have also produced specific learning papers reflecting more real "in-time" learning. We have focused this learning on topics that are likely to have particular resonance for the third sector as they represent a shift in the way activities or services have been delivered. To date we have produced "in-time" learning around Bridging the Digital Divide, Telephone Befriending, Positives of Digital, the changing role of the Connector as well as the impact of Covid-19.

Context

This learning paper aims to share early insights about an evolving model within Ageing Better, that of hybrid delivery. During the pandemic, there was a move from face-to-face to telephone and online delivery. In an earlier report we highlighted the impact of the digital divide and therefore the need to not solely rely on online offers but to instead look at a combined offer including telephone befriending and maintaining links with people through post and hard copy means such as activity packs etc.,

At the same time, however, we recognised that the move to online had been hugely

important to a significant number of people in helping them to maintain some level of social connection and so reduce their social isolation. For some groups of people including carers, and people with physical and mental health issues, the increase and developments within online activities meant that they were better connected than ever before.

As restrictions again begin to be lifted in early summer 2021 followed by the lifting of all restrictions on the 19th July 2021, areas are telling us that there is considerable appetite for face-to-face interactions and activities to start up again. We also know that for some people recommencing face-to-face activity will be critical for improving their health and wellbeing. We also know that for some people digital opportunities are allowing them more and greater opportunities for social interactions. We have learnt from 6 years working in the field of social isolation and loneliness that an individual's self-confidence level has an impact on their psychological ability to interact socially. The last 18 months has had a huge but as yet unmeasurable impact on us all and our own risk and confidence levels. There will be a variety of different views on whether people want to socially connect in the face of changing infection rates over the 2021 summer.

This paper is intended for people who are developing their own hybrid models of delivery. It aims to share the issues and challenges being navigated and to provide some early insights into what we are finding works. We will update this work at regular intervals as more learning about what does and doesn't work around this model of delivery emerges during 2021.

Hybrid delivery – definition

For the purposes of this paper we are taking a broad definition of hybrid delivery. It includes delivering activities and projects across multiple platforms. These include face-to-face, telephone and digital. It covers those projects and activities that offer a combination of these approaches. For example, offering a programme of yoga or keep fit activities face-to-face or online. It also includes activities or projects that use a variety of different tools to connect with people. For example, a social prescribing project that offers people the opportunity to connect initially via face-to-face or telephone.

In most cases people delivering this hybrid model are offering activities across one or more platforms but are not trying to combine them e.g. there will be a face-to-face offer and a digital offer but they will be for separate groups or times. There are some plans to pilot fusing the activities together, for example having some people attend a session virtually and some in person but these are very much at the early stages of piloting.

Understanding the role of hybrid delivery

We have highlighted in previous learning papers how valuable a digital offer has been to some older people who are socially isolated and lonely. The learning we have gained around digital opportunities (despite the well documented challenges for some people getting online) is that it can provide a gateway for people who may otherwise struggle to connect face-to-face as a result of the wider challenges happening in their life. These could include caring responsibilities or their own physical health and wellbeing. The digital offer has therefore provided them with something which they would otherwise have been unable to access. This digital offer

has often, although not always been place based, so allowing opportunities for people to feel connected to their local community.

We have also heard from Ageing Better areas that platforms like telephone and digital have allowed social prescribers to build relationships with people at a slower pace. This has helped to build relationships with some people who have traditionally been less likely to engage, including older men. These alternative platforms have allowed the relationship to build both at a pace and via a method that suits the individual. There is then a potential to transition to face-to-face when the opportunities arise.

But it is important to again highlight that there continues to be a group of people who are excluded from the benefits of digital and for whom using the telephone is challenging. These include people with physical impairments as well as those where digital remains either a physical barrier or something they don't wish to engage with.

There are a number of additional reasons for maintaining a range of delivery methods on a longer-term basis. These include:

- The need to maintain flexibility in order to be able to quickly respond to any future Covid related restrictions.

- The need to be able to provide the flexibility to allow people to continue to engage with groups and activities despite fluctuating health.

- The emerging insight about how many people welcome the potential to plan to have face-to-face activity during the summer but then move to online delivery during the winter months.

- The importance of maintaining the digital skills that many older people have developed during the pandemic – maintaining some online activities will mean that these skills don't disappear but can be maintained and further supported.

Key message: The ongoing provision of activities via a range of delivery methods would appear to be the ideal, resulting in a choice of access routes to suit an individual's requirements, their "digital" and physical abilities and importantly how they want to engage.

Current situation

Our learning from Ageing Better is that some people need or want the digital offer and some people need or want the face-to-face offer. This creates an obvious tension when there is a finite amount of resource available to deliver a project, programme or activity. Alongside this we are hearing that whilst in some Ageing Better areas there is considerable demand for face-to-face opportunities, there are relatively few face-to-face opportunities being made available in the wider network of providers that support people who are socially isolated or lonely.

Understandably the return to face-to-face opportunities is not happening in a consistent way. There are a variety of reasons for this. People are still feeling their way around the new rules and what is possible as well as trying to gauge user, staff and volunteer appetite to meet again and how. There is variety in the range of venues available and rules and guides for operation. Additionally as more people return to work many organisations have noticed a reduction in volunteer numbers.

Some service providers are finding that they can reach more people using telephone or online services. Using telephone or online tools reduces travelling time and so sticking with these tools means they have more capacity and so can reach a greater number of people.

As things begin to open up there appears to be a large demand from some to get back to face-to-face activities and groups. What isn't yet known is whether this level of demand will continue and if not, what the eventual balance will be. At the same time delivery which had to move quickly to online and telephone is now recalibrating to adapt to the demand for more face-to-face activity but in a period of continued uncertainty and limited resources.

At the same time as face-to-face opportunities are, in some places, slower to be established, the focus and mixed "priorities" linked to Covid-19 recovery have to be factored in. For some, this means focusing on encouraging people who have been shielding or have become isolated as a result of Covid-19 to connect more and to support those people who want to get out. For others the priority is reconnecting with the people who were socially isolated prior to the pandemic. This means in some areas demand for face-to-face opportunities exceeds supply.

For some people the digital offer remains hugely important. There were many people who were successfully supported to go online during Covid-19, but there remains a group who really need face-to-face support in order to do so. The reopening after Covid-19 restrictions presents an opportunity to get more people set up and connected to digital platforms.

Key Message: There are groups of people for whom digital will remain a hugely useful platform, whilst for others face-to-face is important. This creates a tension when there is a finite amount of resource available for a project, programme or activity. There is currently considerable demand for face-to-face opportunities which is not always matched by supply. Some service providers have found they can reach more people through telephone or digital platforms and are slower to return to face-to-face models. This is a further transition point for the sector in finding a new balance in the market in terms of delivery methods and provision.

Finding the resource balance

As already set out, resources are finite and for most organisations offering a complete package of face-to-face opportunities alongside a complete digital or telephone offer is unrealistic. Organisations will therefore be looking to find the balance between continuing some digital opportunities but also offering the equally vital face-to-face opportunities to help people reconnect as part of the Covid-19 recovery.

There is good reason to maintain a hybrid model of delivery. The challenge for the sector is to work together to meet this evolving need. Now that so many online and telephone offers have been developed and been proved to work we need to keep those – they have represented a lifeline for many and have shown how important they are as part of a flexible package to support people through changes in health, seasons and mood.

Ageing Better areas are currently managing the demand by offering a programme of events that continues to include some digital opportunities alongside the face-to-face work and utilising co-production and co-design. They recognise, at this stage, that there may be less immediate demand for digital opportunities but that it helps people know there is something there for them should there be a change in their circumstances.

Where Ageing Better areas have a programme of events in place this plan is regularly reviewed and it is made clear the plan has flexibility. This means that if demand shifts, for example people wanting more digital opportunities as winter approaches, they can respond and change what they are offering.

Support for digital inclusion

Ageing Better areas continue to place a focus on digital inclusion and supporting people to access services online. Some areas have identified how summer '21 presents an opportunity to use face-to-face meetings to support and encourage more people to get connected and online.

In some Ageing Better areas there are "Tea and Technology" sessions that can take place both in person and virtually. We have found across Ageing Better that well run digital sessions can also additionally help to build social connections. So these sessions have a dual purpose of helping to establish long term skills as an investment that will help if further restrictions are put in place as well as building social connections. Our insight at this stage is that these have the potential to be a hugely important resource. We are also finding that face-to-face digital sessions can often be hugely helpful in identifying the range of additional barriers which an individual may be facing.

Although the demand for face-to-face opportunities is currently high, those connected with Ageing Better have identified that digital opportunities will increase in prominence as winter progresses. This "summer" period therefore presents an important opportunity to increase digital skills.

Digital delivery is not necessarily cheaper

In our learning report "Positives of digital" we highlighted that the transition to digital platforms, had, been hugely beneficial to some groups. It has allowed people who were house bound and socially isolated either as a result of mental and physical challenges or caring responsibilities to be a more active participant in groups and activities and therefore more connected than they had been before. There are many benefits that the digital world provides in allowing people to access events, activities online and where digital technology is proving to be an important tool in working to reduce social isolation through the development of meaningful connections.

But we also highlighted that in delivering effective activities and interventions online it was important to adopt a different approach when developing digital provision. This involves looking at it as a different medium - not as "simply" moving a class or group online. There is a wider spectrum of support needs and organisational requirements to consider including ensuring that people have the right kit and the right on-going support for them to use it as well as also thinking about the best way to organise and facilitate an activity online.

Digital groups will be different from face-to-face groups and subsequently the experience they offer to people will also be different. Online offers a type of social interaction requiring different skills, focus and approach. The most successful digital

delivery doesn't just try to replicate what is offered in face-to-face sessions. The difference needs to be acknowledged and embraced by organisation and groups so that the digital activity can then be judged on its own merits and applied where it provides greatest potential.

As well as the costs linked to the kit, accessing wi-fi and conference sites there is also the human resource requirements to be considered. We have in the earlier report discussed the learning from areas that running effective online groups requires both a facilitator or chair plus someone to look after the technical side. There is also the important ongoing support role of a digital connector.

Putting these together it needs to be remembered and acknowledged by organisations and commissioners looking to deliver effective digital activities to this demographic that such delivery does not necessarily mean "cheaper".

Thinking about the future

Currently there is a further transition taking place in delivery with more face-to-face options being developed to add to the digital or telephone connection activities developed during Covid-19. Although for some projects and activities, maintaining this in the long term will be possible, for others there will be constrained resources that will make this difficult to manage.

Across 7 years of operation, Ageing Better areas have been able to offer a programme of activity. This has seen the third sector work collaboratively together to offer a range of different activities and opportunities. In our learning work we have called this the "Ecosystem". The ecosystem works to provide a wide range of different opportunities that help prevent social isolation and loneliness or provide an exit route for those who have been supported to be more socially connected. The key message from the Ageing Better ecosystem is that no one organisation alone can prevent social isolation or loneliness. To work effectively the ecosystem depends on collaboration and a network of partnership working.

Not everything can or should return to face-to-face but equally online does not work for all. Within the sector and when looking at individual local ecosystems it will be important to recognise that some organisations and agencies are best suited to delivering in particular ways and to specific client groups as a result of language, sensory impairment, health conditions etc., There will be a need to look locally during this period of rebalancing and be honest about areas where there may be too much similar delivery as well as in identifying any gaps in provision for particular groups.

> **Key message**: In the slow recovery from Covid-19 this collaboration will become even more important. Hybrid delivery that offers choices and different platforms to engage will be hugely important but not all organisations need to necessarily offer all the platforms. Through more collaborative working and effective signposting people aged 50+ can have the choice of how they engage with their social connections.

Further information

Ageing Better national learning reports

- [Bridging the Digital Divide](#)

  [Learning snapshot - Key messages](#)

- [Positives of Digital](#)

  [Learning snapshot - Key messages](#)

- [Telephone Befriending](#)

  [Learning snapshot - Key messages](#)

- [Role of Connectors](#)

  [Learning snapshot - key messages](#)

- [Covid 19 - Transition Phase](#)

More information on the Ageing Better Programme together including insights from across the programme are available at [Ageing Better](#)