

Programme Set up & Development

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+.

This briefing looks to identify key messages around the organisation and set up of the Ageing Better Programme reflecting on how Ageing Better has developed and evolved over the duration (to date) of its delivery.

This short paper is meant to support The Fund and other Commissioners when considering other strategic investments and shares insights into what we found did and didn't always work when setting up Ageing Better.

Background

Ageing Better is a Strategic Programme which is led by third sector organisations. Selecting Ageing Better areas was a three-tiered process. First local authorities were invited to submit applications for their geographical areas. These applications were reviewed with 30 going on to be asked to submit more detailed “vision and strategy” documents. At this point responsibility also shifted from the Local Authority as the designated lead organisation to a third sector organisation.

A key principle within Ageing Better was acknowledging that local geographical context was vital and different in every area. It was one of the reasons behind the decision for the funding to be managed and delivered by third sector organisations. Ageing Better provided funding to the “lead” third sector organisation which was then distributed to a wider set of third sector organisations or delivery partners usually via a formal commissioning process.

All Ageing Better areas had a:

- Lead Organisation - legally responsible for the delivery of the programme
- Ageing Better Core Team - a team of people employed by the Lead Organisation to administer and deliver the programme
- Ageing Better Governance Structure - a group who provided oversight and transparency for Ageing Better delivery and funding

Ageing Better had a national evaluation and additionally each area was encouraged to have its own local evaluation. However, there was also a broader commitment to consistently collect data, information and insight about what was working and what wasn't - “test and learn”. This was implemented differently in each Ageing Better area.

The remainder of this document highlights our learning from implementing this programme to date.

Developing the programme

Selecting the Lead Organisation

The first selection criteria for funding was based on Local Authority areas. Once a shortlist of areas had been established, each Local Authority was tasked with identifying a Lead Organisation from within the voluntary sector.

The way in which the Lead Organisation was selected varied between the different areas and included competitive selection processes or the Local Authority identifying the Lead Organisation itself. Each of these approaches had pros and cons to them. Although an open and competitive process allows a wider spectrum of voluntary sector organisations to be involved it can also create some local tension and conflict.

We found:

- A clear plan and strategy is needed after a competitive selection process to help the voluntary sector move from a competitive mindset to a collaborative one. This also applies to the programme as a whole in ensuring an early focus on collaborative rather than competitive working

Developing a vision and strategy and project plan

The main challenge at both vision and strategy and the project planning phase was that of resourcing the work within the Lead Organisation although funding was provided to support the development of both the Vision and Strategy and the Project Plan. The approaches taken by the Lead Organisations were:

- Seconding existing staff to work on developing the vision and strategy and project plan
- Working with consultants to develop the vision and strategy and project plan

The advantage of using existing staff from the Lead Organisation was that the knowledge of the programme was held by and within the Lead Organisation. For those using consultants some of the soft intelligence about why things developed as they did was lost. The advantage of using consultants was that they provided a broader range of skills and experiences and crucially time and resource which were not always available in the Lead Organisation.

We found:

- Soft intelligence about the programme development can be lost if external consultants are used to develop plans without sufficient involvement of the lead organisation and the personnel who will go on to be responsible for delivery
- Flexibility from The Fund at vision and strategy and project planning allowed innovation and different approaches to be developed and tried
- Developing definitions and clear expectations around terminology is needed to help Lead Organisations better shape their delivery. Where that isn't possible need to be clear that all are happy that the understanding is evolving and acknowledge that
- Consider having a "minus year 1" to allow more consistent set up and time for

preparation and staff to be employed

Selecting delivery partners & commissioning

All third sector organisations involved in Ageing Better found it takes time to build the commissioning processes and expertise. In general programme areas with multiple commissioning rounds and different types of commissioning (small pots, micro-funding, test and learn) were better able to respond to the changing strategic needs in the local area and programme.

We found:

- It was important to ensure there are processes in place from the start for managing conflicts of interest where the Lead Organisation is also intending to be a Delivery Partner
- Sufficient guidance, support and training is needed for Lead Organisations around commissioning and in particular the role of OJEU (Procurement rules)
- Multiple rounds of commissioning and different types of funding size allows delivery to shape and mould depending on the local context and to respond to shifts in the strategic environment

Programme teams

The role of Programme Manager is a hugely important role and time and effort needs to be put into recruitment of and support for the postholder. Some areas found the use of Job Share allowed people to work part time and bring different skills to the role. Consideration needs to be given to the salary levels required to recruit the right people to the Programme Manager role.

We found it is important to give consideration to the evolution of the Programme and how different skills will be needed at different stages of delivery. Over the duration of Ageing Better it became clear that the most successful teams adopted or developed a separate Project Director and Project Manager role or function. This allowed the Project Director role to take on the strategic lead element - thinking about the shape of the programme and how it could develop and evolve and influence other local partners and stakeholders. The Project Manager role could then concentrate on contract and performance management and ensuring systems and process were in place. Over time therefore, many areas evolved their core programme roles to resource the space to either have a strategic lead or to allow adequate “strategic thought” space.

Over time most areas also went on to employ a Learning Officer to support the collection, collation and sharing of learning work.

All areas embraced Test and Learn but there were differences in how this was documented and used in the areas. This led to inconsistencies in how information was collected. Across most areas there were also challenges with the local evaluation and how this could be used to shape delivery over time.

We found:

- The Programme Team needs to change and evolve over the duration of the delivery. This needs to be recognised and planned for.
- Programme teams have valued access to a support and development resource and team. They would also have welcomed access to subject experts in key areas including commissioning; HR; GDPR and VAT. It needs to be noted,

however, that the Fund is bound by legal restrictions which prohibit it offering any support related to legal advice.

- In Programmes like Ageing Better the Programme Team should have a dedicated learning officer. This does not, necessarily, need to be in place from the start but is a valuable addition as the programme evolves and has learning to share
- Ensure the Lead Organisation has a mechanism for collecting information about what works and what doesn't and can feed this into the programme
- The Fund should be clear on monitoring expectations to ensure there are appropriate and consistent performance management measures in place across the programme
- Provide support to programmes when commissioning their local evaluations and help areas understand how they can use learning and evaluation to inform and shape their delivery as well as communicating what works and what doesn't

Governance

We found the requirements of a Board or wider Governance structure over 6 years varied as the needs of the Programme changed and that different skills were needed at different stages of its delivery and evolution.

If Delivery Partners are to be part of the governance structure (and there are good arguments for this) clear structures needed to be in place in order to manage this.

A key goal of Ageing Better was to have older people in the lead but a key piece of learning within Ageing Better was that one size does not fit all, and not everyone wants to be on a board or lead but people still want the opportunity to influence and have their voice heard.

We found:

- Governance structures should be flexible and their form and function should be supported to evolve.
- Clear mechanisms need to be in place for managing conflicts of interest in the case of delivery partners sitting on boards
- Ensure expectations for participant engagement in programme governance are clear
- Ensure there are different ways of working and engaging participants in the programme design and delivery. Representation on the governance structure is one way and an important one but you also need to think more flexibly in order to engage as wide a group as possible.

Other key learning summary points

- Be aware of any terminology being used and check that there is a joint understanding of what the terms mean. Consider co-producing a guide or expectations around key programme terms such as “test & learn” etc.,
- Ensure all programmes and delivery are geographically relevant
- Promote and create an environment where collaboration within the sector is

encouraged

- Recognise it takes time to deliver results and encourage all stakeholders to ‘hold your nerve’ in the first couple of years
- Create a longer programme of up to 10 years and potentially have a pilot programme to help shape initial thinking
- As a funder create a balance between providing information and guidance and making it clear where the areas of freedom are
- Ensure there are accountable structures in place but be mindful of the role of the Lead Organisation
- Coproduction should be entered into for the right reasons and not be “tokenistic”. It should reflect the community it is trying to reach and should ensure the views from the community are reflected in decision making structures.

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