

Outcomes of the Active at 60 Community Agent Programme

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Key lessons learned

- There is value in a Community Agent leadership role. The funding was a catalyst for instigating this role and most community groups who responded to the survey (91 per cent) had continued the role after the funding ceased and most Community Agents who responded to the survey (81 per cent) planned to continue in the role.
- There is a need for the type of support and activities that the groups provided for older people. Nearly all groups responding to the final funded groups' survey (92 per cent) attracted older people as new members and most (74 per cent) attracted those that were living alone.
- Groups were motivated to develop new activities in order to offer more variety and attract new members. They were also aiming to offer activities to keep older people mentally and physically active, to respond to a need and to try new things.
- To engage older people it is necessary to overcome their apprehension, encourage them and sometimes provide practical support such as transport.
- By socialising and getting out of the house older people interviewed had benefited from building new friendships some of which developed and extended beyond meeting at the group. Some older people who had felt that they were low or depressed, or considered that they were at risk of becoming so, improved in their mental well being as a result of participating.
- Around two-fifths (41 per cent) of the groups who responded to the final funded groups' survey had extended the range and number of activities they offered, and around half (47 per cent) tailored their activities more to the needs of older people.
- The Community Agent role is beneficial to those who fulfil it as well as those they help. Those who were interviewed benefitted socially, enjoyed their role, and gained a sense of satisfaction from making a contribution and having a sense of purpose.
- The local funders had a valuable role in mediating and explaining the message from central government at a local level and helping to ensure that community groups interpreted that message correctly.

Background

The Active at 60 Community Agents programme was launched in March 2011 and ran until 31 December 2011. It was a £1 million Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) fund that was administered nationally by the Community Development Foundation (CDF). The overarching aim of the programme was for community groups and their volunteers to help people approaching and post retirement to stay or become more active and positively engaged with society, in particular those at risk of social isolation and loneliness in later life.

What was the role of the Community Agent?

A wide variety of individuals became Community Agents. However, a typical Community Agent who responded to the survey was female, retired, aged between 55 and 69 and already volunteering at their

community group but not usually in a leadership role. The Community Agent role provided an opportunity to extend their responsibilities. They generally focused on letting older people know what was available at their community group, as well as organising and running activities, encouraging older people to take part in these and identifying the sort of activities that older people would be interested in.

As most Community Agents who responded to the survey expected to continue in the role, it is apparent that the role was perceived as valuable by groups and, indeed by the Community Agents themselves. Community Agents interviewed had generally enjoyed the role and gained a sense of satisfaction and purpose from making a contribution and seeing the outcomes of this which often contributed to their wellbeing.

The main lessons learned were that **there was value in someone taking a lead role to engage with and encourage older people to participate**, to be proactive in seeking out older people and keeping them motivated to attend. The experience of Community Agents and older people confirmed that, to fulfil their role, a Community Agent needed to have particular skills and qualities. They had to be able to understand and respect older people, to have good communication and listening skills and to be positive and enthusiastic.

How did they reach and engage older people and what worked well?

The community groups who responded to the survey successfully recruited new older people to their groups. The majority had engaged new members, typically ten, since the programme began. They had targeted and successfully recruited the groups who were the focus for the programme. **There was a need to overcome older people's apprehension and nervousness to encourage them to join the group in addition to providing practical support, such as with transport, to gain their participation.**

Word of mouth was widely used by Community Agents who responded to the survey to raise awareness of activities and support on offer at their community group, and was considered most

effective. This was reflected in word of mouth being the most commonly reported way older people had become aware of the group and its activities but it was not the only method. There was also value in using more than one approach, including taster sessions that two-fifths of responding Community Agents considered effective.

What did groups do with the funding?

Groups who participated in the programme and responded to the first funded groups' survey typically offered physical or healthy living activities and social activities. To encourage more participation by older people, half of the groups responding to the final funded groups' survey had extended the number and range of activities they offered and had tailored their activities to older people's needs. It is evident that **they had either diversified slightly from the activities they usually offered, or had added something entirely new.** Some had tailored what they usually offered to be accessible for older people. Where they had adopted new activities, these tended to be innovative for their group, rather than completely novel.

The groups had extended the responsibilities of their existing volunteers and introduced a new role of Community Agent that will continue in the future. It was evident that respondents to the final funded groups' survey extended their networks, making links with three other organisations on average that would be sustained in future.

What difference did the programme make?

Overall, groups funded through the programme who responded to the final funded groups' survey increased the number of older people taking part in activities as the majority of groups had increased the number of new people who participated. **Through participating in these groups, older people had a reason to leave their house and a new opportunity to meet new people and develop friendships which were the two most commonly identified**

benefits. These social benefits were commonly experienced and, for some older people at risk of depression or loneliness, involvement also helped improve their mental wellbeing. The majority of the groups responding to the final funded groups' survey said the programme had improved the mental well being of older people and that they had improved self esteem and confidence as a result of the programme. In addition to the mental health benefits, older people benefited in their physical health; particularly where the group focused on exercise, sport or physical activity.

The evidence shows the value of new friendships beyond the group as older people interviewed met up independently formally and informally. The shared experience from the group helped social interactions by providing a focus for conversation. In addition, by focusing on promoting participation by older people in community groups, **the programme enhanced the community by raising awareness among older people of opportunities on offer locally and increasing availability of activities.**

What is the legacy of the programme?

There is evidence that the programme has a legacy beyond the lifetime of the programme. The groups will continue to meet the programme aims through continuing the Community Agent role and ongoing activities. **The majority of groups responding to the final funded groups' survey will continue their work, with some groups expanding and building on their achievements.** Evidence also suggests that positive outcomes for participants will be sustained as their involvement with community groups continues.

Conclusion

The programme met its aims as funding for activities and practicalities, alongside the voluntary Community Agent role, provided an impetus for groups to extend their reach to new older people, adapting their activities and offer as required. Consequently, more older people engaged in community groups and benefited from increased

social interaction. This helped improve their wellbeing and confidence and mental activity. The Community Agent role gave an opportunity, valued by group leaders and volunteers, for volunteers to extend their responsibilities.

The programme was helping older people to have a more active role in their communities by increasing their social networks, which extended beyond group meetings, and increasing the number and range of activities available within their community. Groups generally intended to continue the Community Agent role and activities and were seeking more than one source of funding to achieve this including grants, membership fees and fundraising.

The targeted funding approach was a catalyst for establishing new, and refocusing existing, work with older people, which has been sustained after funding ceased. The increased social networks and impact on older people's wellbeing illustrates the valuable service small community groups can provide to support health and social services.

Research methods

Conducted between 2011 and 2012, the methodology comprised surveys and interviews with local funders, funded group leaders, Community Agents and older people.

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