

Preparing for an Ageing Society: Evaluating the Ageing Well programme Parts 1 and 2

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Overview

The Ageing Well programme ran from July 2010 to March 2012. It was designed to provide sector-led support to assist local authorities in England to meet the challenges associated with an ageing population. The programme was delivered by the Local Government Association (LGA) – previously Local Government Improvement and Development, and before that the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) – and was funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The LGA and DWP commissioned Ipsos Mori to carry out the evaluation. The research included online surveys with local authorities, qualitative interviews and observations with a selection of case study authority areas, and analysis of management information collected as part of the programme activity.

Specifically, this evaluation was designed to assess the programme's performance against its four key areas of delivery; namely **promoting effective leadership**, encouraging both a **strategic approach to the agenda** and **engagement with, and the involvement of, older people themselves**, as well as joined up or co-ordinated commissioning and delivery of services for older people.

Programme delivery

The Ageing Well programme was ambitious and was delivered against a very challenging backdrop, particularly given the capacity and resourcing pressures facing the local government sector. Despite this, the overall programme was able to achieve a number of ambitions in terms of supporting individual authorities and the sector more

widely in delivering on the ageing agenda, providing a range of national and regional programme activity, such as master classes and leadership academies, to more tailored 'bespoke' support for those local authorities who required it.

This tailored support was designed with the needs of individual authorities in mind, but in summary included:

- support in developing ageing strategies and action plans;
- engagement workshops with the public, officers and members;
- peer reviews of best practice;
- support in delivering asset-based approaches; and
- the promotion and identification of ageing 'champions'.

In all, a majority – around seven in ten – of authorities who were aware of the programme had engaged with it according to the surveys carried out with local authority leads (68 per cent in 2011 and 75 per cent in 2012¹).

Overall impressions of the programme

Generally, there was great positivity towards Ageing Well in the case study areas. Most felt it had made a genuine difference in any one of a number of areas, from helping councils engage with partners to helping them network with other authorities, and share and receive best practice and support. There was positivity about the quality of the support received too.

¹ NB. Low base size, indicative finding only.

'Ageing Well provided a fresh pair of eyes and a regional and national context...it was refreshing to have someone from outside the county come in.'

(Lead officer interview)

Nationwide, there was also agreement that the programme has been useful, with four in five respondents in both 2011 and 2012² agreeing that it has helped their authority to address the issues presented by an ageing society a **great deal or a fair amount**. Only one in five respondents involved in the programme said it had not helped very much. Specific positive feedback included the following:

- Case study respondents reported that the programme acted as the 'catalyst for change' that many authorities needed.
- Councils were positive that the programme was delivered free at point of delivery, especially given the current financial climate and the challenges some authorities were facing in allocating enough resources to the ageing agenda.
- They were positive about the role and involvement of the Regional Improvement Managers, who were deemed key to developing a suitably tailored approach and ensuring the work maintained momentum.
- The networking opportunities made available through the wider programme were seen as invaluable, as was the ability to draw on best practice from elsewhere and to learn from others.

Despite the generally positive sentiment towards the programme, there were some areas where it was felt things could have been better:

- The timeframe within which programme activity, particularly intensive support, had to be delivered was seen as too short by some. As well as the pressure on individuals, including lead officers, to deliver programme activity in such a small window, some also felt that the short timescale prohibited realistic and achievable improvements – or outcomes – over the longer-term.

- There was also some minor discontent about the council resources that were required as part of the programme, which had not necessarily been made clear at the start. Many lead officers found themselves having to give time above and beyond their 'core hours' to ensure the programme was successful. This is an important consideration when thinking about the value for money presented by such programmes.
- There was also some concern about the tailoring of the offer, particularly for one case study area, which felt that their bespoke support was pitched at a level that they had long ago reached, offering little new insight.

Meeting objectives

Because of the short timeframe in which much of the programme activity was delivered, and the fact the research was carried out immediately after the programme came to an end, it is difficult to measure the impact of the programme against some of its original objectives, particularly in relation to improving outcomes for older people. What can be demonstrated through the evaluation though is that progress has been made, at least in part, against the four objectives around leadership, strategic approach, engagement of older people and joined-up/co-ordinated commissioning and delivery of services for older people. If the programme did not help participating authorities to fully deliver improved outcomes in their local area, it at least helped to set them on the right path.

Feedback from most case study areas suggests that, in the main, the support provided through Ageing Well has allowed their authority to make more progress in tackling age-related issues in their area than might have otherwise been the case without it. The research has demonstrated that the programme has helped, at least in part, to:

- raise the profile of ageing issues within councils and across departments, promoting understanding among elected members and senior officers as well as partners;

² NB. Low base size, indicative finding only.

- support lead officers in championing the ageing agenda within their area, acting as a catalyst for change and improvement;
- encourage the formation, development and buy-in to an ageing strategy and the structures and processes that support it;
- ensure that local authorities' strategic approaches are informed by the needs and aspirations of older people;
- promote more integrated working between different parts of the council, between council officers and members, and between councils and their partners in the voluntary and health sectors; and
- support councils in broadening the approaches they take in relation to ageing issues, e.g. going beyond health and social care, and adopting more preventative approaches.

Lasting legacy and implications

Generally speaking, participating authorities did feel there would be a legacy of the programme, at least in part, and there were some positive illustrations as to how this was starting to take shape. A key legacy was felt to be that it would encourage councils to take the issue of an ageing population more seriously and ensure that staff and financial resources were in place for the future. More specifically, the LGA has provided a number of legacy resources, available to the sector following the end of the programme, on its website.

For some, however, there remained concerns about the challenge in delivering their ageing strategy going forward, notably the degree to which it will genuinely lead to a cultural shift in terms of how ageing issues are viewed across the council and also in terms of the resource and effort required on their part, and the part of their colleagues, to deliver and keep it high on the agenda.

The evaluation shows that there are a number of lessons that can be learned from the programme:

- Being clear on individual roles, responsibilities and the likely resource commitment for councils and other stakeholders upfront.
- Ensuring networking opportunities exist at the national and regional level – sharing best practice and experiences with others appears to be an important aspect of a programme like this.
- Being flexible and adaptable, as is ensuring the programme is relevant and tailored to individual areas.
- Programme branding is also important – being clear on the rationale behind the programme and who it is aimed at.
- The timing and the duration of the programme is also relevant. The Ageing Well programme was provided at an important and much needed time for authorities, but the relative short-term duration of the programme was of some concern – many lead officers felt pressured into ensuring delivery deadlines were met, or felt that programme activity was rushed.

Ultimately, many local authorities had little experience of this sort of sector-wide support, and the value it might offer, but the research demonstrates that programmes such as this have a valuable role to play in supporting some – not necessarily all – councils and their partners in preparing for an ageing society. They are arguably all the more pertinent at a time when local authorities have so many competing demands on their time and resources. A product that is offered free at the point of delivery and is adaptable and flexible to the changing needs of the sector is, for many, simply too good to refuse.

Most authorities are all too aware of the task that they face in preparing for the future, and the Ageing Well programme was never perceived as something that would provide a comprehensive solution to all the ageing issues they faced. But, those who took part in the programme generally felt it provided an important catalyst and impetus for helping to change attitudes and improve approaches to tackling ageing issues.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 908523 85 3. Research Report 807. September 2012).

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