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Remarkable research
for healthy ageing
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Introduction

This report summarises interim findings from the 'Developing age-friendly communities in an emergent post-pandemic world' research project. The work is funded by The Dunhill Medical Trust and is being completed by a partnership led by the University of Salford with Inspiring Communities Together and Manchester Metropolitan University.

The work is investigating the legacy impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on older people's social connections and aims to develop evidence-based recommendations on how places can continue to support older people. Across the UK, older people are reported to have been disproportionately negatively affected by the disease and restrictions imposed to limit its risks. Such impacts include reduced physical activity and, potentially, heightened isolation. However, we do not yet know the full impact of the pandemic on how older people are able to remain socially connected in the places where they live, nor do we understand how age-friendly initiatives can encourage and support older people's social (re)connections over the coming years. This report summarises findings from 9 focus groups and 2 interviews with 37 individuals representing 11 service providers. These discussions explored service delivery during and post-pandemic.

Post-pandemic legacies

While the current project focuses on activities in the later and current phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, experiences during the core period of the pandemic – what was termed 'lockdown' in the UK - inevitably impacted, and continue to affect, service delivery. Providers continued to be impacted by the challenges of delivering support during core lockdown periods, evidenced by their references to this time

"We depended on one provider for rooms for about 20-odd activities, which is the majority of our activities, and they just closed down. We had to immediately think about how we would run those activities, if at all, online."

"We were all online, and we were absolutely exhausted looking at a screen. And the emotions of people as well were heightened. We were taking all that on as well and we were exhausted."

to contextualise current practices. Providers recognised that the implementation of lockdown had reduced services and activities delivered in community venues, some of which have not returned to pre-pandemic delivery levels. The rapid adaptability to expand their remote and digital offers, this was challenging. A primary concern that continues post-pandemic is the suitability of these options in supporting older people. Service providers expressed concerns about the enduring impact of reduced engagement on social isolation. However, after initial challenges, there were positive accounts of using digital and remote engagement methods to enable older people to maintain their existing interactions and connections.

The pandemic highlighted the issues connected with socio-economic inequalities across the city. Some temporary shifts towards more hardship relief and humanitarian work initially brought in during key lockdown periods were retained post-pandemic. Although this period made social isolation and

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"We were such a close-knit partnership that we were able to really support our communities closely and the communication was a positive for us all."

deprivation more visible, such issues were identified as concerns which pre-existed the pandemic and endured afterwards. This meant that service providers have continued to work in partnership on initiatives such as food poverty, initially brought in as a Covid-19 response have been extended to address the impact of the cost-of-living crisis.

Inevitably, lockdown was a challenging and often emotional time and that reflecting on the impact during that period could be valuable in how service providers processed rapid change during that time and subsequently. Nonetheless, responses have produced enduring benefits. The need to deliver collaborative responses had brought partners together, which was now evident through stronger and more effective working relationships. Service providers' reflections of lockdown periods highlight the importance of incorporating the lived experience of service providers in age-friendly practice.

Moving Beyond the Pandemic

The speed with which service providers adapted delivery highlighted how flexible working practices could encourage more creative and responsive solutions fostering cultures of empowerment and equality. This has resulted in new delivery modes, enabling the discovery or reclaiming of age-friendly spaces with increased digital reach and the use of outdoor spaces. This has evolved into activities and connections that have grown and developed post-pandemic.

“Just the sheer joy of some of the people that have never been to some of these spaces that are literally down the road from them...They’d no idea they were there and suddenly it’s, this is wonderful.”

“So, that’s another massive positive, it’s created friendships that these people would have probably never met.”

Providing support in challenging times facilitated camaraderie and opportunities for joint working, resulting in more positive and stronger working relationships. This has evolved into effective and beneficial partnerships between providers, community partners and older people themselves.

“When we did open things back up, either people were too scared still because they’d shielded for so long and managed to keep themselves safe that they didn’t want to come.”

“We were all in the same boat... we were all trying to do our best for the residents of Salford so there was a bit of camaraderie that came out of it which I’m happy to say has continued.”

Provider organisations had retained aspects of hybrid and agile working to deliver more effective services and support staff in managing an improved work-life balance. Developments in agile working, digital connectivity, and partnership approaches have improved efficiency, flexibility and inclusivity. However, this has intensified demand and workload without increased capacity; concerns that have been exacerbated by the current cost-of-living crisis's continuing demands and challenges.

Providers also believed that older people benefited from digital upskilling and have made new and more diverse connections online, some of which continue post-lockdown. However, some revised or new modes were not always suitable for all older people raising concerns about reduced socialisation and support levels.

Developing Strategic Responses

Service providers are committed to tackling social isolation, digital exclusion and health and well-being outcomes that have been highlighted by the pandemic. Service providers discussed several effective working methods developed during the pandemic to respond to these concerns. These build upon the more effective partnerships that have evolved post-pandemic. A renewed focus on collaborative, locality-based approaches has been developed from those stronger working relationships. The reduction of face-to-face contact and access to key community spaces created time and space for service providers to re-evaluate and emerge from the pandemic with a renewed focus on neighbourhood working, community settings and locality-based approaches. A renewed focus on collaborative, locality-based approaches has been developed from those stronger working relationships.

“We need that network, if we are going to make sure communities are supported in good times and bad times. And the bad times do not appear to be over”

“Older people have actually become not a victim, but actually empowered to take some control and, actually, be part of this journey with us. So, you know, a lot of the work, the co-designing work that we've done, we probably would never have done that if we hadn't have had the pandemic”

“I think that was something that came out of COVID. I think it gave...I know it did us as a service; it gave us an opportunity to reassess everything. Maybe coming out of COVID, should I say? But we just reassessed what it is that we do and why we do it and prioritise which bits are the most important.”

Conclusion

Moving through and beyond the pandemic has prompted service providers to significantly improve their ability to expand and develop their service offers to older people. Service providers have improved their technology and adaptability in agile and remote working, bringing ongoing benefits in terms of connectivity and effectiveness.

Working through pandemic conditions resulted in more 'human' and empathetic interactions. It has also emphasised social connection, care, and interaction, which appear to have strengthened relationships and increased autonomy amongst organisations and older people. This has prompted improved mutual respect and understanding, resulting in more inclusive and supportive responses to community services.

Effective ways of working developed during the pandemic are being developed and continued. Developing new delivery modes enabled the discovery or reclaiming of age-friendly spaces. This includes a post-pandemic legacy in improvements to tackling digital exclusion through inclusive digital spaces for older people. It has also improved how local green and outdoor spaces are utilised and perceived, encouraging more outdoor and physical activity.

Despite many opportunities for positive change over the last few years, service providers face challenges post-pandemic. Agile working and the convergence of pandemic conditions with the current cost of living concerns have seen heightened demand levels over a prolonged period. It is also widely acknowledged that exclusion and isolation remain concerns for older generations in Salford. However, rather than create new one, providers experiences indicate that the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities.

There are clear areas of strategic focus for service providers moving forward with a commitment to tackle social isolation, digital exclusion and health and well-being outcomes. Many service providers have implemented plans or built upon the work started during the pandemic. Furthermore, improvements made to co-design and collaboration continue with a commitment to improved engagement with the community in age-friendly provision.

Lessons Learnt

- Service providers quickly shifted and varied their delivery modes demonstrated adaptability, often exceeding pre-pandemic expectations of capabilities and resources.
- New activities and delivery modes have evolved in response to pandemic conditions, often utilising outdoor and digital spaces.
- New delivery modes were not always suitable for all older people raising concerns about reduced socialisation and adequate support levels.
- The pandemic highlighted key issues for older people, particularly digital exclusion, social isolation and hardship, some of which have continued into the cost-of-living crisis.

Key Challenges

- The cost-of-living crisis following so quickly from the pandemic has exacerbated social exclusion, vulnerability and hardship for older people.
- Digital shifts, reductions in community provision and fear around infection have reduced engagement with older people across various services.
- Some service providers reported that new and adapted delivery modes had increased their demand and workload without an increase in capacity.

Key Opportunities

- Service providers have a newfound mutual respect and appreciation for partner organisations, and several networks, meetings, and alliances now continue post-pandemic.
- Improvements in agile working, digital connectivity, and partnership approaches have increased effectiveness and offered more flexibility and inclusivity.
- Service providers feel they have made significant gains in developing new and more diverse age-friendly spaces, many of which continue to be embraced post-pandemic.
- Several examples of effective working methods developed during the pandemic will now be expanded and taken forward, many of which build upon the strong partnerships forged over the last two years.
- There is a commitment from service providers to work collaboratively to address key priority issues around social isolation, digital exclusion and health and well-being outcomes.

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For more information, A fuller report providing further details about the work is available by emailing a.clark@salford.ac.uk or writing to Prof Andrew Clark School of Health & Society, University of Salford, Salford. M5 4WT. This work is conducted in partnership with Inspiring Communities, Age UK Salford and the Age-Friendly Salford network. For more information contact contact Bernadette Elder at bernadette@inspiringcommunitiestogether.co.uk or telephone 0161 743 3625 / 07742454258.