

Ageing Better and Birmingham: The wider impact across the city

Introduction

Ageing Better in Birmingham (ABB) aims to create a new movement of community action on ageing and isolation using a grassroots, asset-based approach. By harnessing active citizenship, the programme aims to reduce isolation among people over 50 and to prevent it happening in the future.

As the programme enters its sixth year it is timely to reflect on the wider impact the programme has had on the way support for older people is conceived and commissioned across Birmingham. This briefing explores impact from the perspective of statutory bodies (local authorities and healthcare providers) as well as the wider voluntary and

community sector (VCS).

The findings presented in this briefing are based on evidence gathered from a series of interviews with stakeholders across a range of these settings. Interviews explored stakeholders' experience of the programme and the extent to which it is influencing wider Birmingham priorities and initiatives. All stakeholders are



involved in prevention and early intervention services and support the most hidden and vulnerable older people across the city.

Context

The Ageing Better in Birmingham programme was introduced during a significant period of change across the city. Statutory and non-statutory services faced a period of considerable cuts in overall budgets which negatively impacted upon services for older people across the city. For the City Council up until 2018 this has meant focusing on those services that they are *required* to deliver rather than those they would *wish* to deliver. During the same period, budget cuts adversely affected the voluntary and community sector. This resulted in a reduction of sector infrastructure that was key to enable the sector to support the development and growth of grassroots activities across the city. Since 2018, recognising these historic challenges, statutory bodies have been required to reconsider conventional thinking and consider how best to 'help

people help themselves'. This has led to an increased focus on a more facilitative and preventative rather than delivery role. This is seen as particularly important since the arrival of COVID-19; it has highlighted and accelerated the need for substantial community activity and mutual aid.

Awareness and perceptions of the programme

The programme appears to have been effective in communicating its aims and ethos with key target stakeholders across the city.

Interviewees perceive that overall awareness of the programme across Birmingham has grown since its launch in 2015. This appears to be most pronounced across the local authority, parts of the voluntary and community sector and to some extent healthcare providers. Within the local authority, awareness is considered to be strongest at the senior level, with commissioners perceived to be increasingly aware of the programme.

¹ Interviews were carried out with eight stakeholders between April and June 2020. This included representatives from BVSC, Birmingham City Council, NHS, VCS organisations and the Neighbourhood Network Scheme.

Interviewees commonly point to the relationship that BVSC has with adult social care services (this is explored in more detail later in this briefing) as the primary factor in this increase in awareness. Some also point to specific marketing and campaigning activities, although there is a sense that these may have had more impact at the community level.

Stakeholders clearly associate the programme with tackling loneliness and isolation amongst older people and there is widespread understanding that it follows an asset-based

development approach to delivery. There is also a clear understanding of what this approach involves and the impact that the programme is having on empowering communities to become more active, resilient and sustainable.

Impact of the programme

Interviewees all believed the programme to have had a considerable impact across the city. It is perceived to have had a significant impact on 'corporate cultures', influencing both the way in which older people are viewed, and the ways in which support can be effectively provided. This has led to changes to service delivery and demonstrable benefits to older people.



The overarching aim is about reducing isolation, but it is also about exploring different ways in which that is done, and it is not just about doing it solely through activities, it is also around relationships between people and those everyday connections, and things like that.

Impact on understanding and perceptions of older people

By focusing on the importance of socialising,



I think the whole thing that's come about from that is really changing attitudes around adult social care and health in terms of rather than almost slowly managing older people's decline, to unfortunately death, there needs to be a real change in the narrative of actually it's a chance for people to live again and how do we free them up and empower them so they can look forward to those later years, rather than looking at it as a problem looking to those later years.

many interviewees report that the programme has helped to dispel some myths about older people and increase understanding of the needs of this cohort across the statutory sector. This includes highlighting the transformative value of having relationships. In part this may be as a result of the promotion of an asset rather than deficit-based approach. This has created a narrative of how to enjoy a good quality of life as people get older, rather than a focus on healthcare requirements and interventions.

Some interviewees highlighted the role of wider initiatives,

such as the Campaign to End Loneliness, in achieving this change in perspectives. But they also highlighted the possible impact of Ageing Better in Birmingham marketing and campaigning activity, for example the Make Someone's Day campaign.

Ageing Better in Birmingham is perceived to have helped to highlight the types of improvements in health and wellbeing that over 50s can experience as a result of participation in activities and gone some way to enhance understanding of the different

types of activities that they may wish to participate in. However, there is a perception that it is difficult to measure the impact on softer outcomes, such as confidence.

Importantly, the interviewees recognise that the programme has helped to create active citizens who are, in many cases, going on to play a more active role in their community.

Impact on understanding of asset-based community development

Interviewees generally perceive that Ageing Better in Birmingham has contributed to improved levels of understanding of asset-based community development across both statutory bodies and voluntary sector organisations. This is seen most clearly through the design and implementation of the Neighbourhood Network Scheme (NNS). A key contribution of the Ageing Better programme is understanding the potential role that community assets can



Empowerment of people within the community. So giving them the confidence, and giving them the tools to be able to go and start being more involved in their community again. Giving them the knowledge that it shouldn't be done to them, it should be done by them

play. Key messages from Ageing Better cited by interviewees include:

- Community resilience is important. Communities with strong social capital and mutual aid are thought to fare better than those without.
- New activity benefits from local VCS infrastructure. A spectrum of need exists across new activities and, without support from local organisations success and sustainability can be more difficult.
- In 'asset poor' communities it is more difficult to establish and sustain activity and grassroots groups will likely require more support to flourish.

- There is not necessarily a link between communities with high levels of relative deprivation and the extent of local assets.

The programme is seen as timely, arriving during a period in which adult social care is moving towards a preventative community development approach. The development of community assets is now considered by some to be central to this.

However, there is a feeling that there remains a gap in understanding what 'real' asset-based community development looks like. This may be attributable to the fact that organisations like the city

council and health service historically are used to delivering services within a specific sphere of control. Consequently they may find it more difficult to move towards a position where they are catalysts for things that take place outside their sphere of control. Some interviewees also perceive that moving away from thinking in a deficit-based way is difficult for some within the statutory sector.

[Community development] is now at the heart of what adult social care are doing and they're developing and investing in community strategy. The healthcare model had been identifying what was already in the community and there is now more of a focus on developing community assets within adult social care.

I think the council as a whole doesn't understand community development. And particularly in the investment in assets. It's not so much about we need workers to deliver these activities. We need perhaps workers to support a whole group of people in these assets to be able to deliver the services themselves. But there is an element of support needed, and I don't think yet the council quite get that.

Impact on the voluntary and community sector

Interviewees perceive that the programme has had some influence on the VCS across Birmingham. Importantly, it is thought to have challenged perceptions about 'traditional' models of delivery that many organisations have historically followed and highlighted the benefits to clients in making a shift from 'doing to' towards enabling people to 'do for themselves' and thereby decreasing dependence. This is seen as necessary to reflect the direction of commissioning priorities across the city.

However, achieving this is not necessarily viewed as easy or indeed universally welcome across some parts of the sector. There is still a considerable way to go to embed this thinking amongst large sections of the sector.

The importance of co-production, not simply consultation, is perceived to be becoming more evident in parts of the VCS by some interviewees.

Including the requirement of co-production as a pre-requisite of the Ageing Better Fund is believed to have had a positive impact on this.



It is communities first. If a community can do something, don't displace it. Don't step in. Don't professionalise something that is community first. The voluntary sector is there to support service delivery needs to be embedded within those structures, respectful of what communities need.

Impact on health and social care in Birmingham

The programme is seen by interviewees as having a positive impact on delivery of adult social care services across the city, in particular through the introduction of the NNS programme (described in more detail overleaf).

Ageing Better in Birmingham is perceived to have encouraged

a more joined-up adult social care offer for over 50s with an increased preventative focus. Learning from the programme is seen as highlighting the role of the VCS and how they can contribute to social care priorities.



You can directly link some of the good stuff that's come from Ageing Better into at least probably about £6 million a year worth of spend around prevention and adult social care, which is attributable to that. I think it's also definitely influenced policy and approach around prevention within sustainability and transformation partnership.

Commissioning approaches have changed significantly during the lifetime of Ageing Better in Birmingham and there is a feeling that over the last 12 months commissioners are encouraging new organisations into the space and encouraging them to engage in a wider conversation about prevention activities.

The impact of the programme on local NHS partners appears to be more nuanced. This may be because responsibility for prevention services, and the funding that went with this has shifted towards local authorities. Learning from the programme is believed to have helped reinforce the belief that communities are going to have to 'do it for themselves as the workers just aren't there to do it'.

The introduction of social prescribing across the city is one way in which Ageing Better in Birmingham could influence health services.

Social prescribing is designed to support people with a range of social, emotional or practical needs by enabling GPs and other primary care professionals to refer people to local, non-clinical services.

However, interviewees have mixed opinions on the overall effectiveness of the social prescribing process in Birmingham generally, as well as the impact that Ageing Better in Birmingham has had on its delivery.

Some interviewees point to partnerships between GP practices and parts of the voluntary sector that have been established. However, others challenge how widespread this is, and perceive relatively low levels of understanding of local assets

amongst primary care staff. This is viewed as a missed opportunity. All agree that the final year of the programme presents an opportunity to strengthen its influence in the social prescribing setting, though more work will be required to maximise this impact.



Ageing Better in Birmingham and the Neighbourhood Network Scheme

One of the major developments during the lifetime of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme has been the introduction of the Neighbourhood Network Scheme (NNS). The programme aims to provide over 50s with community based support to promote well-being and better quality of life. Networks will invest in and support the development of community assets. The approach is a key component of Birmingham City Council's adult social care community social work model.

Ageing Better in Birmingham has had a significant influence on the design and delivery of NNS. The council was able to draw on learning from the programme to shape an appropriate approach to NNS much more quickly than otherwise would have been possible.

"Without Ageing Better we probably wouldn't have had the same model around NNS. They've become a key component in terms of transferring learning in evidence. A lot of that was around really understanding what was working well with Ageing Better. [...] Having that support from Ageing Better to push and nudge and accelerate things has been really helpful [...]. We would've lost two or three years otherwise"

Learning from Ageing Better in Birmingham has influenced NNS's design in a range of practical ways. NNS includes a programme of micro-grants. Ageing Better in Birmingham highlighted the need to ensure that the grant programme supports community activity, rather than the community activity being funding-led. As a consequence, the NNS

programme is prioritising greater engagement with citizens from the outset.

"Having those conversations with people about what it is they are wanting to do, and then exploring how they are wanting to do it, and viewing the funding as one of the tools, but not the driver of the whole thing. That has been really useful."

Other areas of influence regularly cited are co-production, capacity building and the importance of establishing relationships and partnership working to provide support where required.

BVSC as lead organisation

Investment in programmes of the scale of Ageing Better in Birmingham is rare. There is widespread agreement on the importance of having the right organisation leading such programmes.

Delivery organisations must be able to effectively engage with statutory bodies (in particular local and health authorities) and the VCS. Strong, established relationships are required to ensure:

- Duplication and overlap of service provision is minimised and impact maximised

- Process learning and impact is shared with service providers in an ongoing and timely manner. This creates opportunities to influence policy and practice across the locality.
- Change can be sustained post programme by embedding legacy with other services.

Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) leads the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. BVSC is the voluntary sector infrastructure body for the city, providing support to volunteers, voluntary groups and civil society across the city. They are therefore ideally positioned to lead the programme.

BVSC is considered to be well established within both the statutory and non-statutory sectors. Interviewees highlighted a range of formal and informal structures within local authority and health services, on which BVSC is represented, including for example, Birmingham City Council's Health and Wellbeing Board and the Birmingham Integrated Personal Commissioning Group. BVSC's presence across these structures, alongside strong political contacts within the city, are considered to be significant strengths. There is a sense that without these, the extent of impact of the programme would be significantly less and initial set-up and rollout would have taken considerably longer. Importantly, BVSC's central role in supporting the NNS programme is seen to further demonstrate the value of these relationships.

BVSC's role with the VCS provides additional benefits. The sector tends to see BVSC as an 'honest broker', which is important both in terms of securing buy-in and in being able to represent the sector in other settings. Being

seen as 'the voice of the VCS' provides additional weight to its influencing. It allows BVSC to present the range of views within the sector.

Looking forward

Stakeholders have clear ideas about the direction of the programme in the final year and suggest a number of ways in which it can continue to influence service provision across Birmingham. These typically fall into one of two themes:

- Strengthening further the concept of community first when considering how best to affect change for older adults, and specifically enhancing understanding of the role that community-led activities supported by formal institutional structures can play in this agenda.
- Continuing to advocate for older people and age friendly structures, continuing to reframe the conversation about older people's quality of life and highlighting the importance of social connections. The advent of COVID-19 in particular has

highlighted the importance of these connections and there has been a big upsurge in efforts to engender and facilitate connections between people, not just from organisations but also individual citizens. In this new environment the programme is well placed to continue to encourage this involvement.

acknowledge that BVSC has been active in its dissemination across statutory services. A focus for the final year should be to ensure that this learning is embedded across relevant services. BVSC's ongoing relationship with NNS is seen as an important route to disseminate learning and shape future practice.

“ If we can get in all their decisions, the city council to think about older adults, and the impact that the changes they're making have on them. I think that will be critical ”

“ I think definitely looking at the evidence of what works. That was the view we took of Ageing Better in Birmingham, there is clearly stuff that works and we've got to retain that as much as possible and make sure that's in the statutory sector commissioning and funding environment. ”

To do this, a number of practical steps have been suggested by interviewees. These include:

Promoting evidence of what works: The programme continues to generate considerable learning, at both the practical and strategic level. Interviewees

Sustaining successful activities post programme: To do this will require enabling local communities to continue the work after the programme ends and linking them to other sources of support. Ageing Better programme staff should move

their focus from encouraging new activity to supporting the transition of groups into self-sustaining networks that will continue post programme. Network enablers are central to this and BVSC should consider how to ensure that they can most effectively support this transition over the coming year.



I think it is trying to make sure that the activities that have been started are sustained, going back to revisit networks or groups and make sure that people see how they are, give them any additional support that they need to keep going, and again to connect with other things, that connecting thing, to other places, if they do need support, but I think it is making sure that things don't just disappear, once the programme disappears.

About this leaflet

This leaflet was produced as part of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. The content is based on learning from the programme. Ageing Better in Birmingham is delivered by a partnership of voluntary and community sector organisations led by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC). It is part of Ageing Better, the seven-year (2015-2022), £84 million programme set up by **The National Lottery Community Fund**, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better partnerships are based in 14 locations across England, from Torbay to Middlesbrough and the Isle of Wight to East Lindsey. Working with local people, charities, businesses, public sector services and voluntary groups, the Ageing Better partnerships are exploring creative ways for people aged over 50 to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. Ageing Better is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

Further information and useful contacts

Ageing Better in Birmingham

www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk

Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC)

www.bvsc.org

Neighbourhood Network Scheme:

<https://brumnns.wordpress.com/>

CFE Research evaluated the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme and produced this leaflet. January 2021