



# Annual Report

## Engage with Age

April 2020-March 2021



*Engage with Age activities quickly pivoted to continue its work within the varying constraints of lockdown and the Covid-19 Pandemic.*



# Structure, Governance and Management

## Background to Engage with Age:

Engage with Age (EWA) was established as a charity and a company limited by guarantee in November 2000. EWA is a community development organisation with the vision of a society which respects, values and listens to older people.

Engage with Age's mission is to enable older people in Belfast to live happier, healthier and more connected lives.

Engage with Age seeks to enable sustainable benefits for older people and the community. It operates multi-agency partnerships to ensure joined-up and collaborative working. Partnerships are active from a governance level down to operational and daily activities.



## Governance and Management:

Engage with Age is governed by a Board of Trustees that meets quarterly. Trustees come from a range of older people's and community organisations, older people's forums, as well as the business and public sector. The Board is supported by a Finance and Operations Sub-Group that meets six times per year, in advance of board meetings, and considers finance, HR and other related matters. There is also a newly established Governance Committee.

The management of Engage with Age formally reports to the Board and the Finance and Operations Committee, and is delegated responsibility for delivering the company's programme of work at an operational level. The staff team is composed of a Director, Operations Manager, and Development Officers that deliver the company's programmes. Engage with Age has sub-contracted the Outsourced Finance company to undertake its finance administration.



*Company and board activities continued successfully.*



# Aims and Objectives

As described in the Articles and Memorandum of Association, Engage objects ('Objects') are to promote the health, wellbeing, interests and alleviate loneliness, isolation and exclusion of older people living in Northern Ireland (the area of benefit) without distinction of sex, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, caring responsibilities, race, or political, religious, or other opinions by associating together the said inhabitants, local authorities, public agencies and voluntary and other organisations in a common effort to relieve poverty, preserve and protect health, advance education with the object of improving the conditions of life for the said beneficiaries.

## Values:

Our Values guide us in our work and our relationships. They guide our behaviour, our attitudes, the decisions we make and what we expect from one another. Engage with Age values are based on community development principles. We put older people at the centre of all that we do, believing in self-determination and the right to make their own choices.

Our values are:

- Being older people-led.
- Empowering older people.
- Treating everyone with respect.
- Working closely with other organisations.
- Carrying out our work to the highest standards, with transparency.
- Ensuring everyone has the right to take part in stimulating activities and have fun.

We are committed to working in partnership, believing in the strength of the contribution of many agencies, people and volunteers to make a real difference.

## Strategic Planning:

Engage with Age is implementing a strategic plan covering the period of April 2020 – March 2023 which reflects the above vision and mission, the methods of working and the objectives of the company.



**Staff demonstrated ingenuity and imagination in continuing to deliver activities regardless of the circumstances.**

# Achievements and Performance

## The Covid-19 Pandemic

The April 2020 – March 2021 year is a difficult period to report upon because of the uncertainties of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Engage with Age's business model relies on bringing groups of older people together. Lockdown and social distancing provided significant challenges, particularly for a charity working in the field of community development. We are pleased to report that Engage with Age tackled the unpredictable circumstances with imagination and enthusiasm.

Working within the constraints of Lockdown, Engage with Age initiated its Disaster Recovery Plan, which it had created in 2018. This allowed staff to work from home and continue operating. The charity had just commenced its new Strategic Plan 2020-2023 at the start of this reporting period. Engage with Age immediately "pivoted" services to provide support to the older people it works with. Staff prioritized sharing Covid-19 health and safety messages and harnessed telephone, postal, and social media networks to make sure public health advice was understood. Health and safety communications reached significant numbers of people, with some posts on Facebook reaching audiences in excess of 20,000 people.

Many innovations developed quickly. Activities transitioned to social media including "Whatsapp" cookery classes for men, dance activities on Facebook, and "Zoom" 'Chocolate Bingo'. Over 100 older people received IT training through staff and suppliers, and staff received training on video conferencing.

For older people who were not online activities included postal nature watch activities, gardening exercises with seeds sent through

the post, and "conference call" coffee mornings. Significant new developments included, the PAL Gazette, EWA's new newspaper, directly mailed and delivered to 1,500 people. In June 2020 EWA held a one-day festival of 22 events called "The Big Day Inside Out", a range of indoor, outdoor, and online activities.

Of particular significance was the introduction of a Telephone Befriending service. Engage with Age's research with Queen's University in 2018 highlighted the need for befriending. Supported by Comic Relief, a new telephone befriending service commenced in August 2020 and within two months 28 volunteer befrienders and 70 befriendees were recruited, enabling Engage with Age to further address the impact of isolation and loneliness during the pandemic.

When eased restrictions allowed, EWA developed Covid-safe procedures for in-person meetings. Mid-year many activities took place in East and South Belfast. As restrictions were re-introduced towards winter, events moved back online including the "Feel Good Friday" day long social media festival, and the Virtual Slipped Disco.

Several large scale surveys were conducted throughout the period, including a satisfaction survey completed by 166 service users.

28% of those surveyed were new to Engage with Age. Of those who were already involved with EWA, 65% either maintained the same level of involvement throughout the Pandemic or had a greater involvement with Engage with Age. 53% of people got involved in new activities over this period.

# Year One of the Engage with Age Strategic Plan 20-20-2023

Engage with Age revised its mission to “enable older people in Belfast to lead healthier, happier, and more connected lives”. The plan highlighted a number of key strategic priorities.

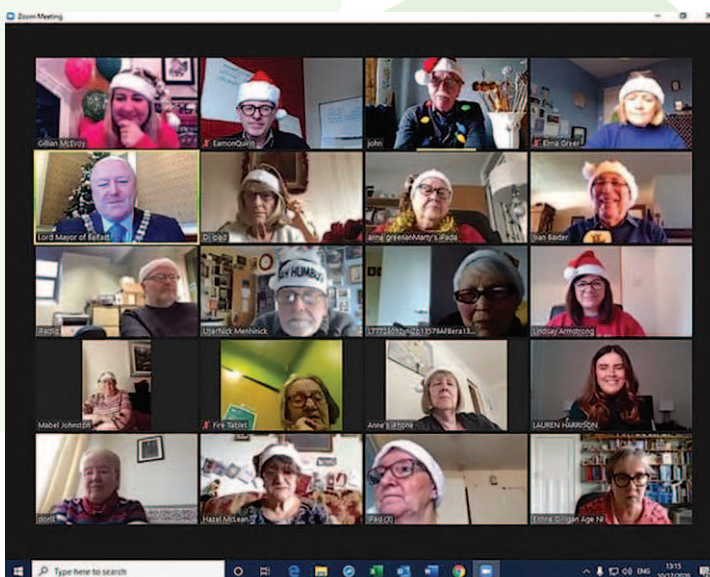
## Supporting Older People's Groups and Forums

Older People's Groups being unable to meet in person due to the pandemic has raised significant issues. These include loss of membership, participants feeling unsafe, and health matters connected to lockdown. EWA encouraged groups to maintain contact and call each other. Some groups continued to maintain contact via telephone, hold small in-person gatherings, or used social media such as Whatsapp, and Zoom. When restrictions were eased EWA spearheaded group meetings in community centres and the East Belfast Network Centre. New walking groups formed, outdoor games flourished, and groups took advantage of good weather while it lasted.

Older People's Forums were supported to maintain contact. The South Belfast Lifestyle Forum and the Greater Belfast Seniors Forum (G6) continued to meet throughout the Pandemic, mostly through “Zoom”, with some “blended” meetings. The Belfast East Seniors

Forum took the decision to formally suspend meetings, though it informally maintained good telephone communication, outdoor meet ups, and schemes sending gifts and support to its membership. Issues addressed by forums included transport, mental health, and safety. The most pressing issue, however, was maintaining social contact.

88% of people surveyed feel being part of groups makes a good, a lot, or a huge difference to their lives. Of those Forums that continued to meet, 63% of members participated monthly in the forums activities, and 75% participated in other activities outside of their Forums. 88% said being part of their forum made either a good, a lot of, or a huge difference to their lives. 88% feel that Forums make a good, a lot of, or a huge difference to the lives of the older people they represent. 70% said they feel their opinions were heard and valued by people who make decisions.



**Activities took place while strictly following health guidance to ensure everyone stayed safe.**



## Addressing the Impact of Isolation and Loneliness on Older People

Engage with Age's PAL Project has been the main vehicle for combating loneliness with older people. At the start of the Pandemic there were seven different groups operating plus the larger scale "Slipped Disco" event. These benefitted up to 200 people on a regular basis. Some groups suspended their activity due to safety reasons, such as the Games Group at Belle Bashford Court and the T'Ai Chi group. Many participants transitioned contact to Whatsapp and the size of individual Whatsapp groups and level of traffic increased significantly. In these instances the group members themselves built and maintained their own social networks. The Dance Group showed particular ingenuity. It transitioned to a Facebook group, then to an outdoor socially

distanced dance group. It then became a group on Zoom, and when restrictions allowed, an indoor socially distanced group. With the reduction in group activity, there was a significant increase in engagement with individuals. Adding the new Telephone Befriending Scheme into this, Engage with Age made considerable strides in addressing the impact of loneliness at a time when older people faced the considerable impact of Covid related isolation.

46% of participants said their circle of friends had increased during the Pandemic as a result of EWA activities. 87% of participants said that taking part in engage with Age social events made a good, a lot or a huge difference to their well being.



*Engage with Age responded to the need for social contact while people were required to stay apart.*



## Promoting Good Physical and Mental Health

Although restricted by Covid-19, there were significant initiatives to promote good physical and mental health. Outdoor activities were prioritized during the better weather. "Buddy Walks" were facilitated through local churches. Good nutrition was further promoted through the publication of "The Tasty Times" food newsletter. In-person Falls Prevention workshops were not possible so a "Zoom" workshop took place attracting over 50 participants. For those online there were poetry readings, hair care and lessons on looking good/ feeling good, and creative arts and crafts sessions. Towards the end of the reporting year the "2PM Sessions" provided an almost

daily mix of cookery demonstrations, chair based exercises, relaxation, and T'Ai Chi. A highlight of promoting good mental health and social connections was the "Zoom Karaoke" hosted by Downtown Radios Glenn Pavis.

As a result of taking part in these activities with Engage with Age 24% of participants said they undertake physical exercise every week and 36% say they undertake physical activity every day. 75% of participants said mental health activities made a good, a lot of or a huge difference to their wellbeing, while 41% were practicing good mental health exercises either every week or every day.



*A range of activities took place throughout the year including one day festivals of activity plus ongoing work.*





## Supporting the Voice of Older People to Influence Matters that Affect Them

The Older People and groups connected to Engage with Age utilized time at home to focus on some critical issues affecting them. Issues addressed included transport, health and mental health, and welfare. An example of activity was a Belfast-wide survey of older people's attitudes to public transport, resulting in feedback that enabled improved discussions with Translink and other transport providers. The Covid-19 Pandemic was the major public issue, and through Engage with Age older people achieved sizable features in all of Northern Ireland's regional newspapers, and on

some of the biggest radio programmes including Good Morning Ulster and Evening Extra. In June, Engage with Age hosted "The Big Debate", which centred on older people's concerns regarding the Covid-19 Pandemic. Over 40 older people participated in a "Zoom" debate hosted by journalist Anne Hailes and attended by the Commissioner for Older People, City Councillors, public health commissioners and 20 other sector representatives. Opinions from the debate were written up and circulated to Belfast City Councillors and public health decision makers.

## Developing an Evaluation Framework

A stated priority for this 2020-2023 Strategic Plan was the development of an Evaluation Framework. With the pressures of Covid-19 it wasn't possible to engage evaluation in the ways envisaged, however, significant consultation and surveying enabled Engage with Age to adjust services and consider the effectiveness of its work.

**Engage with Age connected older people into the media to reflect their concerns.**





## Developing the Governance and Operation of Engage with Age

The ongoing business of governing and managing Engage with Age continued throughout the reporting period. Funders agreed to adjusted contract delivery and every contract and funding agreement was fulfilled. There was a slowing of income during the year which increased and stabilized in the final quarter. Engage with Age did not need to avail of the job retention/ "furlough" scheme, and all staff worked throughout. Communications promoting our services increased significantly.

The work of the Board of Trustees governing the corporate development of Engage with Age was furthered through the Governance and the Finance and Operations sub-committees, regular board meetings, and ongoing contact with staff. The organization completed a Governance Review commenced in 2019, which concluded in the review of Engage with Age's Articles and Memorandum of Association.





# Summary

The 2020-21 year has changed how Engage with Age operates day to day. The charity took a lead in Covid safety, it developed a more outward focus in marketing and communications, it introduced a huge number of new activities online and offline, and had to connect with older people in more thoughtful ways. As a charity, it is more connected to peer organisations such as Age NI, Volunteer Now, and Age Friendly Belfast.

In December 2020 Engage with Age was announced of the World Health Organisation/ Healthy Cities award for Mental Health. EWA was also highlighted and commended for its work in the East Side Awards.

92% of people who participated in our surveying said Engage with Age's work was enjoyable or hugely enjoyable. 84% said being involved with Engage with Age made a good, a lot of, or a huge difference to their lives. The feedback received about Engage with Age's work from our service users spurs the charity and its staff and volunteers on. The recurring advice given to the charity from service users has typically said: "I think you have done an amazing job of helping us, so just keep up what you are doing."

There are significant challenges ahead. Older people's groups in Belfast will require greater support to rebuild mental health and the impact of loneliness will require increased attention, and Engage with Age will need to find new ways to reach those older people, mostly those not online, that it has lost connections with during the pandemic.

It needs to be noted that counteracting the impact of Covid-19 on older people in Belfast has been possible because of the dedication and hard work of staff, trustees, volunteers,

and the older people we work with. It has been a mutual relationship between all parties, which also included funders and stakeholders. While imaginative adjustments to programmes can help reach older people, being available at the end of our mobile phones, being socially distanced on doorsteps, and "mucking in" to make things happen is what has made a difference this year. The 2020-21 year proves how much we rely upon each other to make our communities work, and how much potential there is to do even more.



*It was more than 'business as usual'!*

## Engage with Age Board of Trustees

Anne Greenan  
Jonathan Hegan  
Gillian McEvoy  
Nick Menhinick  
Tony Barclay  
Leigh Greer  
Robert Hagan  
Sinead Hyndman  
Ivan Baxter, to November 2020  
Francis Hughes

## Staff

Eamon Quinn, Director  
Grace Henry, Operations Manager  
Laurence Wright, Development Officer  
John McCandless, Development Officer  
Cathy Chambers, Development Officer  
Martin Towers, Development Officer

## Contractors

Outsourced Finance, Finance Management  
MayWe, Social Media Management  
Lois Kennedy, Befriending Service  
Jeff Robinson, Public Relations



# Statistics

**28%**  
of participants

in 2020-21  
were new to  
Engage with Age.

**65%**  
of participants

maintained the  
same or greater  
involvement.

**53%**  
of participants

got involved  
in new activities.

**88%**  
of participants

said being part of  
groups made a positive  
difference to their  
lives.

**63%**  
of Forum  
Members

participated monthly,  
and 75% participated in  
other activities outside  
their Forums.

**88%**  
of participants

said being part of their  
Forum made a positive  
difference to their  
lives.

**88%**  
of Forum  
Members

feel that Forums make  
a difference to the  
lives of the older  
people.

**70%**

said they feel their  
opinions were heard  
and valued by people  
who make decisions.

**46%**  
of participants

increased their  
social media  
connections  
during the  
Pandemic.

**87%**  
of participants

said that taking part in  
Engage with Age social  
events made a positive  
huge difference to  
their wellbeing.

## As a result of Engage with Age:

**24%**  
of participants

undertake physical  
exercise every  
week.

**36%**  
of participants

undertake physical  
exercise every  
day.

**75%**  
of participants

said their mental  
health improved.

**41%**  
of participants

practice good mental  
health exercises  
on their own.

**92%**  
of people

find Engage with Age's  
work enjoyable.

**84%**  
of people

said Engage with Age  
makes a positive  
difference to  
their lives.

*"I think you have done an amazing job of helping us,  
so just keep up what you are doing."*

Participant



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