

Executive Summary of Engage with Age Impact Report 2023–24



The Engage with Age (EWA) Impact Report for 2023–24 provides a comprehensive assessment of the charity's efforts to empower older people to lead happy, healthy, independent, and socially connected lives. Operating primarily in South and East Belfast, EWA delivers a broad spectrum of services through activity groups, forums, campaigns, and targeted programmes. This in-house evaluation explores progress against the charity's four strategic aims using surveys, interviews, focus groups, and case studies. Over 14,900 attendances were recorded, over 781 activity sessions and 2,100 befriending telephone calls. The charity work seeks to achieve strategic aims to address loneliness, wellbeing, community strength, and advocacy.

Strategic Aim 1: Reducing Loneliness and Isolation

EWA's PAL (People Addressing Loneliness) Project is central to this aim. It consists of peer-led weekly activity groups and a telephone befriending service. In 2023–24, EWA delivered 264 group sessions and made 2,100 befriending calls, serving around 250 regular group attendees and 70 telephone befriendees.

Evaluations reveal that 100% of surveyed participants felt less lonely, and 96% strongly agreed that group attendance made them feel better. Similarly, telephone befriendees reported a notable reduction in loneliness, with half stating a major improvement. Comments highlighted the importance of consistent contact, volunteer kindness, and the confidence gained through regular social interaction.

Case studies illustrate significant transformations, such as increased social engagement and revitalized confidence, often after prolonged periods of isolation. Recommendations include reaching more men, maintaining long-term engagement, leveraging peer volunteers, and continuing check-in support for absentees.



Strategic Aim 2: Improving Health and Wellbeing

Health and wellbeing are addressed through programmes funded by the Belfast Trust and Public Health Agency, with 379 sessions delivered to 7,392 participants. Activities included physical exercise (e.g., yoga, walking), mental health workshops (e.g., mindfulness, relaxation), nutrition education, and creative engagement.

Physical Health:

92% of respondents reported feeling physically better, and 68% increased their activity levels. Accessible options such as bowling and chair-based exercises were praised for accommodating diverse physical abilities.

Mental Health:

100% of participants felt mentally better post-session, with 90% expressing strong satisfaction. Classes on nutrition, stress relief, and breathing techniques were popular. Creative activities also enhanced mental health, promoting fun, friendship, and self-expression.

Nutrition and Diet:

84% reported improved wellbeing through nutrition sessions, and 68% intended to change their diets. Practical workshops improved understanding of meal planning and encouraged experimentation with new foods.

Creative Engagement:

Craft, storytelling, and writing sessions provided cognitive stimulation and social connection. Dementia-friendly sessions saw strong participation, reinforcing EWA's inclusive approach. Participants consistently highlighted enjoyment, confidence, and pride in their creative output. Overall, EWA successfully fostered physical, emotional, and creative wellbeing. Continued funding, programme expansion, and sustained engagement are recommended to enhance long-term impact.



Strategic Aim 3: Strengthening Groups and Communities

EWA works with a range of local older people's groups and forums such as the South Belfast Lifestyle Forum and Greater Belfast Seniors Forum (G6). In 2023–24, 146 support sessions were delivered. Through strategic planning, capacity building, and facilitation, these groups have become more sustainable and active.

Survey data shows 100% satisfaction with activities and a strong belief that groups are healthier and achieving their goals. Membership growth, diversified programming, and improved group leadership were repeatedly noted.



A comparative survey (2021 vs. 2023) found that groups at risk of collapse dropped from 33% to 4%, indicating successful EWA interventions.

While most forums are effective, challenges remain around succession planning, recruitment, and visibility. Forum members suggested the need for more men, younger participants, and stronger outreach.

To maintain progress, EWA is advised to prioritise recruitment, succession planning, and perform a needs analysis of forum capacities.

Strategic Aim 4: Shaping Decisions and Advocacy

EWA supports older people to influence decisions affecting their lives through consultations, campaigns, media contributions, and engagement with policymakers. In 2023–24, these included over 48 consultations and contributions to strategic policy documents and campaigns such as Save The 60+ SmartPass.



While forums like G6 have secured visibility and some tangible successes (e.g., influencing SmartPass retention and winter fuel support), respondents acknowledged limited influence at higher government levels. However, they valued increased engagement and recognition from local authorities and health services.

Participants appreciated opportunities to speak collectively and directly to decision-makers, though concerns remain about broader systemic issues like transport and healthcare access.

Ongoing advocacy support is essential, as is greater effort to influence regional policy through sustained campaigns and partnerships.

Key Recommendations

- Extend outreach to underrepresented groups, particularly older men.
- Build succession planning into group and forum support structures.
- Expand successful peer-led and volunteer-supported models.
- Continue investment in long-term, consistent engagement to foster lasting impact.
- Maintain EWA's hallmark of friendliness, inclusion, and respect.



Conclusion

EWA's 2023-24 impact has been significant and far-reaching, achieving meaningful improvements in wellbeing, social connection, community resilience, and empowerment. EWA is achieving its Strategic Aims. With ongoing adaptation and strategic investment, the charity is well-positioned to deepen its impact and meet the evolving needs of older people in Belfast.

