



Engage with Age

Impact Report 2023-24

Measuring the impact of the work of Engage with Age empowering older people to live happy, healthy, independent, and more connected lives.



Introduction

Engage with Age's mission is to empower older people to live happy, healthy, independent, and more connected lives. The charity provides a range of services for individuals and older people's groups and forums, mostly in South and East Belfast.

Engage with Age (EWA) has a three-year Strategic Plan 2023-26, and its main strategic aims are:

1. To empower older people to reduce the impact of loneliness and isolation on peer individuals within their communities and neighbourhoods.
2. To empower older people to improve their own health and wellbeing.
3. To strengthen communities and neighbourhoods by supporting and empowering older people's groups and forums.
4. To empower older people so they can shape matters that affect their lives.

This impact report seeks to explore if EWA is delivering upon its strategic aims, if its stated outcomes are being achieved, and to learn what Engage with Age can do to inform and improve its work. A table of indicators was developed to assess if EWA's aims and outcomes are being achieved, and this links to the charity's Theory of Change. This is the table of Outcomes and Indicators against which the evaluations took place. See next page for the table of Outcomes and Indicators.

A note on methodology

This is an in-house evaluation of the impact of Engage with Age's programme-based activities, and it is meant for a wide audience. This evaluation uses a number of tools to assess impact:

- Counting the numbers of activities and participants, with some analysis on age and gender breakdown.
- Surveying individuals and groups
- Focus group discussions
- One to one interviews
- Case studies
- Reflections from staff and/ or leaders

Furthermore:

- In undertaking this evaluation, 429 surveys were completed, 17 focus groups, 35 one to one interviews, 23 case studies. Not all respondents answered all questions and there were different surveys and questions depending on the topic of discussion. A selection of evidence is published in this report.
- The evidence in this report is summarised and presented on a proportionate basis, though some comments are highlighted even if the point was only made once or twice, on the basis that the comment is useful or insightful.
- This report concentrates on responses to activities. It doesn't particularly analyse the design of activities/ models of practice, though it does record suggestions and feedback on the activities.

Table of Outcomes and Indicators

Strategic Aim	Outcomes	Indicators include
1. To empower people to reduce the impact of loneliness and isolation on peer individuals within their communities and neighbourhoods.	Older people have increased social connections, reduced loneliness.	Levels of engagement/ connection. Older people tell us: They feel less lonely They have better/ increased social connections.
2. To empower older people to improve their own health and wellbeing.	Improved health and wellbeing.	Levels of engagement. Older people tell us: They have better physical health. They have better mental health. They have improved creative engagement They use IT better and more They feel more connected
3. To strengthen communities and neighbourhoods by supporting older people's groups and forums.	Groups and forums are sustainable and strong.	Level of capacity building. Measurable improvements in groups/ forums. Older people, groups and forums tell us: Groups are stronger Groups achieve their goals Forums are stronger Forums operate better.
4. To empower older people so they can shape matters that affect their lives.	Older people have been listened to and have shaped decisions.	Levels of engagement with decision makers. Tangible changes apparent. Older people tell us: Improved engagement with decision makers

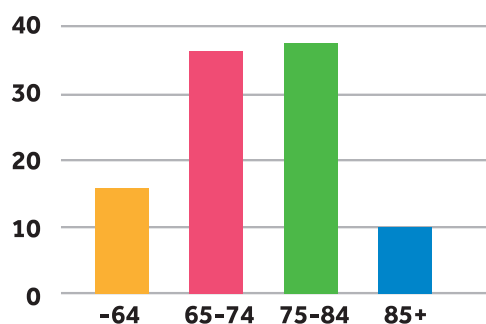
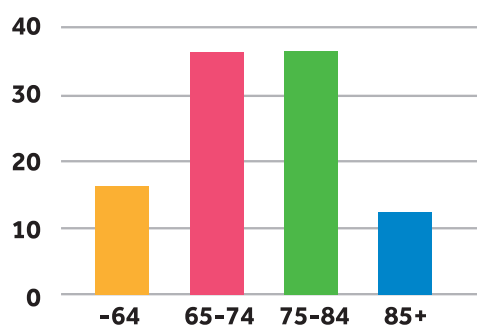
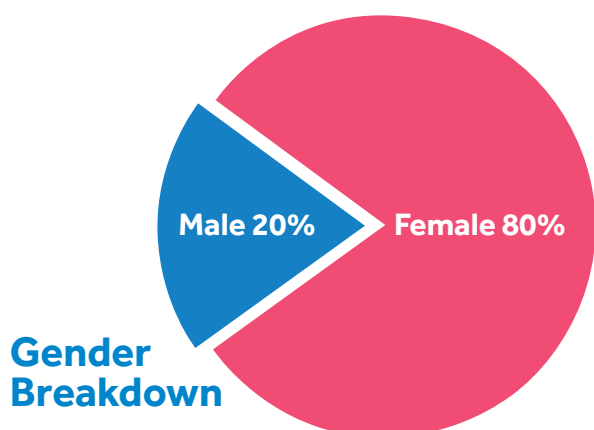
Monitoring Report

Breakdown of activities and attendances

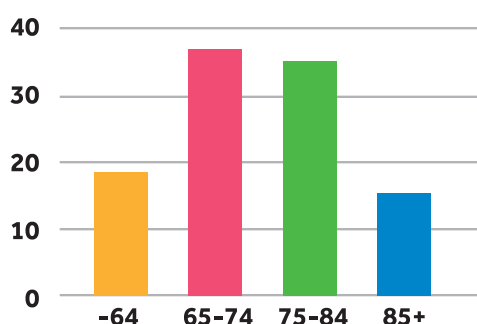
These figures cover the period 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024, and count activity group activity, one to one telephone support, work with forums and campaigns.

Every time an Engage with Age (EWA) session takes place an activity report is completed. Most figures are accurate but for some larger scale events attendances are informed estimates. EWA doesn't hold registration information on attenders, therefore, we make informed estimates on age breakdown, disability status etc. Though EWA counts every attendance, it doesn't have capacity for separating out one off attenders from regular attenders. Every time a person attends an EWA event their attendance is counted, even if they attend repeatedly.

In 2023-24 Engage with Age had 14,927 direct attendances at EWA activities, an increase of 7% compared to 2022-23. This doesn't include exhibition attenders, social media engagement or newsletter/ PAL Gazette recipients.



Female Age Breakdown (%)



Male Age Breakdown (%)

Percentage of people living with a disability: **18%**

Percentage of people from Ethnic Minority: **4%**

Activity Types

For reporting to funders, Engage with Age counts every session as one type of activity, and only counts the session/ activity once. This provides the following breakdown:

Befriending Telephone Calls:	2,100
Isolation/ Loneliness activities:	264
Capacity Building Sessions:	149
Life-long learning Sessions:	85
Physical Activity Sessions:	84
Arts and Craft Sessions:	57
Consultations with decision makers:	48
Mental Health Sessions:	35
Forum Meetings:	30
Health and Safety Sessions	30
Nutrition Sessions:	25
Forum Committee Meetings:	12
Networking Sessions:	10
Exhibitions:	5 (estimated audience 30,000+)
Publications:	2 (to 5,000 people monthly)
Published articles by older people:	80

Activities Summary: 2,100 befriending telephone calls and 781 activity sessions in the 2023-24 year.

Some activities meet more than one activity type criteria. For instance, a walk could be considered a loneliness/ social activity, as well as being a physical activity and a mental health activity. Counting every activity in this way gives the following breakdown:

Befriending Telephone Calls:	2,100
Mental Health Activities:	351
Physical Activity Activities:	324
Isolation/ Loneliness Activities:	282
Life-long learning Activities:	217
Capacity Building Activities:	160
Arts and Craft Activities:	143
Information circulating Activities:	72
Inter/ cross community Activities:	72
Networking Activities:	58
Consultations:	48
Forum Meetings:	30
Nutrition Activities:	26
Forum Committee Meetings:	12
Exhibitions:	5 (estimated audience 30,000+)
Publications:	2 (to 5,000 people monthly)
Published articles by older people:	80

Evaluations

Overall responses about Engage with Age

Over 400 people completed surveys and they contained some consistent questions about Engage with Age, though not all respondents answered all questions.

367 participants responded to being asked if they agreed with the phrase that they were satisfied with the work of Engage with Age/ with the session they attended.



98.6%
agree and 77%
strongly agree
they are satisfied
with EWA

29%
are new
attenders

40%
did a new
activity

77%
said they had
learned something
new

80%
of attenders said
they use, or would
use, what they
have learned in
their own time

95%
said they would
attend an EWA
event again

Open questions were asked about responses to Engage with Age, or the activity, or the group they were attending. The words and phrases that occur most frequently include:

"Great staff"

"Volunteers
do a great
job"

"Lovely
people"

"Very good"

"Enjoyment"

"Meeting
people"

"Lovely
group"

"Laughing"

Strategic Aim 1



To empower older people to reduce the impact of loneliness and isolation on peer individuals within their communities and neighbourhoods.

EWA delivers this strategic aim through its PAL Project, a peer- led programme. The name stands for People Addressing Loneliness (PAL). The programme has two strands, with weekly activity groups mostly lead by older people, and telephone-based befriending with volunteer befrienders, many of whom are older people themselves. Participants engage on a weekly basis to provide a long-term benefit and behaviour change.

In the 2023-24 year there were 264 activity group sessions, and 2,100 telephone befriending calls made. During this period there were approximately 250 regular attenders to activity groups, 70 telephone befriendees and 25 befrienders.

In evaluating this activity 128 surveys were completed, 29 people participated in focus groups, and there were 15 one to one interviews.

100% of 115 people who were asked, said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the activities at activity sessions, with 76% saying they were very satisfied.

EWA seeks to achieve the following outcome.

Outcome: Older people have increased social connections, reduced loneliness.

Indicator 1: Older people tell us they feel less lonely

When asked if they agreed with the statement that they felt better as a result of attending activity group sessions, 100% of respondents agreed with 96% of respondents strongly agreeing.

Representative comments from Focus Groups include:

- "It's actually brought me out of my shell a bit, I've found myself more confident now in talking to people, other people, not just the ones in the group."
- "It makes me feel happy, for me anyway. Meeting other people. You look forward to it. It's very good. There's always some fun thing, some fun activity, and it's what it says, Keep in Touch. It's keeping in touch with people from your area."
- "You look forward to it. You feel happy, you're meeting friends, it's a very good group, it's the best group, you're meeting friends. "
- "It's great having someone to share your feelings with and for them to share with you, everyone has issues, it's good to talk and you know you're not the only one."
- "It's good that if you can't come some week, when you come again, everyone asks how you've been and if you've been ok, makes you feel that people care."

We asked how attending groups makes participants feel and the response was:



Throughout surveys and interviews, participants routinely commented on how well treated they are by volunteers and the good job that the volunteers do. Volunteers were mentioned by name, and a recurring theme was how welcome the volunteers made the participants feel.

15 interviews were conducted with Befriendees.

13 Befriendees described feelings of loneliness as significant to severe before they engaged with our befriending. Post befriending, all Befriendees noted decreased feelings of loneliness, and half noted major changes in feelings of loneliness.



Representative comments from Befriendees included:



Indicator 2: Older people have better/ increased social connections.

For activity groups, responses in surveys said that:

- 45% of respondents who were asked said they had met new people
- 100% of respondents said they had made new friends at activity groups, with 75% meeting up outside of activity groups.
- 95% of respondents asked said they agreed with the statement that their social circle had increased, with 72% strongly agreeing.

Representative responses from focus groups said:

- "It's a great way of starting to connect with the community and the outside world, you can just come along and not have to worry about anything, doing anything, you just come along and dander along and you feel at ease."
- "There's new people coming in every week. It's very welcoming. It always has a great, great atmosphere. It's fantastic. Paul is very great, he never complains, he's great, he's definitely a people person and he's very caring. Paul's definitely a one off."
- "My husband says I'm a different person since I've been coming to the dance group. I am completely changed for the better."

CASE STUDIES

Female #1

This case study highlights how a long-term approach can gently coax an older person into social engagement. Female #1, late 70s, was referred to the Befriending Service by the Connected Community Care Hub (CCCH). Female #1 was bereaved. Following a needs analysis she was matched with a befriender (female late 50s). Befriender reports that the befriending calls were very quiet and timid for the first couple of months. The progress of the calls were monitored through the weekly reporting mechanism, with the Befriender careful not to stray into a counselling role. After a number of months, the calls became better and more equal, with Female #1 talking about their own life a bit more. Female #1's confidence and interest has improved significantly. In summer 2024 the Befriender and Female #1 met up at one of the Coffee Morning Get Togethers. Female #1 told us in conversation how the phone calls helped sustain her while she coped with loneliness. Female #1 has recently taken the step of attending some Engage with Age activities, which is the first time in years she has engaged in an activity herself.

Male #1

Male #1, early 80s, was referred to EWA by the Connected Community Care Hub. He had experienced bereavements and major medical treatment. Though he has recovered he was socially isolated. Male #1 met with EWA to ascertain what he wanted and he was matched to attend the Dance Group on Friday afternoons in East Belfast. He branched out to other EWA activities including the Tuesday Dance Group in South Belfast and the Friday KIT Group in Finaghy. Male #1 states his confidence has increased and his good humour has returned. He has now branched into other activity groups outside of EWA. Male #1 now states that he has a very full social diary and is out almost every day of the week. His children note their pleasure in his increased social activity. Male #1 says his life is transformed and vastly different from the period a few years ago.

OBSERVATIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

- The programme should seek to engage with more men as the breakdown in this programme is 30% male to 70% female. One respondent said: "Men are less sociable than women."
- The long-term approach works. Participants fed back that they like having the activities as a long-term part of their week's activities.
- The text message reminder aspect of the service is successful. One respondent said: "I like the text's, it really helps."
- We received feedback that check-in calls when a participant hasn't attended for a while are seen as very valuable and important. Calls are made by staff and also other participants, and this is part of a social glue that makes this project work well.
- The role of volunteers is very important and referred to consistently in surveys and interviews. The peer lead approach is deemed as important, with older people taking a leading role: "Having a leader and also volunteers is good, it gives the session a good structure and support."
- The friendliness and openness of the groups and phone calls is notable and a characteristic of the approach, the work of the staff, and EWA's work.

CONCLUSION

Engage with Age is significantly achieving its aim of empowering older people to reduce the impact of loneliness and isolation on their peers. The outcome of older people have increased social connections, reduced loneliness is being achieved.

Strategic Aim 2

To empower older people to improve their own health and wellbeing.

Engage with Age has two main programmes promoting health and wellbeing – a Belfast Trust funded programme in East Belfast and a Public Health Agency funded programme in South Belfast. Both programmes share similar health outcomes and targets, and both work mainly through existing older people's groups in both areas. The programmes work alongside other agencies to ensure resources go towards neighbourhoods and groups with little provision. Within this Strategic Aim is EWA's dementia friendly artist in residence programme which seeks to develop creativity with people living with dementia and build skills with family members, carers and staff.

There were 379 sessions in health promotion, with 7,392 engagements.

Outcome: Improved health and wellbeing



Indicator: Older people tell us they have better physical health.

A range of physical activities are undertaken such as dance, yoga, chair exercises, walking, and games such as Boccia.

92%
of those
surveyed said they
felt better as a result
of participating
in physical
activity

68%
of those
asked said they
do more physical
activity as a
result of
participating

65%
said they
had learned
something
new

Typical comments from focus groups include:

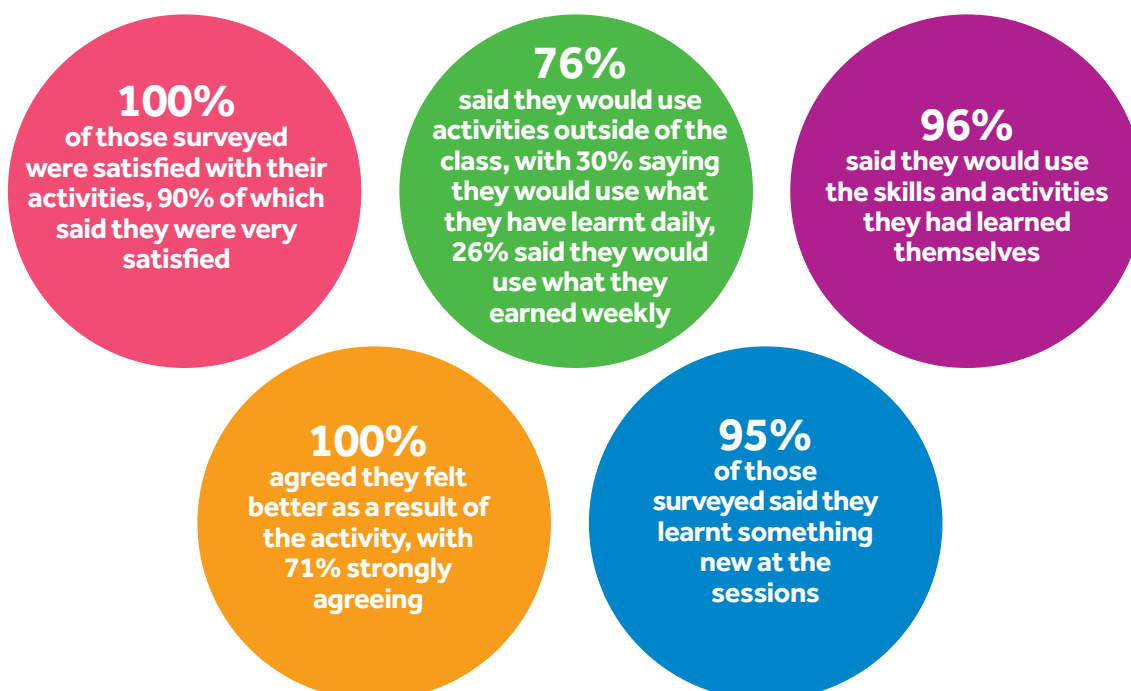
- "I am trying to stay active, I attend the seniors gym in Tullycarnet twice a week and have been bowling for years. It's fun, I like the competition. The group is great fun. There are so many lovely people here."
- "No one is taking any other regular exercise, it is mostly gentle walks and some arm chair exercise, so we need this."
- All interviewees agreed that they feel the health benefits, both physical and mental. Activities include low impact sport which participants say they can do despite their physical ailments.
- "I can play even though I had the stroke and my left side of the body doesn't work anymore, I can only use one hand."

CASE STUDY

Male #1 is 85 years old. He joined EWA ten pin bowling group about 9 months ago after being convinced by his group leader to try a new activity. He tried bowling many years before and had not played for years. He quickly became one of the best players and a mascot for the group, due to his cheerful nature. Male #1 is a regular at the sessions, never misses the Friday at the bowling alley, unless he has a medical appointment. He is very invested in the game, asking more professional players for tips. Asked why he likes the group, he said he does it for the atmosphere and the great craic they are all having when playing. He likes the game and found it quite it quite surprising he is so good at it. He would like to play for as long as possible. Bowling allows him to be active despite failing health and he loves the social aspect of it. It would be his only form of exercise, with the exception of occasional arm chair exercise he does at his club.

Indicator: Older people tell us they have improved mental health.

A range of activities took place that included: mindfulness sessions, relaxation classes, classes on coping with stress, and physical classes such as yoga and t'ai chi which improve mental health.



Things that participants frequently said they had learned included:

- How nutrition affects mental health and mood, and how to improve diet.
- The importance of movement and exercise.
- Breathing techniques.
- Use of pressure points on hands and feet to relieve stress.

Typical comments included:

- "Very relaxing and very interesting."
- "Super fun with the right amount of energy."
- "I really enjoyed it, very informative."

- "Very beneficial."
- "I have been surprised I didn't know how to breath properly, I will practice the exercise I have learnt today."

Focus groups provided very useful information. Asked how participating in mental health activities affects them, typical comments included:

- "Yes, I love it, we have great fun with the music, dancing and stories, also talking to the new people. I like doing the craft activities, I am not good at it, but I do it for the company."
- "We always have a great laugh when we invite other groups in, I am too old for dancing now, but I like to watch others dancing, I love a good sing song too."

CASE STUDY

Interview with a tenant in a supported housing complex.

"I very much like the music gatherings and storytelling happening at our fold. We are always inviting people from other groups and dwellings and over the last year I have made some good friends with new folks. Living on your own can be isolating, especially if your family only visits occasionally. I also joined the bowling club and have been coming on the regular basis to play. I try to come for company even when my back is sore, just to hang out with the rest of the group and have a laugh. We are always having such a great time over there and it is an hour well spent. Everyone is so nice and I have met some new people there too, there is always someone to talk to. A good laugh always lifts you up and makes the rest of the day better. I like the fact we invite other people from EWA to our fold, they are always such good company and I think everyone feels better with some craic and noise in the house. We had some tremendous parties here."

Indicator: Older people tell us they have improved nutrition.

Activity sessions included cookery classes, "Eat Well Bingo", explanations and information sessions on healthy diets, classes on the importance of good nutrition.

Surveying provided useful information and feedback.



Typical comments from surveying included:

- "I learned more about food preparation including planning shopping."
- "Learning about using spices is good, makes boring food more interesting to eat."
- "I learned a lot about nutrition."

Focus groups provided very useful information:

Quotes included:

"I learned that nutrition helps with falls and you won't fall as easily if you have good nutrition and plenty of fluids."

"I'm quite conscious that I obviously don't drink nearly enough water and I think that's very important."

"Tins of fish, good for vitamins and good for joints. Tins are also good in your store cupboard for when you don't want to go shopping."

"A lot of us live our own and it's hard to cook for one. It's very boring to cook for yourself, if there are other people you put a bit more effort in to it."

How could you improve the sessions EWA provides?

"Try other recipes and baking."

"Having better facilities would be great." (note, there's no direct access to the kitchen, which complicates presentations)

"Some air fryer cooking ideas would be good."

"Try cake decorating."

"Try ethnic recipes."

- Most ladies said they eat quite healthy, they have the set meal times, always have breakfast.
- Over half of them (participants) admitted a fondness for sweet stuff as their downfall.
- About half feel like they are eating the same stuff over and over again, so they are happy to try something new, they also admitted that shopping can be a bit confusing, because there is so much stuff out there they never tried or would not know how to cook.

CASE STUDY

Female #1 is taking part in a series of the cookery workshops. She joined the class to get some new idea for meals. She is very hands on during the class, she volunteers with the preparation and admitted she will be trying the new recipes she learned during those sessions. She lives alone, but still cooks for herself and wanted to try something different that she always cooks. She admits that she didn't like everything that was shown during the class, but there is always something worth trying. The cookery group also prepares a shared buffet meal for the entire group to enjoy after the class and she likes that everyone gets to try it and have a meal together.

Indicator: Older people tell us they have improved creative engagement.

A wide range of creative sessions took place including weekly creative writing sessions with the Words Alive writing group, readings of poetry and prose, arts and craft sessions, and creative reminiscence sessions.

Typical focus group comments include:

- "I am not an artistic person, so I am amazed that I usually make something nice, that looks well and I can show off to my little granddaughter. We have made so many lovely things and I like the company of the ladies in the group, that's what keeps me coming."
- "I like it, there is always something new to try and I have always nice things to decorate my house with."
- "I think it's great, with the company and the crafts, I was never good at art, but I like doing it and have a laugh while doing it. It's very good for my mental health."

An older person living with dementia made this comment about the Dementia Friendly Artist in Residence programme: "This lady who came in to teach us and stuff, she is super-duper, she walked in to three or four big tables of people and everyone said we can't do that, we won't be able to do that, and by the time she was finished we were all doing it, and making things."

CASE STUDY

Interview with member of crafting group

Female #1 has been the member of the Alternators craft group for the past 10 years, she was always an avid crafter. Since I've started working with the group, bringing new ideas Female #1 has been very enthusiastic about the new projects and suggesting ideas. As a person with a lot of experience she helps the less advanced members, organises the crafting supplies and works on the ideas for the décor for the Forum gatherings. Helping the group is giving Female #1 new ideas for projects and some more confidence to work with other people, hopefully we will be able to utilise her skills to attract more members for the group and during the craft training for the group leaders, She usually likes to work behind the scenes, but I would like her to be able to work more with other people and take more leading role.



OBSERVATIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

- There are significant positive responses to EWA's work.
- There is scope to add new physical activities into EWA's physical activities programme.
- All interviewees agreed they could feel the health benefit, physically and mentally.
- Because EWA only interacts with participants in these programmes on an infrequent basis it is not possible to state if these activities have changed behaviours. It is more appropriate to ask if participants intended to change behaviours as a result of participating in these activities.
- Groups and participants tell us there is an ongoing demand for activities and EWA could easily fulfil demand if it increased the number of activities it offers.

CONCLUSION

Engage with Age is achieving its aim of empowering older people to improve their own health and wellbeing, and is achieving the outcome that older people have improved health and wellbeing.



Strategic Aim 3

To strengthen communities and neighbourhoods by supporting and empowering older people's groups and forums.



Engage with Age works with older people's groups across South and East Belfast. EWA also supports the South Belfast Lifestyle Forum, the Belfast East Seniors Forum and the Greater Belfast Seniors Forum (G6). This work forms part of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Public Health Agency, and Belfast City Council programmes. EWA takes a community development approach working with groups and forums, seeking to enable them to become stronger, more sustainability and independent, thereby strengthening their communities. Activities include ideas planning, sessions on recruitment, practical support on issues like obtaining venues for meetings, Action Planning sessions with the G6, planning and recruitment support for Forums.

There were 146 sessions.

Outcome: Groups and Forums are sustainable and strong.

Groups

Surveying produced strong results about the benefits of EWA activities to strengthen groups.



Focus groups and discussions provide useful feed back that links to the outcome indicators.

Indicator 1: Level of measurable improvements in groups.

- "The ideas and incentives sessions from EWA have brought a lasting purpose to our meeting."
- "The group has had a change of focus learning new skills and sharing experiences. We're changing, not just staying with the making jewelry."
- "Most of the members are active in the programme and it has become very membership focused, not just run by one or two people."

Indicator 2: Older people tell us groups are stronger.

- "Everyone has grown because of the variation of fascinating mixture of activities. In the past year it has doubled membership to the extent that it can't take any more members because of the size of the venue."
- "Elmgrove has a list of people wanting to join."
- "We are currently relying on four leaders that continually set up a programme. It has been suggested that because of the success of the group it might be worth moving to new premises."
- "We have increased membership by one third and others are attending more frequently."

Indicator 3: Older people tell us their groups are achieving their goals.

- "We can see the joy and excitement in our members. It's what we have set out to do, i.e., making change in people's lives."
- "The ideas and incentives sessions from EWA have brought a lasting purpose to our meetings."
- "We're changing... we have increased membership by one third and others are attending more frequently."
- "Our vision was to bring ladies together to have fun and fellowship and alleviate social isolation. We met the objective."

Groups Covid-19 recovery survey

Between 2021 and 2023, EWA conducted a separate survey of groups because EWA was concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on the health of older people's groups in Belfast. The same questions were asked of 90 groups over two surveys in 2021 and 2023. Questions included whether membership levels were good, if the groups were meeting with good frequency, if the groups had their own officer bearers/ leaders, levels of support from local agencies/ community centres.

In 2021, EWA found that 33% of groups were operating well, 33% were experiencing challenges, and 33% were at risk of collapse. EWA focused resources on at-risk groups from 2021. In the follow up survey in 2023, 65% of groups were operating well, approximately 31% of groups were experiencing challenges, and only 4% of groups were at risk of collapse. Although EWA can not solely take responsibility for all of these improvements, the focusing of EWA resources towards at-risk groups appears to have contributed to the strengthening of groups.

Forums



Indicator 4: Forums are stronger

There is some mixed success in supporting and empowering forums, though predominantly forums are performing well.

65% believe their forum is stronger/ 31% believe their forum has stayed the same.

96% agree that the forum addresses issues that are important for older people, with 60% strongly agreeing the forum addresses issues important for older people.

Feedback from interviews was interesting with a mix of responses:

- "I think we're doing well. Everyone attends, and everyone is there because they want to represent older people. They're doing very well. We shouldn't close our ears or minds to anything but I think it's going very well."
- "I think it's working well and I think our voice is strong enough for people to listen to us. I think our name goes before us."
- "Forum in my opinion is doing moderately well, but I see a lot of room for improvement. We need to recruit and retain more members to be able to represent more groups."

Indicator 5: Forums operate better

- Attendance at Forums is good. 85% of Forum Members attend the monthly meetings, with 30% attending additional Forum Meetings.
- 96% agree the forum improves the lives of older people, with 56% strongly agreeing.
- 91% of forum members asked agree the forum improves their wellbeing, with 51% strongly agreeing.

Feedback from Focus Groups is interesting, with a range of views on how well the forums operate.

- Interviewees all believe the content of meetings is strong, with a good number and variety of consultations and information that is useful for older people.
- Forum members reflect that their forum is cohesive and provides a good opportunity for social contact.
- Interviewees noted there is often a diversity of opinions but that these are welcomed and accepted.
- Forum members note that the same issues of concern for older people reoccur – transport, access to health services, poverty.
- Some members feel the forums are operating moderately well and that new members would help. "We need to recruit and retain more members to be able to represent more groups."

In relation to what would improve the forums:

- More male members.
- Younger members.
- New members to replace forum members who have been there a long while.
- The Forums could be more visible to the wider public.

OBSERVATIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

- An approach to capacity building that is enjoyable and fun is effective.
- Succession is an issue for groups and also Forums. Group members are getting older and there are issues with a lack of younger new members joining.
- Some Forum members have said their Forum could be stronger so a needs analysis of the Forums would be beneficial.

CONCLUSIONS

Engage with Age is achieving its aim to strengthen communities and neighbourhoods by supporting and empowering older people's groups and forums. It is largely achieving the aim that Groups and Forums are sustainable and strong, though ongoing work is needed on recruiting new and younger participants, particularly men, and some work is required to strengthen some Forums.

Strategic Aim 4

To empower older people so they can shape matters that affect their lives.



Activities supporting this aim vary and include: meetings with decision makers, contributing to consultations, campaigning, interviews on radio and television, and engaging with elected representatives. Issues addressed include consultation on health matters, campaigning to save the 60+ SmartPass, responses to Department of Health proposals, written responses to the Draft Programme for Government, and interviews on television/ radio about changes to the winter fuel allowance.

This strategic aim is difficult to evaluate. It is possible to measure the range of activities that promotes this aim and how participants feel about this work. The success of this activity is ultimately dependent on the actions of third-party organisations beyond the control of Engage with Age.

Outcome: Older people have been listened to and have shaped decisions.

Indicator: Levels of engagement

- 80 articles published by/ about older people
- Exhibitions and publications – 30k+ audience
- 48+ consultations (G6, Forums, EWA)
- Belfast Trust Directory Older People's Services
- Healthy Ageing Research Group/ Strategic Partnership, City Council and NI Assembly and more
- 60+ SmartPass campaign



- Significant written responses to a range of issues including Draft Programme for Government, 60+ SmartPass campaign, Older People's Parliament speeches about Health, Transport, IT, Poverty.

Indicator: Tangible changes are apparent

The pervading view from consultees is that older people are able to influence lower level decision making, but they question if decision makers at Stormont pay any attention or listen to them on significant issues.

Examples of lower level successes:

- Engagement in strategic planning with Belfast City Council
- Decision makers routinely reaching out to EWA Forums and G6 for feedback on plans and initiatives.
- Engagement in health forums with Belfast City Council and Belfast Trust
- Improvements in information for older people within Belfast Health and Social Care Trust
- Improved engagement with PSNI community teams.

Examples of higher level successes:

- Contribution to the 60+ SmartPass Consultation, with G6 meeting civil servants, responding to consultations, £100 payment to compensate for introduction of means testing of Winter Fuel Allowance.

Examples of being unable to influence services:

- Failure to see any changes with transport provision
- Challenges for older people accessing health care, particularly GP appointments and experience at emergency Departments.

Indicator: Older people tell us of improved engagement with decision makers

13 members of forums were interviewed and the representative experience is that engagement has improved in recent years but the results are minimal on higher level changes to matters affecting older people.

A representative sample of views includes the following:

- "Most of the activity works well. The decision makers come across as interested and a lot of the topics are things that come up on the news."
- "The involvement in 2 Royal Avenue has really helped. The transport meetings have been good."
- "I felt you were able to speak up because you were with a good number of people who you knew were having the same problems."
- "In a small way I think we have been able to influence decisions, yes I suppose."
- "The bus pass protest was fantastic."
- "I think the G6 is phenomenal, the representation there, I think they do hit the mark. The booklet [Belfast Trust Older People's Booklet] is fantastic. I know people use that widely."
- "We have a very good relationship with the Belfast Trust and have produced that booklet that has just come out. We contributed quite a lot to that. Editing sessions and they took on board a great deal of our views. So that was a success for G6."
- "I am convinced that we did influence the Stormont regime to pay us £100 [to compensate for the means testing of the Winter Fuel Allowance], yes in that respect. There was a big influence on the 60+ SmartPass, I don't think they dare touch the smart pass. But by a large the impact is minimal."
- "I think we need to keep the pressure on regarding GPs and appointments. And we need to keep an eye on the SmartPass as changes to that could be sneaked in at some stage."
- "I've always been concerned that the elderly part of the population has always fallen behind in priorities, though we've been more vocal."
- "I would not honestly say we have influenced big decisions, but what we have done is raised the profile of both the forum and G6 so that decision makers are getting to be more aware of these groups. That will probably influence decisions in the future, so we're heading in that direction but we just aren't there yet."



OBSERVATIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

- Through EWA's work, older people undertake a significant level of engagement.
- Many decision makers consider the forums and groups that EWA supports as important people to consult.
- There are a number of effective partnerships that promote good collaboration with older people, in particular with Belfast City Council and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.
- Older people have been able to contribute significantly to wider scale campaigns such as the 60+ SmartPass and Winter Fuel Allowance. EWA and some of the older people it supports are contacted directly by journalists and broadcasters, so EWA's reputation as credible source of opinion is strong.
- Older people feel they are capable of impacting lower level issues such as community policing, council services, bin collections.
- Older people feel there is a limit to their influence on larger strategic issues such as the Programme for Government and health services.
- All parties feel the need for continued ongoing advocacy.

CONCLUSIONS

Engage with Age has had considerable success in empowering older people so they can shape matters that affect their lives, and there is a good level of success in ensuring that Older people have been listened to and have shaped decisions, however, there are limitations on the extent of influence.

Most success is with lower level issues where older people are able to engage directly with the personnel who take decisions. There is less success where older people are distant from or unable to have direct contact with decision makers or very senior managers/ elected representatives.

The older people EWA has engaged with for advocacy are very positive about EWA's support. Older People also highlight there is a need for EWA to continue this support on an ongoing basis.

What we have learned and recommendations



- Engage with Age is achieving its mission to empower older people to lead happy, healthy, independent and more connected lives.
- EWA is consistently achieving change within communities of older people and achieving outcomes of improved wellbeing.
- A key recurring feature is the friendliness of staff and activities. It is a core characteristic of EWA, and a core approach from staff members. Staff members should be commended and encouraged to continue this approach, and EWA should capitalise on and promote this aspect of its work.
- Though almost 1/3 of participants surveyed were attending an EWA event for the first time, there is scope to target more new attenders. EWA should seek to deploy its resources to new communities who require support.
- Men are under-represented in participants in EWA activities. A greater emphasis needs to be placed on engaging older men.
- Addressing loneliness is effective. This approach should be developed and could be extended beyond its existing programme.
- Peer-lead approaches and the role of volunteers is deemed important by participants, and the high quality of their work is routinely referred to. This is a critical element of EWA's work and its ethos of empowering older people to have agency over their own lives.
- For its health promotion programmes, EWA often only has engagement with people for two or three occasions. EWA and its funders should have reasonable expectations on the level of change/improvement that will happen for people during its health promotion programmes in East and South Belfast.
- The need for renewed and younger membership in older people's groups and Forums is a recurring theme. Succession planning and recruitment should be a priority in future years.
- A needs analysis of Forums should take place to identify areas for strengthening the Forums and concentrating resources.
- It appears that there will always be a need to support older people promoting their views and having their voice heard. Ongoing support of advocacy activity and programmes should be continued.
- On a recurring basis, respondents refer to the effort and thoughtfulness of staff members. Feedback highlights attention to detail and the importance of a friendly welcome. This is one of Engage with Age's unique selling points, and should continue to be supported.

Eamon Quinn, April 2025



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