

# Case Study



## Project

Actively Ageing Well Project

## Organisation

Age Concern Northern Ireland

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## About the Organisation

Age Concern Northern Ireland is the only regional age organisation governed by Northern Ireland Trustees who seek to represent the interests of older people. They are committed to reducing poverty and fighting disadvantage, defeating ageism and recognising diversity. They also address social exclusion and promote more effective and responsive public services for older people.

Age Concern Northern Ireland is comprised of 31 Age Concern local groups. Some ten years ago, it began working closely with the Health Promotion Agency to develop programmes and seminars dealing with broad health issues affecting older people.

## Project overview

The Actively Ageing Well project was developed for delivery in six neighbouring local authority areas as a partnership between several of the local agencies. The project supports the development of a one year plan for each area that includes taster sessions reflecting the needs and available facilities in the community. There is also provision for training of leisure centre staff to enable them to address the needs of older people.

The project employs one full time co-ordinator to deliver the objectives across the six local partnerships. Each local authority partnership also had an allocation of £500 to develop activities. Because of the low budget steering groups needed to attract partnership funding or in-kind contributions.

## What was achieved?

Each of the six areas has successfully set up a partnership of local delivery agencies including:

- Older people's groups;
- Leisure management;
- NHS trusts;
- Health promotion; and
- Community Development workers.

These partnerships have presented opportunities for older people to take part in activities in a comfortable environment. Over the last 3 years, 2,476 older people have taken part in activities through the project across the six areas.

## How did the project get people involved?

The local partnerships offer many different ways for people to become part of the project. All partners, apart from leisure management, have formal contact with older people and are able to engage with them in a variety of ways.

One of the main barriers for older people is the lack of suitable activities and facilities. Involving leisure managers is important to break down these barriers.

The project co-ordinator worked in each area to build and support the partnerships. Through this groups had the chance to work together to provide opportunities for older people.

The percentage of men attending has been small (10%) and the activities tend to reflect the wishes of the groups which are female dominated. The project introduced archery, which has a competitive element, and this was more popular with men.



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## What was innovative and what worked well?

The project had one co-ordinator across a wide area and this presented opportunities for sharing good practice between the different partnerships. Regular events, where all six partnerships met up, helped in building a spirit of collaboration.

The project has left a long-term legacy by working in partnership with leisure providers. As part of the project leisure staff were trained and this offers a more sustainable environment for older people to take part in physical activity.

Recent research by the British Heart Foundation suggests an active lifestyle helps maintain independence in later life. The project used the findings from this research to market activities to older people.

## Were there any unexpected outcomes?

The size of the budgets, £500 for each area, was thought to be very small especially for areas like Belfast where there are nine different leisure centres to work across. However, even though this was thought to be a barrier at first, it actually turned into one of the strengths of the programme. The lack of resources acted as a catalyst for further investment, either in cash or in kind, from other partners. This also helped to establish stronger buy-in.

One area had great difficulty in getting buy in from the senior management of leisure services. However following early successes in the project they were able to change this and the area now has one of the strongest partnerships.

## The future...

The project has become embedded in each of the six areas both as a programme of activities and at a more strategic level. After the project co-ordinator has left each of the partnerships will continue to operate and support each other on the two main objectives of this programme: increasing opportunities for participating; and changing the perceptions of local service providers to the needs of older people.

The project beneficiaries certainly feel that the project should continue in some form with some of them even becoming involved in steering groups to engage in the decision making process.

## Lessons from the project

There are many key lessons to take from the Actively Ageing Well programme about engaging older people in regular physical activity and changing perceptions of people about their needs.

- Trying to impact on two distinct targets of increasing participation and changing perceptions can lead to the focus of the project being lost and progress stalled.
- Larger areas like Belfast need to be considered independently of surrounding areas when looking at project funding and scale, due to the large area and dense population.
- Low levels of available resource encouraged partners to take real ownership of the programme, fund it themselves and lever in funding from other sources.
- Using the term 'Older People' can be off-putting for some potential beneficiaries, especially ones at the younger end of the age scale.
- Take time to engage with potential participants. Find out what they want and what barriers they face.
- Include working with older people as part of the education and training of leisure staff, this is not a core element at present.
- The project could have delivered higher numbers if there had been more resources available.