

Connections for health

A report on the social capital impact of the
Actively Ageing Well initiative on community
and older people's health



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Pat McGinn of PMG Consulting Ltd was commissioned to carry out the research on behalf of Age Concern Northern Ireland (ACNI) and the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPA). This was carried out with representatives from community and older people's organisations participating in the Actively Ageing Well initiative. A range of research tools was used which included a questionnaire, discussions with staff, workshop briefings and focus groups.

The outcomes of the research were presented at a conference entitled Connections for Health.

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Introduction

Social capital as a concept has gained considerable currency in Northern Ireland in the recent past. Social capital is essentially about people trusting people. How connected do people feel to others in their lives? Can they ask a neighbour to help? Are they members of any clubs? Do they volunteer as an activity leader or committee member? Does their club meet up with other clubs? Does their club participate in society by nominating members to voluntary and public bodies? Does their club make its views on policy known to the relevant authorities?

It also examines how engaged people are within communities, how extensively groups share the knowledge and resources of other networks, and how connected they are to people and organisations with decision making power.

It is these types of connections which, according to social capital research, are likely to contribute to longer life, to improved community relations and to benefits for the economy.

Age Concern Northern Ireland (ACNI) in partnership with the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPA) have produced this report on research that reviewed a community development initiative, Actively Ageing Well and assessed the extent to which it contributes to social capital within and between communities.

The Actively Ageing Well initiative was developed by ACNI and HPA and achieved Big Lottery funding for a five year period from 2002. It provides a range of training, activity programmes and networking events that have been designed to promote and develop opportunities for older people to increase the range and amount of physical activity that they undertake.

The Department of Social Development (DSD) through Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) has developed new outcome indicators as a means to test the impact of community development programmes on social capital.

ACNI and HPA commissioned research in which these new indicators were applied to the Actively Ageing Well initiative. It looked at how effective they were in assessing social capital changes, and also how comprehensible and relevant they were to the community and older people's organisations involved.

The results of the application were presented at a conference entitled Connections for Health organised by both Age Concern Northern Ireland and the Health Promotion Agency. This provided an opportunity to increase awareness of social capital, explore the use of social capital indicators, analyse the relevance of social capital to community and voluntary groups and make the link between social capital, health and wellbeing.

The research has identified clear social capital gains within and between communities – showing older people better networked, better informed and better skilled to make effective connections and positive change. The research also highlighted the need for social capital indicators to be included at the planning stage of programmes – and that funding should be available within community development programmes specifically for the expansion of social capital rather than seeing it as something to be measured after the completion of the programme.

Interestingly, and maybe obviously, many of the people questioned found it hard to identify exactly which element of their involvement with Actively Ageing Well, their own clubs or other aspects of their lives, had been responsible for their increased social capital.

It is clear that there are substantial positive social capital changes that can be created and nurtured through high quality, focused community development initiatives.

The challenge facing government, voluntary, community and older people's organisations, health and social care providers and wider society is how and to what extent investment is made in the development of social capital.

Background

This research assessed the extent of changes in social capital within and between the 60 community and older people's groups across Northern Ireland involved in Actively Ageing Well.

Actively Ageing Well

The Actively Ageing Well initiative was developed by ACNI and HPA to promote and develop opportunities for older people to become more physically active within their communities. This was primarily at a practical level, through the promotion and development of physical activity programmes, training in relation to physical activity leadership by older people themselves, inter community physical activity events and work with policy makers as well as with providers of sports and leisure industries to make physical activity more accessible for older people.

Actively Ageing Well also supports the development of local community and older people's organisations through the provision of quality assurance training and development that supports the groups to develop their confidence and skills at running effective organisations. This development takes into account key principles of risk assessment, sound financial management practices, support with funding applications, policies and procedures and the importance of ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their work.

This approach supports the long-term sustainability and empowerment of community and older people's organisations through the joint benefits of:

- individuals becoming more physically active;
- empowering the organisations to have the skills and confidence to continue to function;
- where possible sustaining physical activities and group commitment in an ever challenging environment.

Active ageing

Active ageing is relevant to a range of public policy issues, including:

- ageing in an inclusive society;

- physical health and emotional wellbeing among older people (specifically the role of physical activity in achieving this);
- older people living longer, more independent lives;
- the safety of older people in the community;
- empowerment of older people through life long learning;
- targeting social need through promoting social inclusion;
- the equality agenda.

If older people remain active, they help themselves to avoid ill health and instead become assets for their community as and when they participate in civic life.¹

Social capital

Social capital is a concept which maintains that the health of a community can be measured by the quantity and quality of a sense of belonging and safety individuals feel in the community, the links the community has with other communities, and the links the community has with government and statutory agencies, in other words the skills, networks and infrastructure that aid in social progress.²

There are a number of levels relating to social capital:

- personal level – webs of cooperative relations between citizens that facilitate resolution of collective action problems;³
- neighbourhood level – mutual trust and willingness to intervene for the common good;⁴
- regional level – features of social organisation such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit;⁵

- state level – norms and networks that link citizens to one another and that enable them to pursue their common objectives more efficiently;⁶
- general level – networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups.⁷
- **influence** – groups have representation on local and regional public forums at which their interests are articulated;
- **interdependence** – groups recognise the interdependence between their needs and the needs of others.

Social capital indicators

As noted earlier, indicators have been developed by CENI for the Department of Social Development to measure and test social capital outcomes from social development programmes.

Social capital as it relates specifically to the community and older people's groups in the Actively Ageing Well initiative was analysed using the elements of each of the three social capital dimensions listed below with their outcomes:

Bonding capital

- **empowerment** – groups have confidence, skills and leadership capacity;
- **infrastructure** – groups participate in organisations and projects which are representative and inclusive;
- **connectedness** – groups are well connected with their immediate community by trusting, sharing and working towards shared goals.

Bridging capital

- **engagement** – groups engage with other communities and sectors by participating in relationships and networks;
- **accessibility** – groups have values and participate in structures and processes that make their community accessible to outside communities and sectors;
- **innovation** – groups are open to new ideas and solutions facilitating their community to adapt to change.

Linking capital

- **resources** – groups have access to people and institutions with power and resources outside their immediate community;

Methodology

The social capital outcome indicators (mentioned opposite) were applied to the Actively Ageing Well initiative. The research was carried out by Pat McGinn of PMG Consulting from February to May 2004.

- A telephone survey questionnaire was carried out with representatives from the 60 community and older people's groups involved in the Actively Ageing Well initiative. This provided sufficient relevant information to assess social capital changes.
- Workshops were held with ACNI staff and representatives from participating groups on particular elements of the research.
- Focus groups were undertaken by the researcher with four community and older people's organisations participating in the Actively Ageing Well initiative.
- An analysis of the material collected was presented for discussion at the Connections for Health conference in Belfast in June 2004 and forms the basis of this report.

Results

The research provided analysis of the trends and changes in social capital that could be identified with the groups in the Actively Ageing Well initiative. Changes in social capital are part of an ongoing process of increasing connectivity within and between people, groups and wider society.

Overall findings

All of the groups reported increased levels of confidence and skills in a wide range of practical activities including the involvement of older people in the design and delivery of programmes, activity leadership in community group management, liaising with service providers and other agencies.

Two thirds of the groups indicated their increased confidence in running events and improved contact with other groups.

Results from the focus groups and the telephone questionnaire highlighted the importance of the participating community and older people's groups in the local and regional community infrastructure.

"I would have been in my nightie, or in bed if it wasn't for this."

Participation was a highlight for this member

The majority of participating community and older people's groups identified that their increased confidence, skills and networks was a direct result of the services and programmes delivered through Actively Ageing Well.

The majority of the participating community and older people's groups described great personal satisfaction and positive community change as a result of their involvement with the Actively Ageing Well initiative.

"Since becoming involved in Actively Ageing Well, I am more outgoing, I was a total stranger around here and it has re-established me.... It has really made me strong."

Group strength changed this member

Connectedness

The Actively Ageing Well initiative positively impacted on the connectedness of groups through:

- enhanced skills in management of community and older people's groups resulting in better skilled volunteers and more inclusive groups;
- increased levels of responsibility undertaken by skilled volunteers;
- the attraction of a wider range of older people to all levels within the groups – as participants in activity programmes, as committee members, activity leaders and activity programme organisers.

"All the girls came to visit me in the hospital...I've made new friends, meeting strangers, I have gained more confidence... I'm more willing to face things."

This group member is well connected with their community

Engagement

Participating community and older people's groups identified that they also had a direct working involvement with 97 other groups or organisations.

Involvement with other groups and organisations increased for 87% of the groups since they became involved with Actively Ageing Well. Twenty seven percent of this increase was with older people's groups while engagement with groups focusing on health and wellbeing accounted for 23%. Many of the groups which focused on health and wellbeing were local exercise or sports providers.

"I got out of the way of mixing...I joined when she (another member) called out to the house...Before I started coming, I found it hard to keep a conversation going, every week I came, it became better. I've formed good friendships [and] I'd tell her things I wouldn't tell others.... It's about showing people who stay in the house how to enjoy themselves."

This member enjoyed getting involved

Accessibility

Among the participating groups, 83% indicated an interest in knowing more about other community-based organisations in their local areas.

Also, since starting to work with the Actively Ageing Well initiative, 76% reported increased group membership, by a total of 843 members, an average of 32 members per group.

The reasons underlying this significant growth in numbers included:

- existing members actively encouraging others to join, primarily through word of mouth;
- creation of new, exciting, attractive opportunities for involvement, so that the range of activities delivered through the group was widened;
- opportunities for training and supporting volunteers;
- confidence in the quality of the programmes delivered;
- groups being more open to new members.

"We're going out with people now all the time... you're chatting to all of them... and meeting up with people you went to school with before. You feel you are socialising more."

This member enjoyed new opportunities for involvement

Innovation

As a result of the training, programme development, networking and organisational support taken up through the Actively Ageing Well initiative, community and older people's groups stated that they could develop safe, risk-managed programmes of physical activity, and that they would not previously have had the capacity to do this.

The keys to this increased innovation were stated as being:

- application of risk management approaches;

- greater understanding of the health benefits of physical activity;
- affirmation of the group members' own abilities to manage their groups including management committee functions, programme development, evaluation, funding applications and needs assessment.

"You know how to run things when you come back. Shows you about leadership... things you wouldn't have known... [such as] now, we take everybody into consideration."

Leadership skills were developed by one group member

Resources

Resources provided through the Actively Ageing Well initiative have proved to be key to the capacity of the participating community and older people's groups to increase their social capital.

- Support from Actively Ageing Well staff was named by 94% of groups as a useful and valuable additional resource to the group.
- The benefit of training resources that Actively Ageing Well provides was cited by 90% of groups.
- Support with providing and accessing physical activity tutors through Actively Ageing Well was highlighted as beneficial by 88% of groups.
- Additional funding support provided through Actively Ageing Well was a highlight for 87% of the groups surveyed.
- Access to resources overall had increased through their involvement with Actively Ageing Well, according to 88% of the groups.

The social capital impact of Actively Ageing Well

The positive impact of the Actively Ageing Well initiative on social capital changes highlights the effectiveness of a focused regional community development initiative in developing and reinforcing group confidence, skills, networking and programme development.

This regional programme was supplemented in some areas with local support workers. Local development staff have proved of particular importance for community and older people's groups in the earlier stages of formation where deeper levels of support and confidence building are required.

The confidence of groups is pivotal for the functioning of the consortium infrastructure supported by the initiative in which members represent their groups across a geographic area and have the opportunity to contribute to the design and delivery of programmes.

The initiative also impacts significantly on strengthening the connections between the groups and statutory agencies. This 'connectivity' is critical to increased involvement by the groups in influencing policy and practice. There is evidence that involvement in the Actively Ageing Well initiative is a critical success factor for many groups in their ability to develop the skills and confidence to challenge local public opinion and lobby politicians and health and social services providers on issues relevant to ageing.

In addition to facilitating community and older people's groups to develop confidence, make connections and build networking relationships with others, the initiative contributes to the development of the capacity of community and older people's groups to engage in relevant structures at local level, (neighbourhood, community), sub regional (health and social service trust area level) and at regional levels.

In order for this involvement to effect real change to the advantage of older people, statutory, voluntary and community agencies must respect and value the voluntary contribution of older people and provide the training support and information required for them to be fully effective.

The research showed clear evidence of the greater confidence and skills of groups to carry out activities that are central to the community development process, encouraging people to discover their resources and possibilities in order to work for positive change in their communities.

The initiative generates considerable enthusiasm among the groups involved and there is evidence of substantive bonding between groups and individuals which also increases the capacity and willingness of group members to accept leadership roles.

Actively Ageing Well supports personal development and increases the skills and knowledge that participating older people are able to contribute. It also increased personal confidence and created structures of opportunity for the older people to apply this confidence.

The groups were also better able to involve themselves in work concerned with health and wellbeing, engaging variously with community, statutory, local partnership and cross-border actions.

Participation in the initiative increased accessibility for the community and older people's groups through encouraging others to join and therefore widened the range of options that are open to members.

The contribution of quality assurance and risk management support helped groups to confidently extend the range of activities they deliver.

Progress has been made at a political level with locally based community and older people's groups successfully putting active ageing further up the agenda with local government.

The value of being part of a regional initiative that is managed by credible organisations with expertise in health, community development and ageing was valued by the community and older people's groups involved – increasing connections and networks across sectors and across Northern Ireland.

Application of social capital indicators - learning points

Arising from the application of the social capital indicators with the groups participating in the Actively Ageing Well initiative, the following observations are made about their use with other community development and health programmes:

- Social capital indicators proved valuable in

measuring outcomes which are often observed in community development and health programmes, but have not been effectively measured to date.

- Social capital indicators could usefully be used in the design of programmes from the outset in order to allow for increased clarity in anticipated outcomes.
- There was some confusion by respondents in this research about exactly how they could assess the precise intervention that had produced the identified change.
- Social capital indicators should be supplemented with additional qualitative and quantitative indicators to ensure a comprehensive, accessible method of assessment for funders and stakeholders.
- Independent research that tests the indicators with a wide range of voluntary and statutory organisations should be carried out before their use is fully implemented by funders.
- An agreed process should be developed for the setting of social capital baselines.
- The indicators and terms used were often perceived as academic and unwieldy by community and older people's groups involved in the Actively Ageing Well initiative. There is the need for the use of language that is relevant and comprehensible to those outside the specialised research field of social capital.
- Training and support should be made available to the voluntary and community sector (and to other stakeholders involved in partnerships with them) to ensure that knowledge of social capital and its measurement are widely understood, as there was general agreement from conference participants that this is a useful concept.

Conclusion

The 60 community and older people's groups have gained increased social capital of all types as a result of their involvement with the Actively Ageing Well initiative.

The concept of social capital usefully captures much of the impact of the services and opportunities provided through Actively Ageing Well.

The initiative successfully provides practical learning opportunities for the older people's groups on health and safety, risk assessment, physical activity and health and wellbeing issues. Of equal importance is the knowledge gained in working with committees, sharing information with other organisations and in liaison with statutory bodies that the initiative facilitates.

The social capital measurement indicators that were applied to the Actively Ageing Well initiative are a useful tool in identifying the information required to analyse social capital changes. The indicators, however:

- need to be more widely tested to ensure that they are relevant and accessible to all the initiatives that they would be used to evaluate;
- should not be seen as a panacea. They are most useful as part of a wider approach to measuring programme effectiveness and social change.

Funding bodies should recognise the value of developing social capital and consider making funding available specifically to increase it.

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