

LinkAge Plus: Benefits for older people

By Guy Daly

This report sets out the interim findings in relation to the benefits for older people of the LinkAge Plus (LAP) programme. It is the second themed report based on the national evaluation of LAP. The first themed report presented interim findings in relation to information and access under the LAP programme. The third report deals with the benefits of the LAP approach for capacity building.

LAP has provided benefits for older people in terms of: social benefits, safety, physical and mental health, education and lifelong learning, leisure, employment, welfare entitlements, and access to transport.

Benefits for older people

Social benefits: LAP is addressing issues of social exclusion and discrimination experienced by older people. Various specific initiatives have been developed by the eight LAP pilot sites to promote social inclusion and social benefits more generally via 'upstream' activities which have been developed, that help to combat older people's social exclusion. This is being done by integrating services and by developing universal services that offer 'that little bit of help' to older people who might otherwise face social isolation from their communities. Examples referred to in the report include Tower Hamlets' network centres, Lancaster's Care Navigator project and Volunteering Bureau, Gloucestershire's Village Agents and Gateshead's Timebank. These are just a few of the examples of LAP pilot site activities that are promoting and supporting older people's social inclusion.

Safety: LAP is increasing older people's sense of safety and security in a variety of ways. This includes initiatives related to combating crime

and the fear of crime, having the support that enables older people to continue to live in their own homes, and having measures in place to ensure older people can live safely in their own homes. Specific examples presented in the report include fire safety and prevention (in Gateshead, Gloucestershire, Nottinghamshire and Salford), general safety and home security (Gateshead's Safety Works Centre), home adaptations (Nottingham's Preventative Adaptation Scheme and Handy Person's Scheme), help to continue living at home such as gardening (Nottingham's Golden Gardening Scheme) and 'odd jobs', and help with making choices over housing options (including Salford's Housing Options).

Physical health: Inactivity and isolation accelerate physical and psychological decline towards premature, preventable ill-health and dependency. Older people can improve their health and quality of life by being sensible about exercise, diet and lifestyle. In addition, an increase in preventive measures, including low-level support, reduces the numbers of older people entering hospital as an emergency. LAP is refocusing resources on preventative low-level activities. LAP pilots have developed physical activity schemes (walks, Tai Chi, etc.). LAP pilots have also developed falls prevention initiatives. In addition, LAP activities are focusing on women and older people from minority ethnic groups in accessing physical activity sessions, for example yoga classes, women-only swimming sessions and sessions at fitness centres. Examples presented in the report include Gateshead's Health and Well-being, Nottinghamshire's Activity Friends, Salford's Healthy Hips and Hearts, Tower Hamlets' activity and exercise sessions in their

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network centres as well as Gateshead, Salford and Tower Hamlets' falls prevention initiatives.

Mental health: The Government recognises the need to support older people's mental health as much as their physical well-being. The LAP initiatives that have been developed to combat social exclusion also impact on older people's mental health. In addition, a number of LAP projects have promoted older people's mental health directly. These include outreach and mentoring services as well as befriending and volunteering activities such as Devon's outreach/mentoring developments, Leeds' Social Isolation Pack and Tower Hamlets' Outreach work including its Neighbours in Poplar Men's Group.

Education and lifelong learning: The Government recognises that opportunities for leisure, learning and volunteering are vitally important for older people but that many older people do not participate in leisure or learning opportunities. In response, LAP pilots have promoted educational activities that develop older people's knowledge and skills. Various LAP pilots have either provided or supported educational and lifelong learning activities. These have included sessions related to health and safety, Lancaster's Senior Learner's programme, Nottingham's schemes for ICT skills development, as well as Salford's creative arts and Tower Hamlets' local history initiatives.

Leisure: LAP pilots have also promoted leisure activities and opportunities. Gardening activities and support have been developed in Devon, Gateshead and Nottinghamshire amongst others. Tower Hamlets and Leeds have established network centres which have facilitated a variety of leisure activities. Gateshead, Gloucestershire and Tower Hamlets have developed or supported Tai Chi classes. Other leisure opportunities have included arts activities and even inter-generational roller skating in Gloucestershire.

Employment: A significant policy drive from the Government is to increase the opportunities

for older people to re-enter employment or to remain in work as they grow older. LAP is part of the ambition to improve and increase older people's employment opportunities. Examples of the occupational benefits of LAP for older people include Gateshead's Volunteers' Timebank, Lancaster's employment bureau and Tower Hamlets' outreach workers' employment advice centres.

Welfare entitlements: Pensioner poverty has decreased in recent years. Even so, over one in five pensioners in Britain still live below the poverty line, ethnic minority pensioners are more likely to be in low income households than white pensioners; and women's income in retirement remains significantly less than men's. The Government recognises that a decent income is essential in order to support the security, independence and opportunities of older people in retirement. A key aspect of LAP has, therefore, been to encourage the take up of the welfare benefits to which older people are entitled. Examples of pilot sites that have developed initiatives to facilitate the uptake of benefit entitlements include Devon, Gateshead, Gloucestershire, Nottinghamshire and Tower Hamlets.

Transport: Car ownership declines with increasing age; older women are less likely to have access to a car; and older people, specifically those over State Pension age, are more reliant than younger people on public transport. Older people are considerably more likely to report difficulties accessing local amenities than the rest of the population. A lack of mobility can prevent older people from participating in social activities and lead to low morale, depression and loneliness. LAP pilot sites have, therefore, developed initiatives to assist older people with transport provision, including Gloucestershire's Village Agents and Nottinghamshire's taxi vouchers. However, Nottinghamshire's taxi vouchers scheme has been withdrawn due to cost considerations.

Providing that 'little bit of help': LAP pilots are providing that 'little bit of help' to older people in

their areas in order to promote their well-being and independence and to avoid them needing more intensive interventions and support. LAP is developing 'upstream'/'preventative' services and innovative practices that promote the well-being of older people in relation to social inclusion, safety and security, physical and mental health, learning, leisure, work and volunteering, finances and transportation. LAP 'upstream' support focuses on all older people's well-being rather than a minority of older people's need for intensive support. As such, LAP initiatives are in the main concentrated on the general older population, as one would expect, and those at low or moderate risk. Therefore, notwithstanding that some LAP activities also focus on older people in substantial risk, LAP is indeed focusing on upstream, preventative, well-being promoting activities.

Impacts of Linkage Plus

LAP activities have promoted older people's independence. LAP has also developed partnership working between agencies and sectors. This has resulted in agencies working together and linking up existing and new provision so that older people are able to access services through single access points. LAP activities have focused on promoting older people's well-being and preventing older people slipping into substantial risk situations. LAP pilots have developed a number of small scale initiatives welcomed by older people. These developments are filling a void by meeting needs that previously statutory services would have been expected to meet. In addition, LAP has developed new service provision, or bespoke services, to meet particular older people's needs.

There are clear examples of partnership working between agencies and sectors in the development of LAP activities. Outreach workers in Devon and Tower Hamlets, first contact workers in Nottingham, Village Agents in Gloucestershire, are all working to identify older people who require support and then

signposting or referring the older person on to the appropriate service. Fire Prevention services are being integrated with this voluntary activity. Similarly, volunteers have been trained in Salford to run exercise sessions and the local authority is also working with private residential homes in installing exercise equipment in these homes. Leeds' Social Isolation Pack is another example of an attempt to integrate service provision.

Many of the LAP pilot activities have been focused on promoting older people's well-being and preventing older people slipping into substantial risk situations. LAP pilots have initiated a number of activities that have promoted older people's well-being in terms of both their physical health – through physical activity initiatives, falls prevention work, and outreach work – and their mental health – again, through outreach work and more generally through initiatives that promote social inclusion.

LAP pilots have developed a number of small scale initiatives that older people have most welcomed. Significant examples are probably those sort of interventions that make up the 'little bit of help' such as help with gardening, small household jobs, aids and adaptations, as well as leisure and educational sessions that provide physical or mental stimulation, and opportunities to volunteer in one's community. These developments are frequently filling a void by meeting needs that previously statutory services (social services, adult education and public transport, for example) would have been expected to meet – for example, domestic tasks and educational and leisure activities. In addition, examples of new service provision, or bespoke services to meet particular older people's needs – such as minority ethnic groups and gender specific provision – are being developed, as is seen from the examples in Tower Hamlets, Leeds and Gloucestershire.

Conclusions

LAP is providing that 'little bit of extra help' vital for promoting older people's well-being. LAP pilot sites have developed initiatives that prevent older people's social exclusion, that allow older people to feel safer and more secure, that promote their physical and mental health (such as exercise classes and educational and leisure activities), that support them to remain living at home (such as help with domestic tasks and gardening), that facilitate their re-engagement in employment where appropriate, that ensure they are receiving all their welfare entitlements, and that ensure that they have access to transport in order to undertake their daily tasks. LAP pilot sites have developed services that have filled a gap in order to ensure that older people get a sure start to later life. This is very much in line with the Wanless Review's observation that older people stress that it is the small things that make the difference and keep them out of hospital, delay deterioration and delay institutionalisation.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 471 5. Research Report 554. January 2009).

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