

The LinkAge Plus national evaluation: End of project report

By Howard Davis and Katrina Ritters

LinkAge Plus aimed to improve the wellbeing of older people through stronger partnership working between local government and the voluntary and community sectors, better information and access to services, and putting older people at the forefront of service design and delivery.

Each of the pilot areas implemented the LinkAge Plus approach in different ways, tailored to the local needs of older people. The final report from the national evaluation of LinkAge Plus brings together key findings from across the pilots.

Key findings

- The pilot areas have consistently demonstrated strong benefits for older people through improved access and relevant, tailored services that are popular with local people.
- There is a strong business case for the LinkAge Plus approach, built around efficiencies from an holistic approach to service delivery and cost effective services facilitated.
- The value of LinkAge Plus to local authorities has meant that the majority of pilot authorities have found ongoing funding to support LinkAge Plus initiatives beyond the pilot period.

Experience from the pilots suggests, in particular, that:

- Access to a wide range of services has been made easier as a result of the LinkAge Plus pilot work. Pilots have worked to establish single or multiple access gateways to a range of services going beyond the initial enquiry or contact. For example, Nottinghamshire's First Contact scheme enabled effective cross-referrals, with an average of 2.2 additional referrals for each contact.

- The innovative approaches to outreach trialled in several pilot areas, such as Devon's deep outreach and community mentoring work, have demonstrated the significant and sometimes life changing benefits that can arise from drawing older people into a wider social network.
- LinkAge Plus has helped facilitate 'that little bit of help', small and often preventative interventions which enable older people to retain choice, control and dignity in their lives. Befriending schemes, exercise classes, help with small aids and adaptations and increased social networking have all been welcomed by older people.
- Pilot authorities have successfully worked to involve older people in the design, development and delivery of services through local groups and forums. For example, in Salford, the Older People's Forum was involved in formal scrutiny reviews in leisure, homecare and other services for the city council.
- Improved partnership working was a particular benefit cited by organisations involved in LinkAge Plus at a local level. It is already clear that much of this legacy will continue beyond the life of pilot funding, being absorbed into new ways of working, even where the specific pilot projects come to their end.
- The success of LinkAge Plus is also being replicated in other areas. For example, Nottinghamshire's First Contact scheme has attracted national interest and Gloucestershire's Village Agents scheme is also being trialled elsewhere.

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Background

The LinkAge Plus pilots took place in eight areas selected by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to comprise a mixture of settings, for example including urban and rural areas, different populations, and single and two-tier government areas. The pilot areas were: Devon; Gateshead; Gloucestershire; Lancaster; Leeds; Nottinghamshire; Salford and Tower Hamlets. Piloting of a Streamlined Assessment process for Attendance Allowance applications made alongside social care applications took place in a further two areas: Greenwich and Islington. Each pilot area was locally evaluated in addition to the overall national programme evaluation that forms the basis of this report.

Around £10 million was invested by the DWP in the LinkAge Plus piloting over a two-year period. Pilots were given discretion, within a set of principles agreed with the DWP, over the specific nature of the activities they were to fund. The core principles were:

- **Maximise opportunities for efficiency and capacity building.** Pilots were encouraged to look for efficiencies through joint working with partner organisations and improve outputs through capacity building.
- **Better information and access.** A 'no wrong door' approach means that older people have information on, and access to, services from an initial or single point of contact. Signposting or referral processes should ensure all relevant services are made available.
- **Wider access.** Stronger use of outreach and other approaches to enable pilots to identify and engage with isolated older people. Joined-up, flexible, customer contact facilities to meet different needs, including face-to-face, visiting, telephone and electronic media.
- **Engage and consult.** Older people involved in the design, delivery and development of services.
- **Better services.** Services focusing on early intervention and a preventative approach going beyond traditional health and social care functions, encouraging respect and social inclusion for older people.

Summary of research findings

Improved information and access to services

Access to a wide range of services has been made easier as a result of the LinkAge Plus pilot work. LinkAge Plus has helped partners develop strategies to reduce the likelihood of older people facing a 'wrong door' when trying to access local services. In particular, pilots have worked to establish single or multiple access gateways to a range of services going beyond the initial enquiry or contact, including Nottinghamshire's First Contact scheme and Gloucestershire's Village Agents.

Older people in pilot areas are benefiting from services reaching out to them to improve their access and understanding about what is available. At the same time, LinkAge Plus has worked to involve older people in the design, development and delivery of services through local groups and forums. For example, in Salford the Older People's Forum was involved in formal scrutiny reviews in leisure, homecare and other services for the city council.

Services facilitated in LinkAge Plus areas range from Salford's Housing Options advice service, to gardening and handyperson services, the fitting of small aids and adaptations such as grab rails, visits from crime prevention officers and the fitting of smoke alarms. In Lancaster, a volunteer and employment bureau is offering help to those over 50s wanting to get back into work, extend their working lives, or simply to develop skills in a supportive environment.

Reducing social isolation and outreach

A key feature of the LinkAge Plus pilots is the way they have engaged older people in activities that help them to develop and sustain social networks. These include initiatives designed to improve physical and mental health (such as Devon's deep outreach and community mentoring work), education and lifelong learning, leisure, employment, welfare entitlements, social benefits and access to transport.

In Tower Hamlets, LinkAge Plus has put resources into developing five existing community-based network centres and using outreach workers to strengthen links between the centres and local older people.

Although people are never forced to join in, LinkAge Plus outreach has demonstrated the significant, and sometimes life changing, benefits that can arise from drawing older people into a wider social network.

Inverting the 'triangle of care'

LinkAge Plus supports the vision around inverting the traditional triangle of care, in which resources are concentrated on those with greatest acute needs. This vision argues for resources to be focused on prevention and universalism, older people as citizens, and extending the objectives behind preventative strategies beyond promoting choice and independence to a more complete sense of empowerment.

Pilots have developed services that have filled the gap at the top of the inverted triangle of care 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 use of this approach has also been followed by the Department of Health in its Putting People First initiative for the transformation of social care.

Preventative focus

LinkAge Plus has facilitated preventative services, which have proved strongly cost effective. One clear example is Tai Chi classes which were run in a number of the pilots and have been shown to have a substantial impact on reducing falls. Another example is the ActivAge projects in Gateshead where 33 local groups were supported with LinkAge Plus funding.

Capacity building and partnership working

An holistic approach to service delivery and improved partnership working has helped local services to be more 'joined up', particularly between the voluntary and community and statutory sectors, resulting in a reduction in duplication and overlap. In Nottinghamshire, the First Contact service enabled a range of partner organisations to make effective cross-referrals, with an average of 2.2 additional referrals for each contact.

The LinkAge Plus pilots have also built capacity in terms of strengthened partnerships, improved skills and understanding, new techniques and processes, and a more people-centred approach to the design and delivery of services. For example, in Leeds around £230,000 was invested in capacity building measures such as training, support groups and small grants to voluntary organisations.

Improved partnership working was a particular benefit cited by organisations involved in LinkAge Plus at local level. Much of this legacy will continue beyond the life of pilot funding, being absorbed into new ways of working, even where the specific pilot projects come to their end.

The business case for LinkAge Plus

Even though many of the benefits of the LinkAge Plus approach are hard to quantify, there is a strong business case – built around efficiencies from an holistic approach to service delivery, and the services facilitated through the LinkAge Plus approach.

The business case uses data from a number of pilots as well as wider evaluation evidence to detail the way in which a two year investment in holistic service delivery and the services facilitated could deliver benefits to the individual and the taxpayer over the following five years.

The key findings are:

- an holistic approach to service delivery requires some up-front investment over the two year pilot period but quickly begins to deliver net savings, breaking even in the first year after the investment period;
- the net present value of savings up to the end of the five year period following the investment is £1.80 per £1 invested. This is likely to be higher over a longer period;
- LinkAge Plus can facilitate services that are cost effective in their own right, including fire and crime prevention, and reduced falls associated with balance classes and home adaptations;
- combining the costs and benefits of these services in LinkAge Plus areas with the holistic approach to service delivery increases the net present value to £2.65 per £1 invested;
- in addition to taxpayer savings, there are benefits to older people monetised at £1.40 per £1 invested.

Sustainability

All LinkAge Plus pilots have secured ongoing funding for the majority of their pilot activities. For example, in Tower Hamlets a partnership of the local authority and PCT will provide joint funding of £1.1 million over two years to continue LinkAge Plus work. In Gloucestershire, the work of Village Agents is being extended and expanded into new areas, following pilot activity. In Nottinghamshire, a large proportion of LinkAge Plus work will continue beyond pilot funding. In Salford, £0.9 million from Social Care Reform Grant is being used to sustain eight of the LinkAge Plus projects. In Devon the county council has funded the Senior Council for Devon for the next three years.

That so many of the approaches and services developed under LinkAge Plus have secured ongoing funding is testimony to their success. Key to this has been the ability of pilots to work with the grain of local provision and national policy, often supplementing and enhancing existing areas of innovation and excellence.

Acknowledgements

The LinkAge Plus National Evaluation Team comprises – Howard Davis (who has led the evaluation), Katrina Ritters, Ian Blair, Anne Green, Clare Batty, John Hilton (the Local Government Centre, Warwick Business School), Peter Watt (Birmingham University) and Guy Daly (Coventry University). Irene Chinnock has provided the team's project support.

This research summary draws, in part, on interview and other material provided by team members, LinkAge Plus pilots, local evaluators and the DWP. Their contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 516 3. Research Report 572. July 2009).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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