



Engage with Age Annual Report 1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023

STRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Engage with Age (EWA) was established as a charity and a company limited by guarantee in November 2000. EWA is a community development organisation with the vision of a society which respects, values and listens to older people.

Engage with Age's mission is to enable older people in Belfast to live happier, healthier and more connected lives.

Engage with Age seeks to enable sustainable benefits for older people and the community. It operates multi-agency partnerships to ensure joined-up and collaborative working. Partnerships are active from a governance level down to operational and daily activities.

Governance and Management

Engage with Age is governed by a Board of Trustees that meets quarterly. Trustees come from a range of older people's and community organisations, older people's forums, as well individuals from the business, public sector and individual older people. The Board is supported by a Finance and Operations Sub-Group that meets six times per year, and a Governance Committee that supports the role and responsibilities of Trustees and Director.

The management of Engage with Age formally reports to the Board and the Finance and Operations Committee and has delegated responsibility for delivering the company's programme of work at an operational level. The staff team is composed of a Director, Operations Manager, and Development Officers that deliver the company's programmes. Engage with Age has sub-contracted to an external accountancy company to undertake its finance administration and engages a number of other service providers.

Objectives and activities

As described in the Articles and Memorandum of Association, Engage with Age's objects ('Objects') are to promote the health, wellbeing, interests and alleviate loneliness, isolation and exclusion of older people living in Northern Ireland (the area of benefit) without distinction of sex, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, caring responsibilities, race, or political, religious, or other opinions by associating together the said inhabitants, local authorities, public agencies and voluntary and other organisations in a common effort to relieve poverty, preserve and protect health, advance education with the object of improving the conditions of life for the said beneficiaries.

Values

Our values guide us in our work and our relationships. They guide our behaviour, our attitudes, the decisions we make and what we expect from one another. Engage with Age values are based on community development principles. We put older people at the centre of all that we do, believing in self-determination and the right to make their own choices.

Our values are: Being older people-led; Empowering older people; Treating everyone with respect; Working closely with other organisations; Carrying out our work to the highest standards, with transparency; Ensuring everyone has the right to take part in stimulating activities and have fun.

We are committed to working in partnership, believing in the strength of the contribution of many agencies, people, and volunteers to make a real difference.

Strategic Planning

Engage with Age is implementing a strategic plan covering the period of April 2020 - March 2023 which reflects the above vision and mission, the methods of working and the objectives of the company. In early 2023 Engage with Age commenced development of a new strategic plan for the 2023-26 period.

Achievements and performance

The April 2022 - March 2023 year was the third year of the Covid-19 Pandemic. While surges in the virus were not as severe as previous years, the impact of the pandemic was still felt in engagement levels and cautiousness from older people. Engage with Age took a proactive stance towards enabling older people to be active within their communities while also being safe.

Year Three of the Engage with Age Strategic Plan 2020-2023

Engage with Age is pleased to report that while Covid-19 impacted on the practicalities of undertaking activities it did not affect the overall achievement of the main aims of its Strategic Plan. This was due mainly to the imagination and creativity of its staff, support of its board, collaborations with partner agencies, and the enthusiasm of the older people EWA worked with.

In August 2022 the company held a barbeque for 60 older people at Inverary Community Centre in East Belfast. Normally this would be unremarkable, but this was the first time in two years that a gathering with that number of people, indoors or outdoors, had been undertaken.

Supporting Older People's Groups and Forums

Surveying just before the reporting period highlighted that two thirds of older people's groups we work with had been adversely affected by Covid-19. This was in the form of reduced attendances and less frequent meetings. Support this year was targeted to encourage groups to gain greater confidence- regroup and grow membership. The Capacity Building Programme continued to work throughout East and South Belfast, achieving nearly double its target level of participation. The South Belfast programme reached out to new communities such as lower Donegall Road, and the East Belfast programme revisited relationships with over 60 groups across East Belfast.

The Older People's Forums EWA supports continued to operate well. The Belfast East Seniors Forum returned to a full schedule of in-person committee and forum meetings. It renewed its committee and grew membership numbers. The South Belfast Lifestyle Forum continued to grow in numbers with routinely well attended meetings sharing information and conveying the needs of communities in the south. The Greater Belfast Seniors Forum (G6) maintained its monthly meetings focusing on its Action Plan. In March 2023 EWA brought all of the Older People's Forums together for an inter-forum meeting, to share experiences and best practice, and to network with each other. This helped identify common needs and aspirations and assist with planning for the future.

Addressing the impact of Isolation and Loneliness on older people

The PAL Project continued to operate. Throughout the year, weekly and fortnightly activities took place, offering a range of book groups, social groups, walks, interest groups and dancing. Opportunities were taken to link with partner agencies for excursions and information sessions. EWA's links with peer agencies strengthened, including organisations such as Age NI and Red Cross, and partnerships such as the Belfast City Council City Wide Group on Isolation, and the NI Assembly All Party Group on Loneliness. Participation numbers grew, and this year saw the welcome return of The Slipped Disco event at the Oh Yeah Centre, Engage with Age's disco for older people.

Telephone befriending was also maintained through this period. Up to 27 volunteer Befrienders regularly telephoned 50 Befriendees. Feedback on the service was unanimously positive. Half of the Befriendees completed surveys and interviews in 2022 and 100% of that number reported positive impacts of the service on their wellbeing and a decrease in feelings of loneliness. One Befriender said: "I have never been on my own before... it was really hard to lose independence... the calls encourage me and I love to hear from my Befriender and I always feel better after the call." Throughout the year Befriending gatherings were held and this helped connect Befriendees to their Befrienders and wider activities.

Promoting good physical and mental health

The EWA health promotion programmes in South and East Belfast all exceeded their targets as set by the Public Health Agency and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

Physical deconditioning was highlighted as an issue for older people, given the reduced levels of movement and travel associated with Covid-19 safety and the need to isolate or stay at home. Physical health was promoted by EWA with a range of exercise sessions, armchair aerobics, and the welcome return of in person Tea Dances, particularly at St. Patrick's Day and throughout South Belfast in March 2023. Mental health was promoted via stress reduction sessions, t'ai chi, and promotion of Public Health programmes. Social engagement at activity sessions was more important than ever, and even by the end of the reporting period we were still meeting older people who had been staying at home in their efforts to stay safe from Covid. There was a significant increase in crafting and creative activities. The Words Alive group in South Belfast continued to meet weekly and then reach out to provide readings to people living in supported housing and nursing homes. In East Belfast new crafting and art sessions took place with a range of groups, many of which were undertaking this type of activity for the first time. Larger scale in person older people's fairs returned this year and EWA brought significant attendance to events in East and South Belfast as well as central events from Age Friendly Belfast. Skills workshop in IT continued and there was high attendance at information sessions on falls prevention and home accident prevention. Over 80 keep warm packs were distributed by EWA to vulnerable older people across South and East Belfast, and EWA worked to promote assistance to cope with the Cost of Living Crisis. Promotion of opportunities for older people and health messages were promoted directly through our East and South Belfast Programmes, through the monthly PAL Gazette to 1,300+ people, and online to audiences in excess of 10,000 throughout the year.

Supporting the voice of older people to influence matters that affect them

The Older People's Forums that EWA supports continued to engage directly with decision and policy makers, with over twenty formal consultations through forums with agencies including PSNI, Consumer Council, Queen's University of Belfast research programmes, Belfast Trust, the GP's Federation for Northern Ireland and more. The Forums were particularly engaged in consultations for the Belfast Age Friendly Plan.

Throughout the year EWA supported older people to attend forums include Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership, NI Assembly All Party Group on Loneliness, and the Belfast City Council All Party Reference Group on Older People. Engage with Age was also very active with dementia friendly campaigns, contributing to the South Belfast and City-Wide dementia campaigns, and co-chairing the Dementia Friendly East Belfast Programme. In summer 2022 the Festival of Windows increased in scale, engaging with 40 people living with dementia from 6 centres. 50 artworks were created and displayed in 50 shop windows belonging to businesses across East Belfast. The artworks were later exhibited at the Skainos Centre as part of Positive Ageing Month. Promoting the voice of people living with dementia was further enhanced through EWA's new Dementia Friendly Artist in Residence programme, which worked with six centres across South and East Belfast, and the ongoing production of the monthly Dementia Friendly What's On Guide. The PAL Gazette continued as a newspaper for older people, with a monthly column on the work of G6 and over 60 articles and submissions by older people.

Developing an evaluation framework

Pressures of time and resources, and the ongoing affect of the Pandemic on how we did our work, meant it was not possible to produce an evaluation framework as envisaged at the start of the strategic plan. Evaluation and reflection on the impact of EWA's work continued in this period, and the company is actively pursuing developing a new method for considering the impact of its work.

Developing the Governance and Operation of Engage with Age

The ongoing business of governing and managing Engage with Age continued successfully throughout the reporting period. Every contract and funding agreement was fulfilled. Finances were managed effectively with income secured from a range of sources, some of which were new. Communications promoting our services increased significantly. The work of the Board of Trustees governing the corporate development of Engage with Age was furthered through the Governance and the Finance and Operations sub-committees, regular board meetings, and ongoing contact with staff. Within this period three new trustees were recruited to Engage with Age.

Summary

The 2022-23 year can be best described as charging ahead out of Covid-19. Staff displayed great resilience and a 'can-do' spirit, while at the same time keeping older people safe.

In this year there were 14,000 attendances/ engagements from older people at Engage with Age activities, plus a further estimated 5,000 attendances at exhibitions and 10,000 online. This is a significant increase on previous years.

By the end of the 2020-23 Strategic Plan, Engage with Age had developed new services, increased its volume of engagement, deepened relationships with participants, navigated the challenges the Pandemic, and maintained a clear focus on delivering improved health and helped make stronger communities. The PAL Project continued to support older people experiencing loneliness, health improvement work progressed throughout South and East Belfast, groups and forums were sustained and grown, and the voice of older people persisted in advocating for the needs of its community.

By March 2023 EWA had started formulating plans for the next strategic plan 2023-26, looking forward to developing and extending the work and impact of EWA. The 2022-23 year closed with significant three-year funding agreements to sustain the PAL Project and capacity building work with older people through to the year 2026.

Having achieved many of its aims in the most difficult of circumstances, Engage with Age is ready to move forward in its renewed mission to empower older people to lead happy, healthy, more connected, and independent lives.