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Does local still matter? An evaluation of the importance of geographical locality for the delivery of remote support for older people in Salford during the Covid-19 pandemic - summary report

Clark, AJ, Kelly, S, Chesterton, L and Ahmed, A

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Authors	Clark, AJ, Kelly, S, Chesterton, L and Ahmed, A
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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on people across the world. In the UK, government and public health guidance to limit the spread of the disease resulted in social distancing and shielding for those most at risk and limited physical and face-to-face contact with family members, friends and colleagues. For some, there was also reduced opportunities for volunteering and the partial suspension of some services and activities that provided to support engagement and interaction. Consequently, it has been reported that older people have been disproportionately affected by both the disease itself, as well as the impacts of steps taken to limit its spread. There has also been a substantial impact on the processes and working practices of individuals and organisations that support older people. In common with the rest of the UK, Age-Friendly Salford moved many of its activities and services to remote delivery, such as online or by telephone, often at speed, and with little time to reflect on the processes and outcomes for providers and those who access services and engage with activities. This summary report outlines the experiences of providing and accessing activities remotely through the Age Friendly Salford network. The work was commissioned by Inspiring Communities Together. It considers two perspectives: those of stakeholders (referred to here as 'providers') involved in running and arranging such activity and older people as intended recipients. The work explored:

- How organisations developed activities relating to the Age-Friendly Salford initiative online.
- Identified good local practice as well as some of the challenges and barriers to providing activity at a distance.
- How older people in Salford experienced seeking help and accessing and participating in online support and engagement activities.
- The opportunities and challenges of continuing to deliver remote support and engagement activities as part of the Age-Friendly Salford initiatives post Covid-19.
- Whether, and how, 'local' matters when providing support and engagement activities for older people in Salford.

Findings and recommendations are based on focus group and interview discussions with 43 staff members and volunteers from 8 stakeholder organisations and 24 older people. Older people self-identified and no lower age-limit was used to determine who constituted being 'older'.

Providers' experiences

Individuals and organisations stepped up to the challenges posed by Covid-19 to transform activities and services initially designed to for face-to-face support and engagement to remote provision. Developing and adapting services at speed, in an unfamiliar and worrying wider context, was daunting but providers described having little option but to get on with the job at hand. In responding to the pandemic, staff and volunteers working at all levels valued being able to develop new services and activities, and the opportunity to think creatively about how to engage with older people. While the benefit of hindsight suggest some things could have been done differently, managers, staff, and volunteers alike rose to the challenge, drawing on and demonstrating skills in adaptability, working at pace, and an ability to reflect on and respond to rapidly changing demand.

Staff had to get used to a new model of working. Not all staff were technologically savvy, so it was about getting used to new systems. It wasn't possible to see each other, so we had to think about how to respond. Adaptation was mandatory, we had to embrace change (provider)

We worked long hours. It was very stressful getting to grips with it all in those first few weeks. In hindsight it was our finest hour but so stressful getting used to new systems at the time (provider)

The infrastructures of many front-line services have been adapted to meet the needs of not only older people but also staff and volunteers. This included developing online training and support. There is a sense that organisations needed to ‘regroup’, recalibrating staff and volunteer roles and adapting collaboration processes with other providers to support both older people, and their own staff and volunteer base. Moving to remote provision was believed to have facilitated stronger connections between organisations, as well as to have encouraged integration across different organisations. The flexibility that working online brings notably helped facilitate greater connectivity between service providers which were previously working separately.

Alongside improved collaboration between services, providers also reported new relationships between individuals in the delivery of activities and support, including older people who came new to remote activities. Reaching out to, and interacting with, those

who had not previously participated in activities people has encouraged a rethink about the meaning of engagement, but also heightened awareness that many other older people have not been able to access remote services and support.

We had no downtime, and it was so intense. The biggest change was the instant loss of [face to face] training. It took a few weeks to work out. In this time, we concentrated on creating and forging relationships with other services. We became more organised, but it is still difficult at times as we all miss the type of connectedness and communication that comes with office working (provider)

Online activities and remotely delivered services work best when using media, technologies, and platforms that older people and providers are familiar with. Introducing too many new or different platforms and apparatus can lead to frustration and risks disengagement. Activities and services worked best when they make use of different, interactive features available on, for example, online platforms. Yet while platforms such as skype and zoom promise the potential to expand service reach and uptake from large audiences, this were not achieved in practice.

Experiences for providers and older people alike bear out the adage ‘quality over quantity’ when it comes to online engagement and provision; a small number of high quality activities may prove more beneficial than a large selection of activities and options that are difficult to promote and operate.

It is a fallacy that older people cannot use tech; if they have support and equipment they can engage. We must build confidence but that’s labour intensive... It’s all about building confidence and getting the word out on that. People are engaging and using it. We are trying to engage past the barriers (provider)

Tailoring communication to individual need highlighted the value of a person-centred, inclusionary approach in this context. Providers often recognised the importance of putting people's individual characteristics, needs and preferences at the heart of their approach. This required a recognition of, and effort to deconstruct, myths about older people’s online engagement. It also took time and requires adequate resourcing if it is to be continued.

Facilitating engagement involved a consistent effort to break down barriers and build a culture of inclusion. Providers worked to foster trust and build strong relationships with service users. This proved fundamental not only for providing practical technological support, but in meeting relational and interactional needs. Developing open and empathetic relationship helped to develop a shared sense of community, promoted belonging, and arguably lessened vulnerability to isolation.

Some older men were very isolated. We made an effort to contact them every day.... One man went from saying ‘I don’t know why you keep calling me’ to ‘I’ve been waiting for you to call’ (provider)

Older people’s experiences

Older people discussed an initial shock and fear about Covid-19 and expressed much concern about the public health recommendation to shield or at least limit contact with all but essential face-to-face activities and services. They continue to manage these feelings, and some remain concerned about isolation. Alongside the risk to physical health from the disease and reduced opportunities for physical exercise, there was a threat to social health and wellbeing caused by uncertainty about the future, worries around illness, and the impact of substantial reduction in opportunities for face-to-face social contact and interaction. In this context, online and remote provision of activities and services has proved essential for those able to access it.

Attending activities and engaging with organisations and services can be a key part of some older people's daily and weekly routines. Alongside the practical help and support, they provide opportunity for interaction and provided 'something to do' during what otherwise could be an uneventful day. When such services were suspended at the beginning of the pandemic the impact was felt as much in terms of a loss of routine as it was withdrawal of social interaction and opportunity to participate. Some older people reported a reduction in confidence and even a reduced sense of belonging. For others, anxiety was heightened by a sense of 'waiting for something to happen' and many were frustrated at a limited access to information locally and nationally, even though behind the scenes it was clear that providers were doing what they could to move services and activities to remote delivery.

When you're sat at home, the first hour is alright but then you start looking at the clock then. And you're thinking 'oh another half hour of this'. It can drag.... you're stuck..., you know, I can make a brew and that to pass time (older person)

In a way it was quite frightening, not knowing what was going to happen. And confusing, not knowing what to do. And the only way of finding out was by watching the news which I didn't want to do (older person)

Older people's uncertainty about the pandemic points to the importance of certainty and stability in everyday life. This includes the opportunity to access services, interact with others, and participate in activities. While a reduction in some services was noted, remote provision enabled some to remain supported. However, and outside of core welfare support, such as the door-to-door shopping service, oftentimes it was not the specific activities or services that were missed, so much as the worry that support might not be there in the way that it once. More than that, it was the opportunity to interact

with others that was missed the most. Accessing and receiving services or engaging in activities provided a sense of connection and belonging as well as, for some people some of the time, a sense of purpose. For those who could engage, moving to online activities in particular enabled them to enhance and enrich their lives amid a time of social distancing. Such individuals described organisations as a vital lifeline during the pandemic. The range of activities provided helped foster social engagement and ensure people could engage in some form of interaction at a time when the risk for isolation is heightened. Online activities provided a renewed structure and routine to daily life and helped provide a focus and sense of purpose and were especially valued in how this helped people navigate heightened and multifaceted experiences of isolation, and fears of becoming isolated.

It's what gets me up in the morning. Without them there's nothing out there. It's a reason to get up. It keeps you going... gives you something to do (older person)

The main benefit for me is that you can remain connected and stay together. I think for me it has been vitally important. I can't imagine what I would have done without them, can't imagine (older person)

Moving to remote delivery happened quickly and relied on staff goodwill to go 'above and beyond', frequently working longer or unsociable hours for limited recognition outside of their organisation. However, there was a potential dissonance between what 'quickly' means for providers and older people, with some worried about what was happening with activities they previously accessed. Those who could, and did, access and engage with remote activities and services report a greater sense of connection and of not having been forgotten. They also felt better able to reach out for help when required. They also report learning new skills, particularly in the use of technologies that they continue to use in other aspects of their lives, including remaining in touch with family and friends in other parts of the country. Many believed that being able to continue to access services and activities has enabled them to maintain a sense of

My digital skills are much better now... I'm learning a bit on the screen and that definitely, which is quite good I feel a bit more, what's the word, moving with the times (older person)

structure and purpose to their days and weeks at a time when they had little scope for that structure to be provided elsewhere.

Does local provision still matter?

Those older people we spoke to firmly believed that who provides activities and services, and where they are based, matters. In part, this is because existing relationships bring a sense of trust and understanding in a time of uncertainty. Crucially though, they

were firmly of the opinion that remote and online services should continue to be provided by people and organisations that they considered had an affinity with or attachment to the City of Salford as this brought the benefits of a shared familiarity to place, its history, and its people. Remote provision by locally based providers also offered a greater sense of connection through a geographical awareness and was reported to enable a greater sense of trust built on locally situated relationships, even if those relationships existed online or over the telephone. Local provision also created a sense of collective action and shared purpose among providers. Many older people saw online engagement as a stop gap or bridge until social distancing could end and face-to-

Most of them, the people running the groups, you already know them... And that makes it easier. Like, they know us, and we know them, and that's what it's all about, isn't it? You need that probably for it to work like it has been, the way it's been going. It's just a bit closer isn't it. We all know about each other, and you know you're not too far apart, don't you? You know you'll see each other again, eventually (older person)

face activities could restart, which meant that knowing those who facilitate such engagement are based in the same city is integral to forming maintaining the type of connections they want with others.

Valuing locally based provision is not about excluding others who might not be considered 'local', nor about refusing to engage with providers that might be based elsewhere or operate nationwide. Rather it is about recognising the value placed on a shared sense of belonging to a particular place (Salford) in a particular context (the pandemic). Knowing that providers understood the city and lived and worked in it brought a familiarity which helped facilitate a sense of trust and 'togetherness' that was perhaps at considerable risk due to the pandemic. The majority of those involved in providing and receiving services and activities also identified with Salford and suggested that this helped create a sense of purpose not just at the present, but also provided some reassurance about the future. Here, there was very much a shared sentiment of needing to connect with people beyond through a screen or over a telephone. For providers and older people alike, knowing that they would be able to interact in-person with other groups members helped maintain a sense of optimism for life beyond Covid-19.

I think it just helps you feel more linked into it, linked into Salford and its people and history and all those things... It's more than chatting in that way, in the groups I mean. It's being part of the community (older person)

The future

Providers hope that a more blended approach to provision can be developed as life moves on from Covid-19. This includes the synchronous delivery of online and face-to-face activities and the use of different mediums and platforms tailored to the demands and aspirations of those who engage. Taking forward a blended approach after the pandemic will require ongoing trialling, evaluation and reflection. It will also need to be designed to ensure older people have some choice in how to engage. It is not enough to merely hope that what worked during the pandemic will work in a post-pandemic world. It will also be important to continue to support those older people who are unable, or who prefer not, to engage remotely. Notably, those who continue to have difficulty leaving their homes would benefit from a continuation of services such as at home shopping and wellbeing telephone calls.

Providers at all levels recognised, and were concerned about, gaps in provision during the pandemic. These include difficulties accessing and engaging with particular groups, such as those with limited or no internet access, or individuals for whom English is not a first language. Older people certainly look forward to the return of face-to-face engagement and are reluctant for activities and services to remain online or operated

I want some of the [online] sessions to carry on. I suppose I would, yes. I think a mixture with face to face though, certainly. The face-to-face thing is the one big thing missing as far as I'm concerned. We couldn't watch too much of the online. Well, maybe it would be useful for say my [evening] meeting. That would be easier, so you don't have to travel in the dark. Not leaving the house at night, kind of thing (older person)

remotely in the longer term. At the time of reporting the UK is undergoing a phased re-opening. This has coincided with the sense of gratitude and relief at being able to access online and remote activities is being superseded by a sense of wariness and boredom with remote delivery.

Moving to online provision reflects wider trends that have seen the rise of more networked society that depend less on geographical proximity or localness as a primary source of relationships, belonging and interaction, and more on bonds based around shared interest. While improvements in technology have increased the depth and quantity of some networks, they have not eradicated the need for face-to-face context nor nurtured meaningful contact. Indeed, the loss of these during the pandemic

They've bridged a gap the zooms but it's the no face to face, you know you're sat there staring, watching people. You're all just sat there...you're still alone aren't you. Yeah, there's just not much advantage whatsoever for me. It's just not the same (older person)

has served to reinforce their importance. Older people have experienced a range of challenges with remote delivery that go beyond difficulties of adapting to new technologies. They report experiencing fatigue from too much online engagement as well as the physical impacts of remaining sedentary, and especially, a sense of weariness caused by a lack of certainty about when a return to face-to-face activity might be possible. So too, is it clear that digital connections cannot alleviate worries about becoming isolated, nor replace the comfort afforded by close contact with others.

There is, then, a possible tension to be addressed between the perspectives of providers and older people in their visions and aspirations for future engagement. Some older people hope that online formats would only be integrated into the organisations as a backup, an emergency measure, rather form part of the mainstay of a blended approach that would make online activity a more permanent fixture. While a blended approach certainly brings benefits to everyone who is able to access such provision, it needs to be considered in consultation, and as part of a wider conversation with older people about how they would like to continue to engage with others across Salford and Greater Manchester.

We wouldn't mind keeping the weekly chat and the quiz and the bingo for the time being. Until we can go outside meeting face to face on a regular basis. Then we wouldn't need to go online for that. External contact I hope would mean we could kind of dispose of the online meetings (older person)

Summary

The pandemic and associated UK public health responses may have accelerated an extant increase in the uptake of remote and online delivery of services and activities. However, while the approaches and efforts summarised here proved successful for those who were able to engage with them, they do not offer an uncritical longer-term panacea for the challenges that many people face as they grow older. Of course, remote delivery does not solely mean online delivery and represents more than the replacement of face-to-face with virtual meetings and it is essential that telephone services and at home shopping services continue for those older people who find it difficult to leave their homes. Crucially, face-to-face activities will also continue to be important, especially so now that many older people have been forced to experience life without them; and there continue to be notable numbers of older people across Salford who are unable to engage with remote platforms and online technologies this is crucial. In this sense, remote delivery appears to be more of a stopgap than a future mainstay way of engaging. Yet at the same, the move to remote and online methods of delivery has provided proof of the ability of older people's activities and services to continue to operate timely, effective, and much needed engagement and support for older people in Salford. Notably, in a seemingly internet-focused world, that such services should continue to be delivered by locally-based providers indicates the ongoing relevance of place-based initiatives such as Age-Friendly Salford in supporting older people to age as well as possible in the places where they live. The key consideration going forward then, to recognise that Age-Friendly places exist online as much as they do in physical spaces.

Key Learning

- Covid-19 and the UK Public Health response have had a profound impact on older people's wellbeing, engagement, and their ability to get on with everyday life. It has also impacted on providers operating at all levels in organisations that support older people.

- Adapting to Covid-19 has shown that organisational change need not always be top-down, nor come from grassroots action. Rather, it works best when all levels of an organisation work in tandem with service users to meet a shared aim or overcome a common obstacle. However, providers need time, resources, and support to be able to do this.
- Remote delivery of, services and activities has been successful for those older people who have been able to engage (or who have been supported to engage) with them. However, remote delivery can be exclusionary. There are challenges to getting online, and some may simply choose not to engage in this way. Providers are acutely aware of this and that a number of older people may have been unable to access or engage in the ways that might have been hoped. Overcoming structural barriers that restrict engagement for this latter group requires more input than what local or even city-wide organisations are able to achieve on their own.
- Services developed a joined-up approach to provide support particularly to more marginalised older people. Responses to Covid-19 have accelerated the pace at which this was already happening, but there are also instances of the pandemic necessitating innovative ways of working to reach more marginalised older people that should continue.
- Online and remote provision does not equate to cheaper or more efficient provision. It requires ongoing investment in staff and volunteer time and training, as well as an awareness of the impact of working at pace on wellbeing.
- Older people are adaptable and quickly engage with new modes of delivery but need support to do so. This should be tailored to individual needs and contexts. Working online does not negate the need for person-centred care and support and can bring the need for this into even sharper focus.
- Providers worked long hours to change delivery practices and process, but gratitude can sometimes give way to wariness. It is important to recognise that remote delivery can be fatiguing for everyone.
- Online activities work best when they are varied and have a balance between social and task-based activity. Good facilitation is essential to ensure full participation. Online interactions and relationships mirror off-line ones, and face-to-face group dynamics will remain in an online environment and may require tactful managing.
- Remote delivery cannot replace face-to-face experience. Specific activities or support service can be delivered, but it is important to accept what might be lost with the lack of co-proximity.

Recommendations

- Providers working at all levels should be trusted to work flexibly and be trusted to innovate effectively. The skills and experiences gained during Covid-19 should be utilised when adapting other areas of operation at speed.
- Providers continue to develop symbiotic relationships with older people and rethink the meaning of bottom-up development as a more fluid process. This includes reappraising how innovation arises and how it might be implemented. Grassroots and front-line staff can be successful agents of change, but success depends on legitimising decision making at all levels of governance and operation.
- Providers should continue to reflect on and evaluate activities. They should celebrate and share their many instances of successes, but also be supported to share their learning when things go wrong.
- Older people are a resource to support change and can help overcome some of the barriers to remote provision. For example, some can provide support to upskill others or support other activities to encourage interaction and engagement. These skills should be drawn on, and further harnessed, in the future.
- Older people care about who is providing support and opportunities for engagement. That such activity is delivered by local, and familiar, providers matters immensely and indicates an ongoing need for locally based provision.
- The Age-Friendly Salford agenda should continue to engage with different types of places across the city and especially online. Initiatives to support growing older in the city should not be restricted to physical spaces.
- A city-wide conversation is needed about how to support older people beyond the pandemic. Older people should be at the heart of this.

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For more information A fuller report providing further details about the work is available by emailing a.clark@salford.ac.uk or writing to Prof Andrew Clark School of Health & Society, University of Salford, Salford. M5 4WT. For more information about the Age-Friendly Salford network and its partner organisations, including Inspiring Communities Together, contact Bernadette Elder at bernadette@inspiringcommunitiestogether.co.uk or telephone 0161 743 3625 / 07742454258.