social research

Public Services and Government

Evaluation of the Angus Gold Project (a partnership approach to digital education and social inclusion)

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Angus Gold is a digital inclusion initiative allied to a broader programme of health education and improvements to engagement with services for the 50+ population. Following the end of a three-year pilot phase funded by the Scottish Government, a team from the RBS Centre for the Older Person's Agenda at Queen Margaret University was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the project.

Main Findings

■ The project successfully targeted groups and individuals likely to face barriers to accessing training and support elsewhere: 44% of trainees reported that they lived alone; 40% had a chronic illness or disabling condition and a third reported that they were rarely or not always able to get out and about. Approximately a third had visual impairment and a quarter reported hearing difficulties.

■ Benefits to strategic partners included improvements to service provision based upon a better knowledge of service users; greater accountability to service users; and a better understanding of the value of interdisciplinary working.

■ At the time of the evaluation 389 participants had undergone basic computer training with nearly a quarter progressing to further training at community college level and over a quarter purchasing their own computers.

■ The training uncovered unexpected levels of literacy problems and was required to find ways of supporting learners through teaching methods that avoided emphasis upon reading and typing. Tailored teaching with individualised activity plans and reviews supported this process.

■ A strong project brand was developed through consultation with participants that made Angus Gold highly visible to potential collaborators and encouraged loyalty and a sense of project ownership from those who took part.

■ Strategic partners were unanimous in their support for the project and particularly highlighted the impact of the project upon the lives of participants and the benefits of a holistic approach to meeting needs.

■ Participants cited the improved social opportunities associated with the project as most valued, this included improvements to the quality and frequency of contact with existing social networks and the opportunity to expand or establish a social network through participation in the project leading to increased levels of social contact.

The Scottish Government

Background

The Angus Gold project began in March 2004 and became fully operational by January 2005. The project's remit was to promote digital inclusion for the 50+ population of Angus within a broader programme of health education and improvements to engagement with services. The specific aims and objectives of Angus Gold were to:

- Increase the use of modern technology in the target age group, as a means of accessing information, contributing to the development of this information and increasing community involvement

- Develop a website that meets the specific needs of older adults

- Develop involvement in a 50+ smartcard which may utilise discounts and incentives and be linked to existing citizen card development – i.e. leisure, library and travel cards

- Provide a publication that will be available online to provide a guide to local services targeted at the 50+ age group

- Inform the 50+ population on health and well-being issues and opportunities in Angus – including service provision, health improvement and community safety.

Angus Gold was designed around a strategic partnership agreement with council agencies working in collaboration with representatives from the third and private sectors. At the end of a three-year pilot phase the RBS Centre for the Older Person's Agenda was commissioned to carry out an evaluation of the project.

Aims

The evaluation was required to consider both the impact of the project and the approach taken to each strand. This included analysing the extent to which the project had met each of its objectives; the impact upon participants; consideration of whether there had been any unintended outcomes and whether the approach taken represents value for money. The evaluation was also required to appraise the approach taken to each element of the project including:

- the engagement methods;

- the development of a website and an entitlement card;

- partnership working;

- the levels and type of support required by different age groups; and

- the training and delivery models used alongside the efficacy of delivering ICT in different types of venue.

Methods

A selection of qualitative methods was employed including a review of existing literature and visits to comparable projects elsewhere in the UK. A postal questionnaire was sent to all project participants, and discussion groups and interviews were held with participants, strategic partners and other stakeholders. Members of the Angus Gold team were also interviewed. An evaluation of the website included interviews with the web designer, a website evaluation with members of a website end user group and an assessment against accessibility criteria.

Findings

Strategic partnership

The project was founded upon a multi-disciplinary partnership comprising representatives from the public, voluntary and private sectors and through this offered a more holistic response to the needs of project participants. The project was able to harness different types of input and resources from partners and most progress was made with partners that embraced the community learning and development model and adapted their working practices and style of provision accordingly. While not one of the original objectives, the project positively influenced strategic partners by increasing their knowledge of service users, providing new ways to consult with participants and disseminate information and promoting opportunities for participants to become involved in the planning and provision of services.

Engagement

The engagement process was shaped by the decision to target older people who were not already well networked and faced barriers to accessing services and support elsewhere. This was achieved through a series of experimental recruitment activities in places that were unconnected to the provision of services such as bingo halls and shopping centres. The team also contacted organisations working with the target groups such as mental health support groups and those supporting disabled people.

A rolling process of consultation, review and evaluation was used to adapt the project to the perspectives and needs of participants. A residential conference secured input from participants from the earliest stages of the project and helped recruit working groups to different strands including the branding of the project. Tensions emerged between a concern to pace the project according to participants' needs and the requirement to work within a pre-agreed timescale.

ICT Training

The project successfully targeted trainees by developing mobile training and the introduction of an informal system to prioritise those with little or no previous computing experience. A person-centred approach was used to overcome barriers to learning. Training was punctuated with reviews in order to tailor materials and content to trainees' needs and develop individual learning plans. This approach led to a low drop-out rate (less than 10%), sustained interest both in pursuing further ICT training following the end of the programme and in progressing to further project strands.

Provision of mobile training extended the geographical reach of the project, provided access to groups and individuals with few other educational opportunities and helped to overcome concerns about learning in more formal settings. As a result of partnership working with the community college a digital education pathway was created via a transition stage designed to ease progress from community-based learning to college.

Website development

The project's website was developed through consultation with individuals with diverse support requirements and little or no prior experience of using the internet. A firm of web developers was contracted to work with a website end user group. The development process took longer than expected as a result of following a pace set by participants.

The evaluation found that nearly a third of participants had visited the website recently and most found it easy or very easy to locate information. Participants also reported that the lay-out and information on the website compared favourably to the complicated nature of much online content.

Strategic partners recognised that the website represented a sector leading example of what an accessible and usable website should be for older people but raised concerns over the need to keep the content updated.

Angus Gold Card

The National Entitlement Card (NEC) was rebranded to carry the Angus Gold logo and from June 2007 has been distributed to anyone entitled to a travel concession. It is also available to 50-59 year old residents if they apply to the Council. A team of participants have been involved in negotiating discounts and deals with the local business community.

Delays to distributing the card undermined links to the publication and website in the earlier stages of the project. According to the project team, these delays mean the potential of the card is only beginning to be realised.

The card now carries over 20 different discounts and deals and has been distributed to over 30,000 people in Angus. Cardholders who were not project participants were provided with little information on how the card could be used when they were originally sent out. Of the project participants, 38% of cardholders have made use of the card to obtain discounts or other deals.

After the initial start-up costs the running costs of the card are limited and the majority of the associated workload is being undertaken by project participants. Work on the card has continued beyond the period of Government funding.

Publications

The project produced three types of publication: a magazine, a service directory specifically for the Arbroath area and a third format combining both directory and magazine. A writer/researcher was contracted to work with an editorial team of participants to compile content and gather input from the wider community and service providers.

Evaluation questionnaire data shows that 78% of respondents had seen an Angus Gold-related publication and over a third of respondents indicated making use of a specific article or piece of information from the publication.

For many strategic partners the publication's greatest strength lay in its relationship with the other project strands and the distribution network that was harnessed by the project including the local meal delivery service for frail and housebound older people.

Health and well-being

Health and well-being issues were integrated throughout the project and information was disseminated in a range of formats and media. The process began by establishing how health-related issues were perceived by the local 50+ population through a survey carried out by participants. Fourteen IT trainees also went on to receive training as health mentors and to engage frail and housebound older people residing in sheltered housing facilities around health based activities.

Health, wellbeing and community safety information has been dispersed throughout the project, which has maintained a focus upon groups and individuals who particularly stand to benefit from it. This includes participants who were socially isolated, frail, disabled and those with enduring health problems.

Partners reported that the project has helped support and promote local and national health and social care policy and noted the improvements to the well-being of participants as a result of taking part in the project. This included benefits to

well-being associated with areas such as computer training that were not directly health-related. The benefits of disseminating health information in a broader context of activities and initiatives were also recognised.

Participants reported improvements to well-being and quality of life as well as increased skills in accessing information on health conditions. Opportunities to learn about health-related issues were also increased through various branches of the project including talks at forums, a health-themed publication and health and wellbeing information on the website.

Impact on participants

Very few criticisms of the project were voiced by participants and a number of strategic partners indicated that the impact upon participants' lives and wellbeing had been the single most significant achievement of the project. Both partners and participants highlighted that the combined impact of the project as a whole and the interconnected nature of its various strands was key to its success.

Acquisition of computing skills had a positive influence upon both frequency and quality of social contact with existing social networks as well as making activities of daily life easier. Project participation extended social networks and increased levels of direct social contact for participants. The sociability associated with the project has been a trigger for initial engagement and a motive for maintaining engagement for participants.

Connecting project strands

It was originally intended that different project strands including a website, entitlement card and publication would be rolled out concurrently and be interconnected. Various delays hampered this intended 'synergy' and illustrated the unpredictable nature of a development model tied to joint working with participants. The benefits of integrating the different strands were demonstrated by the approach taken to the health and wellbeing objective with information disseminated across a broad range of project activities and initiatives. This process increased opportunities to access information; improved skills to locate information and supported participants in better self-management of health conditions. Partners reported that the project had helped support local and national health and social care policy while participants highlighted the positive influence on well-being of the overall impact of the project. The project team noted that the links between the strands also had commercial potential that made the project attractive to the private sector.

Value for money

Issues to consider when deciding whether Angus Gold represents value for money include:

- It has targeted groups and individuals who are high users of public services and provided skills to access services and information about them online

- Participants have been enabled to take control of aspects of their lives that due to frailty, ill-health or disability were becoming more difficult to manage such as shopping, money management and maintaining social ties

- The experimental approach of the project means that lessons have been learned that will benefit future initiatives especially in respect to digital inclusion and the engagement of groups often considered 'hard to reach'

- Value has been added through benefits to partners in terms of reviewing working practices, identifying gaps in provision and reaching a broader range of service users

Sustainability

Following the end of Government funding much of the project has been mainstreamed although the future of the website and publication remain uncertain. Representatives of the strategic partnership reported that insufficient forward planning had been a result of:

- Uncertainty over demand and outcomes associated with a pilot project

- Lack of responsiveness to the level of demand as the project progressed

- Not planning effectively beyond the pilot phase of the project

Replicability

As a pilot initiative Angus Gold has proved the efficacy of the approach taken and therefore its value as a template. Partners and participants alike highlighted the crucial role of the Project Co-ordinator as a champion of the project and driving force behind its success. Considerations for replicating this type of initiative, based upon lessons learned by Angus Gold include:

- Forward planning from the outset, including provision for expansion

- Early development of a strong brand identity

- Responsiveness to levels of demand during the life of the project

- Overcoming sector differences for joint working between partners
- All partners observing the National Standards for Community Engagement
- Balancing through-put of trainees with the need to develop other branches of the project
- Identifying new revenue streams and exploiting the commercial knowledge of private sector partners
- Capacity building through collaboration and joint working

Conclusion

Despite questions concerning longer-term planning and preparations, Angus Gold has provided a framework to improve local conditions for the 50+ population not only by promoting closer working between different services and agencies but also by helping older residents play a more active role in shaping policy and provision.

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