



Report of Programme Activities

Year 1

October 2013-October 2014

Dr Yvonne McGivern

Independent Programme Evaluator

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Introduction

In October 2013 the ARK Ageing Programme was established within ARK (a joint initiative between Queen's University and University of Ulster) as a resource to support engagement between the age sector and the academic sector. The Programme will run until December 2016.

ARK has commissioned an evaluation of the Programme across its life with the following reporting requirements:

- October 2014: 3 or 4 page report of activities
- April 2015: Mid term review report
- April 2016: 3-page report of activities
- February/March 2017: Final report.

This is the first of those reports.

ARK Ageing Programme - aim, approach, mechanisms

The aim of the ARK Ageing Programme is to address two main issues:

- The lack of an evidence base for some of the work in the ageing sector in Northern Ireland; and
- the lack of a co-ordinated and sustained commitment to research in this area within the university sector in Northern Ireland.

The main approach is to encourage and to facilitate the production of research (research that will support lobbying and advocacy in the age sector) and the sophisticated use of information and evidence by the sector. The nature of the approach is to be responsive, reacting to the needs of organisations within the sector, and proactive, acting as co-ordinator, networking, bringing 'interested' parties together, and working to build capacity in terms of research knowledge, research skills and the application of research and evidence within the sector. The Programme is run by Dr Paula Devine (full time Project Co-ordinator based at QUB) and Professor Gillian Robinson (20 per cent staff member) based at UU.

Programme staff devised an initial work plan setting out the ways in which the Programme would operate.

What has been done to date?

The Programme has been running for one year and the mechanisms which the team set out in its initial work plan are in place.

In summary, in terms of Programme 'infrastructure', this is as follows:

- two lecturers appointed (one at QUB and one at UU) and active in post;
- four PhD studentships awarded and students in place at QUB and UU;
- ARK website updated to include ARK Ageing, and an ARK Ageing Facebook page and Twitter hashtag #arkageing set up; and
- Evaluation Steering Group and evaluator appointed.

In terms of Programme activities, in summary, this is as follows:

- an ongoing programme of individual face to face meetings with age sector organisations and government;
- several workshops, seminars and training events;
- the visit of the first of six Visiting Fellows, Professor Nancy Henkin, and the completion of a programme of events by Professor Henkin (a seminar and a practice development session at QUB and two public workshops) and meetings;
- preparation for the visit of a second Fellow, Professor Sue Yeandle, in June 2015;
- a QUB School of Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy meeting in June 2014 on research on ageing or lifelong development;
- two modules (on ageing and on dementia) included on the 2014 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey with a further module planned for 2015;
- ongoing informal communication via the ARK Ageing website, the Facebook page and Twitter account, and the publication of factsheets, occasional papers, policy briefs and journal articles (see <http://www.ark.ac.uk/ap/publications/>); and
- attendance in September 2014 by a number of team members at the British Society for Gerontology conference, New Understandings of Old Age and the Lifecourse, and attendance by two of the PhD students at the 2014 ESRC Research Methods Festival in July.

Key public events: workshops, seminars and training

In February 2014 members of the ARK Ageing team took part in an event with the Age Encounters network. The event was funded by the ARK Ageing Programme. Several months later the ARK Ageing team officially took over the running of the Age Encounters network. The team has also collaborated with several organisations in the delivery of key events. In August 2014 it collaborated with Age NI on the conference, At the Crossroads, in Riddell Hall at Queen's University. In September 2014 it collaborated with NICVA on the training workshop, Research on the Road, delivered in Cushendall, County Antrim. In October it worked with INCORE on the Beyond the Silos workshop with Visiting Fellow Nancy Henkin at Holywell, Derry/Londonderry. Also in October it worked with Linking Generations and Nancy Henkin on the workshop, Collaborating towards An Age Friendly Northern Ireland, which took place at Belfast City Hall.

Visiting Fellow

The visit of Professor Nancy Henkin took place from 29 September to 13 October 2014. The evaluations of events in which Professor Henkin took part as well as feedback from team members indicate that the visit was a success. The key elements underlying this success are the amount of planning and close communication that preceded the visit on the part of the ARK Ageing team in collaboration with the organization, Linking Generations, which had put forward Professor Henkin's name as a candidate for the Fellowship; the high level of 'buy in' and ownership from Linking Generations, and from Professor Henkin in terms of willingness to take on extra activities post arrival; and the design of the VF's

main programme to include different types of events and audiences.

Developments

As might be expected, the activities undertaken so far have led to others. For example, the QUB School meeting in June 2014 has led to the planning of a mini academic conference scheduled for April 2015. A Call for Papers will be circulated in January 2015. This may also serve as the inaugural event of the Northern Ireland branch of the British Society for Gerontology, which team members are in the process of setting up. Also, additional funding from the Improving Children's Lives Initiative at QUB has been secured to include questions on ageing within the Kids' Life and Times Survey for 2014. A further possible development, suggested by Visiting Fellow Nancy Henkin, is that a symposium be held at the end of the ARK Ageing Programme, bringing together all the Visiting Fellows and key organisations to identify and highlight common threads, reflect on work done and so on. This is under discussion.

Who has the Programme reached?

Attendees at events have come from a diverse range of organisations within the ageing sector as well as from other sectors (e.g. the youth sector, the housing sector), from government (local and Stormont), from health trusts and other health related organisations, and from within the universities (the majority from Queen's University). Most attendees are based in Northern Ireland. At some events there have been participants from further afield, mostly Republic of Ireland. While those wishing to attend events are asked to register in advance, a contact form has also been given out at the close of some events. This invites participants to leave their contact details, indicating if they would like to be added to the ARK Ageing mailing list and/or if they would like to be contacted directly by ARK. This has been successful in widening the Programme's contact list. In addition, there is a question on the evaluation form, 'How did you find out about the event?'. For those events operated in partnership with another organisation, it is largely the partner organisation from whom most have heard of the event. While this is likely to change over time – with contacts generated by partner organisations being recorded in the ARK Ageing database via the contact form – it is worth keeping in mind that it may be partner organisations who are the gateway to new participants.

How have events been received?

Events have been very well received. At the close of four events – a seminar by Professor Irene Hardill, the Research on the Road, Beyond the Silos and Collaborating towards an Age Friendly Northern Ireland workshops – participants were invited to complete an evaluation form. Following the At the Crossroads conference, AgeNI emailed participants inviting them to take part in an evaluation survey (using some of the same questions as on the ARK Ageing evaluation form). An analysis of these evaluations shows them to be overwhelmingly positive, with almost all participants saying they would recommend ARK Ageing events to colleagues.

Participants indicate that they find the content interesting, easy to follow and with enough time for discussion. They value attendance at events for a variety of reasons – finding out about the latest work in a particular area, learning something new, helping them generate new ideas, and finding attendance useful for the work they do. They also note that as well as offering an opportunity to stay in touch with colleagues from other organisations the events enable them to make new contacts. (To this end, breaks are important, enabling participants to talk informally and make contacts.) Participants also comment that finding out what others are doing, and how that is working, is very useful indeed. The venue matters. There were many spontaneous comments about the high quality of the venues chosen to date: standout venues are Riddell Hall at Queen's University and Holywell in Derry. A key to the venue is its accessibility to a diverse (and largely older) group of people – accessibility in getting to and from it (including the availability of parking and public transport) and accessibility within it, and the level of comfort (e.g. that it is warm enough). Suggestions for improvement were few. They included offering hard copies of presentation material in event packs, ensuring presentations were easy to read for those with vision problems, and taking presentations at a slower pace. There were also comments suggesting that events could be slightly shorter, although to counter that there were comments requesting more time for discussion.

The evaluation form is to be revised to gather information on the participants' sector and their role in order to relate this to ratings given and/or comments made. This information will only be collected at larger events where audience size is sufficient not to compromise anonymity.

Evaluator observations

As evaluator I attended the Hardill seminar, the At the Crossroads conference and the afternoon session of Towards an Age Friendly Northern Ireland workshop. My observations and informal conversations with participants reflect what has emerged from the evaluation surveys: the importance of ensuring that timing/length of the day suits the audience; that start/finish times suit transport links especially for those travelling from further afield; (that, where appropriate, it might be useful to discuss transport needs with potential attendees or representative groups to encourage and facilitate attendance); that attention is paid to readability of presentation slides and audibility of speakers and contributors during discussions in workshop sessions; and that attention is paid to the language used in presentations so that it is accessible to the audience (e.g. briefing speakers on the likely audience and on the aims of the ARK Ageing Programme in order to maximise usefulness/impact). A final point, while both universities have fulfilled their commitment to appoint lecturers and PhD students under the Programme, UU has only a 20 per cent staff member working on the project, with QUB hosting the full time Programme Co-ordinator. This has impacted to some extent on the balance of activities to date. The project team is aware of this and is considering ways to address it.