

Sustainability Learning Review 2015

Age NI



The
ATLANTIC
Philanthropies

Background to Age NI

Age NI is the leading charity for older people in Northern Ireland. Its vision is of a world where everyone can love later life. To achieve this, Age NI is committed to removing barriers to the development of a positive ageing model. The charity looks to target issues related to poverty, poor health, inequality and poor access to care services, as well as problems stemming from social isolation.

In the past five years, Age NI has engaged with more than 519,000 older people, answered 58,062 calls through its Advice Service and identified more than £4.8m in benefit entitlement for older people. It has continually lobbied on behalf of older people and supported the development of age-sector groups across Northern Ireland.

With respect to the future of the organisation, Age NI defines sustainability as: “The ability to consistently deliver our mission, making the most of changing funding environments and markets.”

Grant history and the role of Atlantic

Prior to and following the merger of Age NI, The Atlantic Philanthropies invested in Age NI activities through the following projects and collaborations:

- CAP (Changing Ageing Partnership)
- Age Awareness Week
- Modernisation of the regional age sector
- ‘Next Steps’ capacity-building programme
- ‘We Agree’ campaign, which influenced the development of the Commissioner for Older People Act
- AP2020

Impact and successes

CAP (Changing Ageing Partnership)

Since 2006, CAP has represented a strong, informed voice capable of challenging and changing attitudes and approaches to ageing. In collaboration with Help the Aged, Age Concern Northern Ireland (who subsequently merged to form Age NI), QUB and WEA, the representation of older people in policy development and service development processes has increased. This has provided older people with a campaigning platform, as well as lobbying and advocacy skills. CAP has also campaigned strongly for a Bill of Rights and supported various campaigns that have included 'Can't Heat or Eat', 'High 5' and 'Free Transport for 60-64'

Age Awareness Week

Since 2008 AAW has celebrated older people and the positive contribution they make to society. Not only has AAW helped to challenge the negative stereotypes of ageing, it has also provided an accessible focal point for the public in Northern Ireland to engage in events and discussion on the issue of ageing.

Modernisation of the age sector

Since 2006, Age NI has assisted in the development of a sub-regional age structure for NI that aligns with the outcomes of the Review of Public Administration, specifically local government reform. This has resulted in the formation of 11 sub-regional networks that have provided older people with new opportunities to inform policy and participate in local decision-making processes. Age NI have also supported the formation of key partnerships with statutory government bodies and the community and voluntary sector.

AP2020

AP2020 was launched in 2010 to create a consultative forum for older people positioned at the very centre of Age NI. It has since been held as a model of best practice which has been replicated in other areas. For example, Peer Facilitation has provided insight into the needs and experiences of older people in areas such as the development of Age Friendly Belfast, dementia research and nursing care standards. AP2020 has also sought to influence policy and debate in key areas such as the ageing strategy consultation and current nursing home provision. It has done so by translating academic research into the policy context and influencing policy developments on the basis of this evidence.

Obstacles and challenges

Diversity of the sector

Beyond self-sufficiency, Age NI also has an important role to play in ensuring the wider sustainability of the age sector. The age sector in NI is highly diverse and managed from various levels. On the one hand it is comprised of multi-agency partnerships that focus on the delivery of services. On the other hand, it is highly localised and managed by community-based groups that organise weekly meetings, events and activities for older people living in urban and rural areas across the province. Ultimately, knowledge, skills and experience vary significantly across the sector, requiring bespoke approaches to meet the needs of the range of organisations and networks that Age NI aims to support.

Economic climate

The economic climate has represented a significant challenge to Age NI over the duration of its Atlantic-funded projects, not least in a reduction in the amount of charitable funding donations received. Diversifying funding platforms to both new and existing audiences has been instrumental in developing a more sustainable funding platform. At times Age NI has found itself competing against other local charities and causes. Despite this, significant corporate partnerships have been developed with a range of public and private sources. These include Danske bank, the BBC, the Ulster Chemists' Association and the NI Chamber of Commerce.

Valuing care

Age NI currently receives a significant portion of its income from public-sector contracts, particularly in the provision of domiciliary, day and residential care. Given the recent cuts to public expenditure, rates at which Health and Social Care Trusts pay for the provision of such models of care have not increased in line with inflation, creating sustainability challenges for the organisation as a whole.

Products and services

A significant aspect of Age NI's approach to sustainability is to generate revenue and income through the sale of products and services that meet the needs of older people. At present Age NI markets a range products and services such as insurance and personal alarms across Northern Ireland. These are sold in collaboration with Age UK. In recent years some of these products and services, purchased at the UK level, have not been well suited to the Northern Irish marketplace, resulting in poorer than anticipated performance.

Sustainability practices

The Taskforce on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector defines sustainability as “the ability to achieve the necessary investment, resourcing and support to evolve, survive and develop in order to make a continuing contribution to a vibrant society” (October 2004). Age NI has adopted a number of sustainability practices over the past number of years to sustain key programmes and activities. These can be broadly summarised as:

- Impact through programmes
- A strategic approach to sustainability
- Building income diversity
- Prudent financial management
- Communicating success
- External positioning and relationships

Impact through programmes

A number of Age NI's Atlantic-funded programmes have resulted in a broader infrastructure of capacity focused on older people, delivering impact for older people. Examples include the development of 11 networks, aligned with the new council areas, that focus on promoting of specific concerns of older people. These 11 networks will seek to continue advocating on behalf of older people through emerging structures created by Community Planning.

The investment secured from the 'We Agree' bid to Atlantic has also delivered an office of Commissioner for Older People, which has sought to promote and protect the rights and interests of older people across Northern Ireland. This office currently has an annual budget of about £800,000, which in turn has created more than £3.2m in investment in the past four years focused on promoting the rights and interests of older people.

A strategic approach to sustainability

Age NI has also worked to develop an effective and sustainable organisation so that it continues to improve the lives of older people across NI. Its strategic plan employs the use of 'outcomes' to focus the impact of the organisation on the lives of older people. The framework of this strategic plan does not look to measure impact in terms of numbers reached, but instead to demonstrate how Age NI activity has changed and improved older people's lives for the better.

It allows funders, partners and commissioners to clearly understand what Age NI plans to achieve over the coming five years. It also allows Age NI trustees to consider how, at the strategic level, they will focus on achieving those outcomes. This has enabled the investment of unrestricted funds to support the continued delivery of inhouse age-sector development and Age NI policy functions. Furthermore, the strategic plan offers a commitment to innovation and supports the development of a cause-related social enterprise called Peer Facilitators.

Building income diversity

Age NI has always functioned with a diverse income platform. Over recent years, and for reasons identified in the obstacles and challenges section, there has been an alternative focus on specific targets for income diversity. Age NI has set definitive targets for each of these areas:

- Gifts
- Grants
- Commercial
- Contracts

These targets will inform the development of a number of key strategies, including marketing; fundraising; business development and commercial. It will also provide an overarching framework that can be monitored and evaluated regularly.

Prudent financial management

In the current financial environment, Age NI has looked to promote prudent financial planning and management. As contract rates remain static and funding programmes are reviewed, Age NI has anticipated and planned reductions in key areas such as grants and contract rates. Over the past few years, many of these reductions have not transpired at the rate projected. Therefore within each business year, Age NI has been able to outperform the organisational budget. This has allowed smaller pots of money to become available to invest in other key organisational priorities that have emerged throughout the year.

Communicating success

Age NI has built and continues to develop a platform that enables 'successes' to be communicated to a broad range of stakeholders. Central to this communication has been Age NI's investment into a new digital platform that includes the use of social media. This has offered an economical and effective method for reaching out to and communicating with various stakeholder groups. It also promotes Age NI activity and can demonstrate some of the successes that have emerged from some of the work that has been carried out. Ultimately Age NI believes a digital presence has enabled the organisation to reach out to a broader group of stakeholders that previously might have been out of reach. It has also been an integral factor in facilitating the delivery of corporate partnerships such as Danske Bank.

External positioning and relationships

Age NI also benefits from being a recognised brand that is part of a UK-wide infrastructure. Although only six years old, research indicates strong brand recognition for Age NI. Working in collaboration with 11 age-sector networks has certainly provided Age NI with an infrastructure, presence and capacity at local level. It has also provided an opportunity to explore potential fundraising activity in partnership with local groups and stakeholders.

Through the Peer Facilitators social enterprise programme, Age NI has also identified an emerging marketplace for quality and peer-led engagement with older people, and has already successfully tendered for a series of contracts. These not only represent significant income opportunities, but have practical value in terms of reaching out and engaging with older people with different capabilities, especially those with dementia.

Keys to sustainable practice

Age NI has identified key factors that have encouraged sustainable practice. These include:

Strong leadership from the board, staff and volunteers

Action is required from all of the organisation's people. This requires a shared organisational vision and clear measurement systems that allow people to engage with the organisation's activity and programmes on an ongoing basis.

Iterative approaches

Age NI's values have established a culture of learning approaches that encourages the organisation to be reflective and strive for improvement, even when programmes have been effective.

Blending strategy with opportunism

This has been an ongoing area of debate within Age NI that will continue in the future. The strategy of the organisation outlines a flexible framework over a prescribed time period. This helps staff to respond appropriately to opportunities on a day-to-day basis without risking 'mission creep'. This process has been improved through the development of an outcomes-focused strategy, allowing for greater clarity in terms of what Age NI is looking to achieve in the future.

Partnership and collaboration is key

As a strong and recognised brand, Age NI has had more and more opportunities to collaborate and work in partnership with a range of organisations and individuals that share similar goals. This provides both direct and indirect opportunities for Age NI to create a positive impact on the lives of older people.

Implications for sustainable grant-making and support

- Long-term vision – beyond three-year programmes
- Working with people is a long journey
- Flexibility – things change
- Advocacy – importance of change
- Need a strong foundation and infrastructure to support change.

