“We just clicked!”

Age UK London’s MiCommunity Project Report • June 2012
Introduction

The overall aim of Age UK London’s MiCommunity Project was to use intergenerational volunteering to build a stronger sense of community and connectedness between young volunteers and older people, bridging differences in age, ethnicity and culture and challenging negative stereotypes.

This took place by facilitating young people (aged 16-24) to share their information technology (IT) skills with older people (aged 60+), many of whom have little or no IT knowledge or skills. It was intended that the project would establish important links and understanding between the two age groups, whilst enabling older people to use digital technology more confidently and promoting volunteering amongst young people.
**Background**

The project was funded by the Mayor of London and Reuben Foundation under the Mayor’s Team London initiative.

Age UK London worked in partnership with seven London Age UKs – Barnet, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, Hillingdon, Kensington & Chelsea and Redbridge - plus three Pearson in Practice IT Academies\(^1\), to deliver the 11-month project, which finished at the end of May 2012.

Many older people are being left out of advances in digital technology and are at risk of being excluded from mainstream society. Increasingly, a lot of services are only available online; information on a range of issues including health and pensions is only available electronically and older people are missing out on a range of social and cultural opportunities.

In addition, a lot of younger people report feeling misunderstood and alienated. The recently published final report\(^2\) on the riots in England in August 2011 illustrates some of these disconnections. The report emphasises the need for people to feel that they have a stake in society and for individuals to respect each other and the place they live in.

MiCommunity offered an ideal opportunity to bring older and younger people together in meaningful and constructive ways.

**Activities and outcomes**

MiCommunity involved four main volunteering activities:

- **Local schools’ student volunteering**
  The majority of volunteering took place in schools and colleges, where young people volunteered to deliver one-to-one IT training in 4-20 week courses.

- **Pearson in Practice volunteering**
  A pool of young volunteers from three London Pearson in Practice Apprenticeship Training Academies\(^3\) provided IT taster sessions (digital clinics) and short courses at Age UKs and community venues across London.

- **Beneficiary (older people) volunteering**
  Older people volunteered to share their skills, for example volunteering in schools or sharing their new found IT knowledge with their peers.

- **Corporate volunteering**
  Volunteers from a range of organisations and companies helped older people get online and use IT by delivering a number of group and one-to-one sessions.

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1 Croydon, Romford and West London  
3 Pearson in Practice was formerly known as Zenos IT Academies
MiCommunity Theory of Change

Rationale and assumptions

- Older people recognise they need digital technology
- Engage older people
- Different sections of the community come together
- Relationships develop between the generations
- Younger people recognise the value of volunteering

- Young people will want to develop ‘work ready’ skills
- Skills transfer will occur between the generations
- Young people will have the capacity to teach
- Enrichment activities will enable school participation

MiCommunity project: older and younger people engaged

- Older people motivated to learn IT
- Younger people getting ‘work ready’

Delivery mechanisms

- IT as the vehicle
- One-to-one tuition
- Learner led
- Young people as volunteers
- Visible school leadership
- Older people’s engagement through Age UKs
- Age UKs’ co-ordination role
- Resources and human resources

Contextual landscape driving the change

- Enrichment activities
- Nurturing environment for young and old people
- Workplace schemes and apprenticeships
- Enabling policy and political environment
- Age UK London leadership
- History of intergenerational practice
At the beginning of the evaluation, a draft Theory of Change was developed with a range of stakeholders involved in the project, which the evaluation then tested. This diagram summarises the findings of the evaluation. It shows the underlying rationale and assumptions of the project and the key drivers of change, along with the outcomes and early signs of longer-term impacts.

Outcomes

- Changing negative perceptions of younger and older people
- Increasing life opportunities
- Promoting volunteering
- Connecting communities

Success of programme drives scaling up and out

- Community cohesion increases at a personal and institutional level
- Health inequalities improve
- Younger people’s employment and economic opportunities improve
- Social isolation is reduced
- Older people live independently for longer
- A reduction in poverty

Taken from the evaluation completed by Dr Gillian Granville
By the end of the project, 1324 people had volunteered to help older people learn new IT skills and 1450 had directly benefited from their help. The project involved volunteers from 39 schools and three Pearson in Practice IT Academies and represented every London borough. In total, 6911 volunteering hours were delivered in 20 boroughs.

**Key achievements**

**Our targets**
- To involve 1000 volunteers in 15 London boroughs
- To help 875 older people learn new IT skills
- To involve volunteers from 15 schools
- To connect older and younger people to build stronger communities

**Volunteers who took part**
- 1324 volunteers from 32 boroughs across London
- 678 young people from schools and colleges
- 133 Pearson in Practice apprentices
- 234 older people (beneficiary volunteers)
- 279 corporates

**Young volunteers**
- Represented all London boroughs apart from the City of London and came from at least 18 different ethnic backgrounds. Forty-two per cent were male and 58 per cent were female.

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*Taken from equalities monitoring data collected from 867 participants. Not all participants chose to answer all questions.*
Organisations and companies who took part

• Cabinet Office
• Clifford Chance
• Department for Communities and Local Government
• Department for Work and Pensions
• Representation of the European Commission in the UK
• everything everywhere (Orange and T-Mobile)
• FreshMinds
• Greater LONDON Authority
• haysmacintyre
• Hill+Knowlton Strategies
• Magners
• Pret A Manger
• London South Bank University
• TimeBank
• Turner Broadcasting
• United Agents
• Xoomworks

Older IT learners

• Came from 26 London boroughs
• Came from at least 18 different ethnic backgrounds
• A third were aged over 75 years
• 70 per cent were female
• 24 per cent reported having a disability

5 Taken from equalities monitoring data collected from 717 participants. Not all participants chose to answer all questions.
Findings

Changing negative perceptions between the younger and older generations

By taking part in the MiCommunity project, younger people and older people challenged the stereotypes they had of each other and changed some of their negative perceptions. This was demonstrated and developed in a number of ways, such as younger people and older people enjoying in-depth conversations, showing mutual respect, sharing interests, learning together and establishing friendships. The majority of participants felt that by taking part in the project, they understood each other better and were able to recognise the connections that existed between them.

One of the findings from the project was that younger people broadened the positive views they had of their specific partners to all older people in general.

‘My view has definitely changed. I only have one grandparent and I tend to think that is what older people are like, whereas meeting all these people, I realise they are just like us. I actually have something in common with my partner and I get on with her and we have a laugh and stuff. I did think that the age gap would stop me doing this, but it hasn’t.’

Older learner
Increasing life opportunities

MiCommunity has increased life opportunities for both the older and younger participants. The main focus for older people has been the ability to get online and use digital technology. Older people found the one-to-one support extremely beneficial and something they had difficulty finding with other courses. Many told of how it had improved their levels of personal confidence and meant they were able to pursue hobbies and interests.

‘I was terrified of computers but I have learnt so much through my course and my confidence has increased enormously. Last week I managed to book my holiday online. I wouldn’t have thought I would be able to do anything like that a year ago.’

Older learner

‘I am very into traditional Irish music and there are different sessions. They would say ‘why don’t you get an email address? Because that’s the way we’re doing it now’. And I thought I have got to get a grip of myself.’

Older learner

The ability to shop around websites to get the best deals was one of the many identified benefits of getting online. Participants were pleased there was the potential to save money, access information and also protect themselves against potential scams.

‘You can be more aware of what is on offer and compare deals. You can book traders and check if they are registered which is also safer for us. It is also so cost effective to find things. If I have to ring places to make enquiries my phone bill goes up, but if I look online it doesn’t cost me extra.’

Older learner

For the younger people, MiCommunity was a real opportunity to improve their employability skills. The project improved younger people’s ability to prepare for the job market with 87 per cent reporting it had helped them develop their communication skills and 82 per cent feeling it had developed their confidence. In addition all young volunteers were provided with a reference.

‘So you have that good feeling about yourself, that self-confidence, thinking, yeah, you know what? I can actually teach someone. Doing something like this helps you. It gives you that motivation that you are worth something, you are able to teach someone.’

Local school volunteer

There was also evidence that the project could have a particular impact in more disadvantaged communities:

‘We are here in the middle of one of the most deprived wards in the country and the need couldn’t be greater because, for these young people, anything we can do that raises their aspirations, builds their confidence but also brings them into contact with as wide a range of people, can only benefit their future development.’

Head teacher
**Findings**

**Promoting volunteering**

Taking part in the MiCommunity project led to many of the younger people changing their perceptions of volunteering. For the majority, it was a rewarding and worthwhile experience. Their self-esteem improved, and they gained huge satisfaction from passing on their skills to another person and in seeing the difference it made to that person’s life. Eighty-nine per cent were satisfied or extremely satisfied with their volunteering opportunity and similarly 89 per cent would recommend it to a friend.

‘I found this programme to be excellent. It definitely increased my confidence and my communication skills. I really did enjoy working with the elderly.’

Local school volunteer

Nearly 80 per cent of the young volunteers said they would consider volunteering again for another project.

‘I think it does encourage you to volunteer, yes to put it on my CV, but the good feeling I get after my person tells me ‘you have really helped me today’. It leaves me really happy when I leave, because I know that even though I don’t know a lot, I have still offered and given her so much of my knowledge.’

Local school volunteer

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6 Taken from a volunteer satisfaction survey completed by 182 young volunteers
Connecting communities

One of the overarching aims of MiCommunity was to build a stronger sense of community and connectedness between generations, partly through developing a greater understanding of the different cultures and backgrounds of participants. There are indications that this connectedness was beginning to happen by the end of the project and that if this continued, the longer-term impact could be significant.

‘After the riots, they [older people] think we are all hooligans. This project changes their opinion. She said: ‘Oh, you are quite nice. I haven’t seen any naughty people.’ When she goes out and meets her friends she will tell them and so on, and it will have a domino effect and eventually the stereotype will be changed.’

Local school volunteer

Schools and Age UKs built new relationships, for example by exploring joint projects, adopting a local Age UK as a school’s charity and inviting older people to school events.

‘[The area has] a reputation and a gang culture, which is stopped at the school gate. We have 1200 students in a built up area so it is good for older people from the community to come in and meet our students. [It can lead] to older people feeling more confident around their community.’

School staff member

The project helped many older people feel less isolated in their community, particularly those with mobility problems, and gave them the means to stay in touch with family and friends easily and cheaply.

‘There is so much technology out there and so much information available from your own home, especially if you have mobility problems. You can also look up medical problems when you have concerns about your health.’

Older learner

‘Most of my family still lives in Italy. I have learnt to Skype through the course and now I can stay in touch with them. I have spent some lovely evenings on Skype with my family. I think using the Internet is a great way of fighting loneliness and depression, especially at our age.’

Older learner
Conclusion

The MiCommunity project has been a great success, involving over 2770 people from many different backgrounds and cultures from all across London. The project has generated real enthusiasm for volunteering and skill sharing. It has demonstrated the benefits of connecting older and younger people, many of whom had little or no contact with each other, through the learning and sharing of IT skills. This opportunity has brought people together, within schools and local Age UKs, and has proved hugely beneficial for both groups.

Young volunteers have gained confidence, communication skills and the chance to demonstrate how much they know - and also develop the skills to pass that knowledge on, enhancing their career prospects in the process. For older people, the project has opened up a range of digital opportunities and the potential to help people engage with their local communities, reduce isolation, pursue hobbies online and access a wide range of information including that related to health and money matters.

This volunteering programme has the potential to enhance life opportunities for large numbers of both older and younger people. It also offers the chance to create significant and lasting change, for the better, across communities.
Copies of this report, the evaluation and a toolkit to develop a MiCommunity project in your area are available to download from:

www.ageuk.org.uk/london

Age UK London would like to thank the following key delivery partners:

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Age UK Redbridge
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