COMMUNITY FUND

The 'Test and Learn' approach

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.
We collect information and insights from across 14 partnerships and use this learning to support service deliverers, funders and policy makers working to reduce social isolation in people aged over 50.

This learning snapshot details key findings and recommendations based on using the 'test and learn' approach, when tackling loneliness and social isolation in people 50+.

You can use it as a summary of the full learning report, to share practical tools with colleagues and in teams, or include in your own presentations and briefings.

1. Why focus on 'test and learn'?
- The test and learn model has been fundamental to the successful operation of Ageing Better.
- It has helped build the learning around what does and doesn't work when trying to reduce social isolation and loneliness.
- Test and learn is a mechanism for building continuous improvement into a programme.
- Test and learn gives programmes the flexibility to respond to new learning and fast changing circumstances; supporting speedy delivery adaptations, including those needed in times of crisis.

2. What are the challenges?
- When applying test and learn, it is understood that not everything tried will work. This way of working is still not widespread.
- Not all elements of a programme can be flexible and follow the test and learn model. The challenge is identifying which elements can't and acknowledging why.
- There are power dynamics at play in any funder/deliverer relationship. It takes time to build the trust and boundaries needed to use test and learn methodology.
- Effective test and learn programmes still require performance management skills.

4. So what can we do with this learning?
By applying test and learn principles over 7 years, Ageing Better has gained insights that can support others to adopt this approach.

Try 'Test and Learn' in your programme
- Set the boundaries and understand the objectives – identify what will be tested.
- Develop systems and processes to understand if the objectives have been met and how learning will be collected.
- Implement change as a result of learning.
- Be clear about how test and learn will be applied to which areas of the programme.
- Use and collect data in context. Be targeted about how much data is collected and processed and be clear about the rationale and benefits of this.

3. How did we implement 'test and learn'?
- Each area had the freedom and flexibility to design local solutions to tackle social isolation in their communities.
- Co-production has been at the heart of Ageing Better's work across all programme areas and the test and learn approach supported teams to adapt services based on learning from co-producers.
- Ageing Better encouraged reflection and invested time in facilitating shared learning amongst partners.
- From the start, Ageing Better valued the exploration of 'what didn't work' and why, as well as 'what did'. This, and their commitment to relationship building, helped set a successful learning culture.