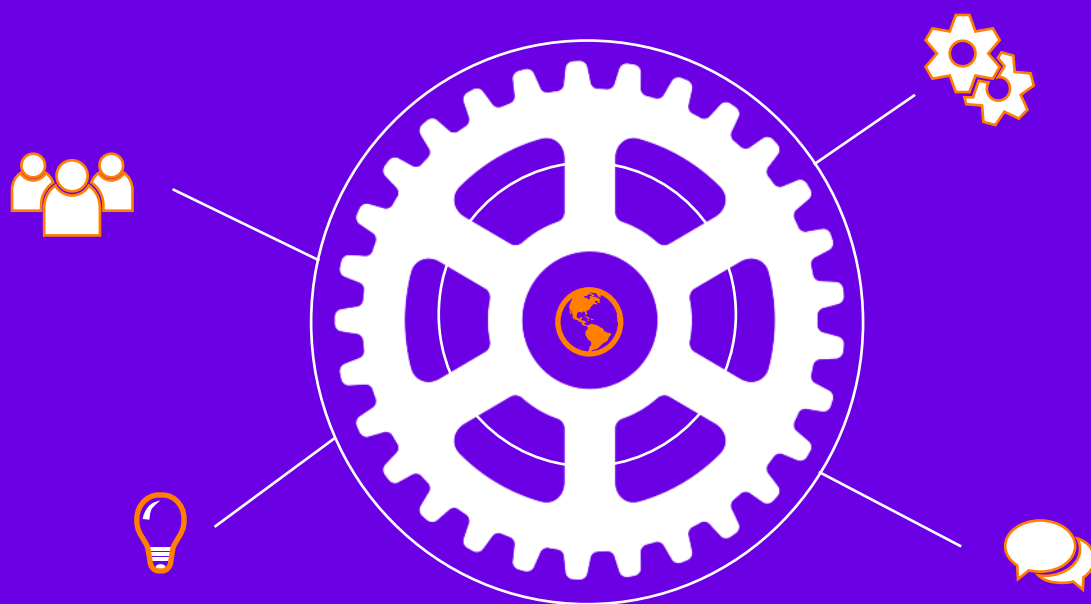


Age & Opportunity

Life is for
Living.



Final Report on the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's Transitions in Later Life Project

March 2017

Introduction

Age & Opportunity is the Irish national organisation that inspires and empowers older people to live healthy and fulfilling lives. It also influences policy to ensure the active participation of older people in ways that benefit communities and wider society. It facilitates opportunities in lifelong learning; active citizenship; arts and culture; sport and physical activity.

In January 2016, Age & Opportunity was confirmed as a partner organisation to develop a programme that would assist with transitions that people experience in later life, with support from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK Branch. Age & Opportunity proposed to develop and test a new programme to build resilience in people aged 50+ to enable them to navigate later-life transitions:

- Development of a menu of activities for participants
- Establish 'peri-retirees' co-design group
- Run at least three pilots to test materials through: small group coaching sessions; small groups with a facilitator; self-directed activities; blended learning with an online element alongside a facilitator
- Train 20+ Age & Opportunity facilitators nationwide in the use of the newly designed materials

Having provided details of the development of the programme in the interim report, this final report outlines achievements in the project and what challenges have been faced. It also focuses on the pilot delivery in three significantly differing situations: a semi-rural setting with people who have retired; a group of male prisoners in a low-security prison; a group of staff from across a range of services in the Ireland's national Health Service Executive.

1. Please describe the model/methodology/approach you have been developing during this period and how your thinking about this approach has evolved during this year?

As outlined in the interim report (September 2016), there was significant attention paid to theoretical models of resilience and what they might mean to the approaches taken. Models that saw resilience as a skill as opposed to a trait were pursued. The New Economics Foundation CLANG model, the Resilience Centre Australia's Resilience Doughnut for adults, the UK's Office of Science review of resilience, and the Lundsman inner strength model were incorporated into a single model (*I am, I have, I can*) that informed the development of the programme.

Since then, due to engagement with the Gulbenkian Learning Community meetings, *The Four Ss* (following Schlossberg, as outlined in Guy Robertson's scoping research) were added to the conceptual frame, allowing for *Changing Gears* to be seen through the lens of self, situation, support, strategies. This proved very helpful in addressing resilience as a trait, a skill or a capacity which draws on interior resources as well as external supports. Social determinants were referenced as participants reflected on how they had coped in the past with major transitions. In the context of the prison, Hulme's revolving transitions provided a very useful framework for understanding the negative cycles which inhibited people from managing transitions and taking control of their lives. It helped to explain why certain individuals 'bounce back' from challenging situations, while others are caught in a cycle of depression, dysfunction or criminality.

2. What has happened and what have you delivered? e.g. outputs and outcomes in terms of beneficiaries, workshops, organisations (your own and partners')

We agreed the following outputs at the start of this project:

- Establish 'peri-retirees' co-design group
- Development of a menu of activities for participants
- Run at least three pilots to test materials through - small group coaching sessions; small groups with a facilitator; self-directed activities; blended learning with an online element alongside a facilitator
- Train 20+ A&O facilitators nationwide in the use of the newly designed materials.

All of the above outputs have been achieved, apart from the facilitator training, which was not carried out as it no longer fits with Age & Opportunity's delivery model for education work; in-house trained facilitators deliver most courses and workshops now, in order to assure quality and fidelity of delivery.

The interim report detailed the course content, the accompanying resources and materials and the contribution of the co-design group of peri-retirees.

Since then, Age & Opportunity has delivered the programme in three significantly differing situations:

- A group of people in a semi-rural setting who have retired
- A group of male prisoners in a low-security prison

- A group of staff from across a range of services in the Ireland's national Health Service Executive

The development of the game *Your Money and Your Life* was detailed in the interim report. It proved to be an entertaining and enjoyable way of exploring the dilemmas faced in life, while balancing the conflicting needs of finance and peace of mind. Participants could see that while financial planning is important, it is not the only factor in determining quality of life, particularly in retirement.

3. What do you feel the project has uncovered about what works for whom and in what context for developing wellbeing and resilience to deal with transitions in later life?

Participants from the group of retired people and the group still in work identified the value of taking time out, in a structured engagement, to think about and plan for later life. There is great value in recognising how people have coped with challenging situations in the past, re-affirming their ability to learn from and cope with adversity. Many of the participants, in all three groups, identified the importance of support structures, in particular, family and friends.

The group of prisoners, in particular, identified patterns of behaviour / life circumstances that led to revolving transitions. Resilience building approaches which drew on therapeutic models (CBT, Mindfulness mediation) made sense to them, as many knew only too well that dwelling on negative thoughts leads to a downward spiral into depression. Several noted how the system 'gets in on you', eroding self-belief or self-esteem. Some spoke of using the experience of prison to make changes for future life.

All three groups recognised and commented on the value of the facilitated sessions: 'it made me think about my life, past, present and future and stimulated me to make plans for the future' (group of people in employment).

There is great value in presenting people with a model that builds on their life experiences and helps them to identify what helps and hinders resilience in their individual lives.

Participants commented positively on the facilitation style, remarking that this was not 'chalk and talk' but a process of reflection, sharing, learning from and/or validating each other's experiences. As one participant in the group of retired people commented: 'The most important learning for me was experiential'.

Participants in the group still at work identified the need to separate their identity from the workplace and pay attention to themselves as people rather than as members of staff in the health service.

Working with the group of prisoners reinforced the need to promote autonomy among the participants. In the context of a system which limits individual freedom, Age & Opportunity's approach was to create some 'freedom of choice', i.e. to be very flexible, allowing the men to make decisions about the delivery and timing of sessions, occasionally ending early to facilitate access to the 'tuck shop' (which operated very restricted hours). This was vital to engaging and sustaining their interest but also in demonstrating the need to choose, even in restricted conditions, to be stronger than circumstances.

4. What have been the key successes and highlights?

The development of the course itself is a key success. *Changing Gears* is a valuable resource for people to think about and prepare for later life. While retirement is a key transition for many people, *Changing Gears* promotes health and wellbeing and has potential for people at all stages in life.

The co-design approach to developing the material was a success. The material and approach were influenced by the experiences of people who had recently retired. Their reflections on that experience enabled them to identify factors that helped them to prepare for retirement and elements that had been missing.

Piloting the course has tested the material and allowed for learning from the experience. The material has proven to be a flexible resource readily adaptable to suit the requirements of each of the three pilot sites.

Given the difficulty in starting the programme, gaining entry to the Irish Prison Service was a significant success, one that Age & Opportunity intends to develop. Most significantly, the immediate relevance of the material on transitions for prisoners has been a highlight. With all its drawbacks in terms of lack of freedom, isolation, hostile environment, emotional insecurity, sense of stigma or lack of respect, separation from support networks, including family and friends, prison intensifies the experience of transition. In many ways the prison setting is a kind of pressure cooker or crucible for a lot of issues which people face in life, only in a more concentrated form. Small wonder then that those prisoners on the course engaged so willingly with the material, bonded as a group and expressed a desire for a follow-up.

5. What other outcomes have been achieved for the participants as a result of the project that weren't necessarily planned for?

At the request of participants, we issued certificates to those who participated in and completed the *Changing Gears* (called *Bounce Back: Coping with Life's Changes* programme in the prison setting).

6. What have been the main issues or challenges and how have you overcome them?

Getting the *Changing Gears* (*Bounce Back*) programme started in the prison was a particular challenge, despite having the approval and support of the prison Governor. This delay was due to a number of factors, including internal communication among staff; a small population of older prisoners; the work schedule of prisoners; the choice of internal co-ordinator to promote and recruit for the programme. It took up to two months and several attempts before the course was finally able to begin.

To overcome these challenges, Age & Opportunity:

- Changed the time of the course, from an afternoon to an evening session, to facilitate men who were on day release
- Changed the name of the programme to *Bounce Back* as *Changing Gears* might not be appropriate in a prison setting
- Removed the age group for participants (50+) to welcome any prisoner who wished to take part
- Identified a new prisoner who could help with recruitment. The previous co-ordinator was perceived by other prisoners to be very controlling. This information was made known to us by one of the men who had taken part in the initial focus group.

The challenges of staffing changes at Age & Opportunity have already been outlined in the interim report. These changes led to an overall delay in initiating the project.

It also proved challenging to get the attention of employers. A number of the organisations contacted said that they were already using retirement planning services. These services traditionally focus solely on financial planning with only a passing reference to health or life planning. As this is often the approach, employers do not seem ambitious for exploring a new way that engages with the quality of people's lives in retirement. While resilience as a concept is being discussed in some areas, getting the message across about the need to promote resilience for later life is an ongoing challenge. The pilot delivered to a group of staff in the Health Service Executive (HSE) was very successful. It is hoped that this success can be used to gain entry to other sectors as well as to deepen the relationship with the HSE.

7. Are you working with any new partners, organisations, audiences as a result of this work? If yes, please outline who and how you are working with them.

Work with the Irish Prison Service is new to Age & Opportunity. It is hoped that this work will continue and that there will be a further delivery of the course to other prisoners.

Most of Age & Opportunity's work has been directed towards people who have already retired. The engagement with TILL has helped Age & Opportunity to develop an offering that is relevant to people who are in mid-life or still of working age.

This work has also led to conversations with the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, TILDA, who have included a measure of resilience in their Wave 3 data. It is hoped that the interaction of Age & Opportunity and TILDA could lead to a seminar on resilience, adding to a public discussion about the concept and how it can be practically encouraged.

8. Has anything else surprised you and have any of your starting assumptions for the project been challenged?

Conceptually, Age & Opportunity has a focus on health and wellbeing and had made the initial assumption that high resilience led to high levels of wellbeing. In the course design phase, the Young Foundation's report on resilience and wellbeing showed that there is not necessarily a correlation between the two and that a number of older people are likely to be 'happy but vulnerable', i.e. that they experience high levels of wellbeing but low levels of resilience.

There were also concerns that the group of prisoners would find it difficult to engage in the process of reflection and sharing in groups due to the restrictive, hostile environment of a prison. During the evaluation, however, prisoners made it clear that the course had brought them together as a group and that while there is ample time to talk in prison, it was the structure and focus of the discussions that proved particularly helpful.

9. Where do you see the sustainability of this work coming from in the future?

In order to ensure the sustainability of the work, a case must be built with employers so that retirement planning is not confined to financial matters. This, however, if tackled in isolation, would lead to arguments about retirement planning being

something from another era and that employers have no obligation to people who are leaving the workplace.

A more potentially fruitful approach would be to begin a public conversation about resilience within the workplace as a 'core competency' so that employers can see the benefit of building resilience both for individual workers and for teams. Workers could then be encouraged to use resilience as a way to consider career transition, including as a mechanism for retirement planning.

Changing Gears has proved an adaptable programme which supports health and wellbeing in the workplace, with relevance to workers at all ages. There is potential to create long-term sustainability for this but there is a need for awareness raising that must happen first.

Also, Age & Opportunity sees scope for developing the programme as a model for developing human agency when confronted by debilitating serious illness. *Changing Gears* has great potential for supporting resilience and, therefore, better health outcomes for people experiencing serious illness.

Age & Opportunity is funded by the Health Service Executive, which has a Quality Improvement Division with a Service User Involvement division. Age & Opportunity has scope to explore this further with small amounts of HSE project funding.

10. Is there anything you would like to add about your learning from the project

Age & Opportunity is continually developing new approaches and providing fresh insights through its work. During 2017 / 2018, it plans to work with older people with intellectual disabilities, older people seeking asylum or with refugee status, older people in hospital settings, older people in receipt of home care, to name a few. It does this through remaining in conversation with different groups and organisations, building alliances within the age sector, making timely suggestions and drawing together disparate partners to find new ways of working. This project has provided a different conceptual framework for certain conversations and has helped the organisation to think about what its programmes could do.

On a more practical level, despite explicit support for delivery of *Changing Gears* from the Irish Prison Service, it took Age & Opportunity over two months to actually access a group of prisoners. This required the organisation using any means it had at its disposal to clear the logjam. Through this determined effort and because the organisation had made the commitment to the Gulbenkian Foundation, it finally broke through the barriers and delivered *Changing Gears* (using the course title *Bounce Back*). Now, having proved to the Irish Prison Service, that this is worthwhile and has a benefit for prisoners, Age & Opportunity has created optimal conditions to develop further work in prisons.