Evaluation of Advice NI's

Rights4Seniors Supporting Active Engagement Project

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Executive Summary

This is an evaluation of Advice NI's Rights4Seniors Supporting Active Engagement (SAE) project completed by Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) in April 2018.

Supporting Active Engagement

Since 2007, Advice NI has been delivering a range of rights-based projects targeted at older people. Supporting Active Engagement was established to support 'hard to reach' older people aged 65+ at risk of information poverty and isolation, focusing on those living in sheltered housing schemes across Northern Ireland. It was designed to help older people to become more engaged in society by making them aware of and able to access information, rights and entitlements through the use of digital technology.

SAE has been delivered in partnership with Radius Housing Association (previously Fold) and includes:

- Delivery of a **10-12 week rights-based digital training programme for residents**;
- Providing participants with the opportunity to access a **benefits entitlement check**;
- Engaging older people as **volunteers** to deliver the training and provide peer to peer support.

The project was funded by the Big Lottery Fund initially for a five-year period from April 2013 to March 2018; further extension funding has been provided up to March 2019. Since its original inception, SAE has undergone some remodelling, based on the experience of delivery and changes to government policy around access to benefits.

Evaluation approach and methodology

The current evaluation of Supporting Active Engagement builds on an interim report completed in 2016 and is designed to document the project's achievements and learning and inform the continued development of Advice NI's work in this area. It focuses on the outcomes achieved through SAE for participants, providers of support to older people and Advice NI; it also locates the SAE model within the wider strategic environment. The methodology used for the evaluation has included:

- **Desk review** of relevant strategy and policy documents and SAE monitoring data and reports
- **Observation** of two of SAE training sessions to provide an insight into delivery 'on the ground'
- **Consultation** carried out via focus groups, face to face and telephone interviews with:
    - ***Project beneficiaries*** including participants and staff from Radius Housing Association
    - ***SAE volunteers*** who support delivery of the project
    - ***Internal stakeholders*** including project management and delivery staff, and partners
    - ***External stakeholders*** working in relevant strategic and operational fields.

Key achievements

The table overleaf summarises the key achievements of Supporting Active Engagement structured against the three outcome areas.

Table: Summary of achievements of Supporting Active Engagement

Outcomes for older people	Outcomes for providers
SAE has partnered with Fold, and subsequently Radius Housing Association, to access and engage **older people** in housing schemes across Northern Ireland	A total of **49 Fold/Radius housing schemes have participated** in the programme
Onsite delivery of the training has ensured that it has been made **accessible** to scheme residents, including those with physical impairments	There has been **investment in digital infrastructure** and all participating schemes have installed wifi in their communal areas
Over the 5 years of SAE, **632 people** have participated in the programme	Scheme co-ordinators have **increased awareness of resources** - including Rights4Seniors - and enhanced their ability to signpost to sources of support
96% of respondents to an end-of-training survey report **increased confidence and skills in using digital technology** for a range of purposes	There has been **empowerment** of residents who are better able to find information and deal with some issues independently
They are **more aware of resources and information** relating to their rights and entitlements and 89% report feeling **confident to make a complaint**	SAE has supported Radius (and previously Fold) to **meet its own objectives** in enhancing residents' lives through digital inclusion, social engagement and benefits maximisation
SAE dealt with **2475 benefit enquiries** and **£777,905** of additional monies has been levered	The project has begun to **extend its reach**, providing opportunities for other groups and organisations to access the training programme for their users
Participants have **enhanced connections at different levels** – with other residents in their scheme, with friends and family and with the wider world	
88% of survey respondents report feeling **less isolated** after participating in SAE	
The same percentage – 88% - report **improved health and wellbeing**	

Organisational outcomes
SAE has been **delivered broadly in line with its original funding agreement** with the Big Lottery Fund, although it has had to **adopt and amend its approach** in response to both internal and external circumstances
A strong **partnership relationship** has been established with Radius (and previously Fold) Housing Association to support project development and implementation
There has been **collaborative working** with South City Advice Centre and with other voluntary/community groups and organisations to facilitate delivery
SAE has produced a **body of resources** including course content and website materials which have potential application to other elements of Advice NI's work
Policies and procedures to support volunteering have been developed, and the project has informed **Advice NI's wider strategy and approach to volunteering**
There is a **body of enthusiastic volunteers** bringing a range of skills and experiences who are **crucial in supporting the project's capacity to deliver**
Learning has been shared internally and used to **inform new developments** in respect of Advice NI's rights-based digital inclusion work with older people
Advice NI has actively engaged with external organisations and agencies in a variety of ways in order to **promote its message and learning**

The evaluation demonstrates SAE's significant achievements over the duration of the original five-year funding agreement with the Big Lottery Fund. It also demonstrates the 'fit' between the project, and indeed Advice NI's rights-based digital inclusion work more broadly, in relation to a number of strategic themes.

Moving forward

In looking ahead, the evaluation highlights a number of issues for consideration by Advice NI:

- The value of **strengthening Supporting Active Engagement** by integrating the most successful elements of the programme with learning from Advice NI's other digital inclusion projects for older people – in particular, the What Works Fund Building Resilience in Retirement project.

- The potential for **extending reach** of the work to a broader 'market' of older people beyond the Radius schemes, including building on recent activities to engage with other vulnerable groups including BME groups.

- The need to review **organisational capacity** in light of any extension of the project, including issues relating to appropriate skills sets to deliver to new target groups, capacity to deliver benefit entitlement checks and individualised support, and the continuing need to recruit and train volunteers.

- The importance of **strengthening volunteering** including maintaining the interest and motivation of existing volunteers through further training, development and support opportunities, whilst also building on the peer-to-peer support model as a means of building up a broader volunteer base for Advice NI's rights-based digital inclusion activities.

- The importance of building and strengthening strategic relationships and alliances and exploring the potential for further **collaboration** with others involved in the field in order to support the ongoing development and roll out of rights-based digital inclusion programmes or projects.

- The importance of **strategic positioning** of the work and demonstrating its alignment with current policies, strategies and initiatives across a range of themes including digital inclusion, information poverty, social inclusion, wellbeing and volunteering.

- The need to **enhance the role of the Advisory Group** to support strategic thinking about how SAE, and indeed Advice NI's rights-based digital inclusion work more broadly, should evolve, as well as to help with positioning and promoting its role and value.

- The need to explore a range of **resourcing options** for the work which fit with Advice NI's core ethos and purpose as a rights-based charitable organisation.

Introduction

Advice NI's Supporting Active Engagement (SAE) project has been funded by the Big Lottery Fund since 2013. It was established to support older people at risk of information poverty and isolation. It is primarily targeted at 'harder to reach' older people in sheltered accommodation (although it has increasingly been extended to include other vulnerable groups in the community). SAE aims to help participants become more engaged in society by enabling them to access information, rights and entitlements through the use of technology. This involves training to build their digital confidence and skills in order to navigate the internet and access information; the project also provides participants with access to benefits entitlement checks to ensure that they are claiming all their benefits and entitlements. SAE includes a volunteer component with individuals (including older people) being engaged to support the delivery of training.

Within Advice NI, Supporting Active Engagement initially acted as one of a suite of three projects designed to promote digital inclusion amongst older people. The other two were the POP NI portal initiative and a complementary outreach project, Manage Your Money Better. In July 2014, Advice NI commissioned Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) to develop and implement a 'shared measurement approach' to the evaluation of the three projects and in 2016 an overarching report was produced, setting out the key achievements against common outcomes for the different strands of activity. This represented a final end-of-project report for POP NI and Manage Your Money (both of which concluded that year) and an interim report for Supporting Active Engagement.

Since the previous evaluation report was completed, Advice NI has successfully secured extension funding for SAE from the Big Lottery Fund for a further year, until March 2019. This has involved some remodelling of the project building on the experience of delivery, the findings from the interim evaluation and changes in government policy around access to benefits.

This current report represents the final evaluation of Supporting Active Engagement up to the end of its original five-year funding contract. It builds on the previous exercise in order to document the achievements and learning from the project, and to inform the continued development of Advice NI's work in this area. More specifically, the objectives of the report are to:

1. Summarise the 'story' of the evolution and development of Supporting Active Engagement.
2. Assess the outcomes achieved through the project.
3. Review the 'strategic fit' of the delivery model developed and implemented through SAE.
4. Inform the continuing development of Advice NI's work in respect of digital inclusion to support the wellbeing of older people.

The evaluation methodology for this exercise has included the following:

Strategic review	Desk review of relevant literature in the area of policy relating to older people, digital inclusion and information poverty
Review of SAE documentation	Desk review of project documentation including: • Original funding proposal to the Big Lottery Fund • Extension proposal for funding agreed with Big Lottery Fund • Progress reports to the funder • Project materials, including training course programme and resources • Volunteering policy and procedures
Review of monitoring data	Review of collated data generated through internal monitoring including: • Activity data • Feedback from participants at the end of training, gathered via a questionnaire administered through SurveyMonkey; a total of 383 evaluations were completed by end-March 2018 (representing 61% of all participants) • Data collated on Advice NI's AdvicePro system on benefits entitlement checks
Consultation with SAE beneficiaries	Focus groups with older people living in two sheltered housing schemes, involving a total of 12 participants Face-to-face interviews with co-ordinators from two of the schemes Telephone interview with representative from Radius' Community Engagement Team
Consultation with SAE volunteers	Focus group with 7 SAE volunteers, both long-term and recently recruited to the project
Consultation with Advice NI	A series of face-to-face interviews with the SAE Project Manager Face-to-face interview with the SAE Digital Support and Information Officer Focus group with internal stakeholders, including Advice NI Manager, SAE staff (Project Manager and Digital Support and Information Officer) and Manager of South City Advice Centre Discussions with other Advice NI staff engaged in work with older people including the Co-ordinator of the Money Advice Services What Works project, Building Resilience in Retirement
Consultation with external stakeholders	Telephone interviews with representatives of relevant external organisations: • Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland • Digital Transformation Service, Department for Finance • Advice Services Team, Voluntary and Community Division, Department for Communities • Digital Assist, Business in the Community
Observation	Observation of one SAE training session to provide an insight into delivery 'on the ground'.

Following this Introduction, the remainder of the report presents the findings from the evaluation, based on the data gathered through desk review and consultations, and structured around the 4 terms of reference outlined above.

1. The story of Supporting Active Engagement

1.1 Introduction

The following summarises the development of Supporting Active Engagement including its background, planned activities and outcomes, and changes to the project as it evolved.

1.2 Organisational background

Advice NI provides leadership, support and representation to the independent advice sector in Northern Ireland, as well as providing advice services to the general public. Its key activities include provision of advice services to those who need them most (including welfare rights, HMRC products and services and business debt advice) and the development and delivery of training relating to advice provision. The organisation also has a social policy role, including participation in the Welfare Reform Mitigation Working Group.

Through its experience, Advice NI is cognisant of the multiple challenges relating to rights and older people; these include:

- An increasingly complex landscape in relation to rights, including the effects of welfare reform
- Lack of awareness amongst older people of their rights and entitlements and attitudinal barriers in accessing these, including concerns about stigma
- A growing focus by government on providing information about benefits and entitlements on-line
- Significant barriers in accessing this information including internet access and skills, confidence and trust to utilise technology.

Working with older people has been a core area of work for Advice NI since 2007 and has included conducting research amongst older people, carers and professionals within the age sector, and the development of a number of projects including the Advantage Older Persons Advisor course.

As part of this work, in 2011 Advice NI developed and launched the Rights 4 Seniors website, providing information on the rights of older people and those who work for them. Subsequently, the organisation secured funding to develop three interconnected projects targeted at older people:

- **POP NI www.popni.net :** An online community guide, funded by Atlantic Philanthropies over 3 years from April 2013;
- **Manage Your Money Better:** A complementary outreach project to POP NI, funded by Comic Relief for a 3-year period, which began in July 2013;
- **Rights4Seniors / Supporting Active Engagement:** A digital inclusion and benefit uptake project funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Reaching Out – Connecting Communities programme, initially for a 5-year period from April 2013 and subsequently extended for one year up to March 2019.

Collectively, these projects were designed to provide training, information and advice to older people, raising their awareness and ability to access information, rights and entitlements through the use of

technology. They were seen as being '*symbiotic'*, feeding into and complementing each other in their overall goal of reducing information poverty, increasing engagement in society and enhancing wellbeing.

1.3 Supporting Active Engagement

Supporting Active Engagement was established to support older people at risk of information poverty and isolation. The focus was on 'harder to reach' older people living in sheltered housing schemes and nursing care homes across Northern Ireland who are experiencing isolation and loneliness; the project aimed to address some of the particular challenges within these settings including, for example, health/care support needs, differential rules relating to benefits and entitlements and limited digital availability / capacity. It was designed to help older people to become more engaged in society by enabling them to access information, rights and entitlements through the use of technology – in particular the Rights4Seniors website.

This was to be achieved through:

- Delivery of a **10-12 week rights-based digital training programme in the use of iPads** for residents of the schemes/homes. The purpose of the training was to build participants' skills and confidence to browse the internet, navigate the Rights4Seniors website, make a complaint and get involved in discussion forums, sharing their views on issues affecting them.
- Providing participants with the opportunity to access a **benefits entitlements check** to ensure that they were claiming all of their benefits and entitlements.
- Engaging older people as **volunteers** - 'internet champions - to deliver the training in the schemes/homes and provide peer to peer support.

Advice NI was awarded a grant of £500,000 from the Big Lottery Fund for the original five-year programme, and the agreed activity targets were as follows:

- *600 beneficiaries will have completed training*
- *12 volunteers will be recruited per year*
- *125 learning sessions will be completed by beneficiaries (10-12 week cycle per course)*
- *3000 beneficiaries will have had benefit entitlement checks completed if required (subsequently reduced to 1500) and 450 will have learned how to assert their rights / complain).*

A set of outcomes were also agreed with the Big Lottery Fund, along with a set of specific change indicators; in summary, these were as follows:

- *Reduce information poverty amongst older people by increasing access to web-based resources and services including their rights and entitlements*
- *Build the confidence and assertiveness of older people to reduce negative experiences and challenge when they have been mistreated*
- *Bridge the digital divide, reducing isolation by giving older people the opportunity to learn new skills and inspiring them to use the internet*
- *Improving the health and wellbeing of older people.*

In terms of organisation and delivery, Fold Housing Association was identified as the key partner to support the implementation of Supporting Active Engagement. The project initially employed two staff:

- A Supporting Active Engagement Co-ordinator, responsible for managing the internet champion volunteers and developing the online content for the project; and
- An Older Person's Information and Advice Officer, to deliver information, advice and entitlement sessions and undertake benefits entitlement checks for participants.

An Advisory Group was established to oversee and support SAE; over time, this has included representatives from Advice NI, Fold Housing Association (and subsequently Radius Housing Association), Supporting Communities NI, Age NI, Volunteer Now and the University of the Third Age.

1.4 Changes to Supporting Active Engagement

In June 2017, four years into the project, Supporting Active Engagement lost its two key staff members. This presented some challenges to Advice NI in terms of continued delivery of the project but the organisation took the opportunity presented to review and adjust its SAE delivery model. Building on the experience of the project to date, the findings from the interim evaluation and developments in the external environment, a number of changes were implemented, as follows:

- SAE continued to employ two full-time staff but the role of Information and Advice Officer was changed to that of Digital Support and Information Worker. The revised post includes a greater focus on maintaining and delivering the online content of the Rights4Seniors and POP NI websites (both of which are promoted through SAE), as well as informing older people of changes to benefits which may impact upon them (in particular, Universal Credit) and referring them for benefits entitlement checks. The role of SAE Co-ordinator also changed to that of Project Manager. Both new postholders took up their positions in August 2017.
- Following a tendering process amongst its member organisations, Advice NI partnered with South City Advice Centre (based in Belfast) to take up the work previously undertaken by the Information and Advice Officer and deliver the benefits entitlement checks and advice element of the project.
- The SAE programme content was revised and updated; in particular, it now includes training in the use of Resolver, an online service to help people make complaints quickly and easily.

These changes were agreed with the Big Lottery Fund, and also form the basis of the extension funding which has been provided for Supporting Active Engagement up to March 2019.

Another change has been in terms of the partnership arrangements for Supporting Active Engagement. Initially, Advice NI's partnership agreement was with Fold Housing Association; in April 2017, Fold merged with Helm Housing Association to form Radius Housing Association, a much larger organisation with around 125 sheltered residences and approximately 12000 tenants. A new agreement for the delivery of SAE was subsequently established between Advice NI and Radius.

2. Outcomes achieved through SAE

2.1 Introduction

The following section explores the extent to which Supporting Active Engagement has achieved its outcomes. We begin by presenting a theory of change and outcomes framework for the project. We then present the evidence generated through documentary review, monitoring data and consultation to demonstrate the outcomes achieved for participants, providers of support to older people (in particular, the sheltered housing schemes) and for Advice NI itself.

2.2 Theory of change and outcomes framework for SAE

For the previous evaluation CENI had developed a theory of change and overarching outcomes framework common to Advice NI's three older people's projects (POP NI, Manage Your Money Better and Supporting Active Engagement). This was designed to ensure that the focus was on *'what difference were they trying to make?'* rather than simply counting or describing their activities. The framework provided a construct for rationalising multiple and diverse outcomes and facilitating data collection, analysis and reporting across the three projects.

For the final evaluation of Supporting Active Engagement, this theory of change and framework was modified and further refined to ensure that it was specific to the project and reflected the outcomes agreed with the Big Lottery Fund. The framework also included outcomes which were perhaps not made explicit or articulated during project planning and design (for example, outcomes relating to shared learning). It is summarised below:

Diagram: Theory of change for Supporting Active Engagement

SAE activities	Outcome levels	Outcomes	Impact	Contribution
Engage with providers (housing schemes, community organisations) Recruit participants Develop, deliver training Update resources including R4S Benefit checks Recruit, support volunteers	**Participants**	1. Hard to reach older people engaged 2. Digital awareness, knowledge and skills 3. Capacity to exercise rights / access entitlements 4. Increased benefit take-up/money resources 5. Enhanced connections	Reduced information poverty Enhanced financial wellbeing Reduced social isolation Improved quality of life Enhanced provision of support to older people	**To policy goals on:** Digital transformation and inclusion Access to generalist advice Active ageing Volunteering
	Providers	6. Enhanced support to residents /users 7. Improved digital infrastructure 8. Enhanced awareness of sources of information, resources, services 9. Enhanced relationships between providers and older people		
	Organisational	10. Enhanced organisational capacity 11. Shared learning and practice		

Towards the right hand side of the diagram, the framework sets out the overall impacts which Supporting Active Engagement is trying to have in terms of enhanced financial wellbeing, reduced social isolation, improved quality of life and enhanced provision of support to older people. In turn, the project also fits with and ultimately can make a contribution to the achievement of high level policy goals including those relating to digital inclusion, poverty and health and wellbeing.

Working back from this, the framework presents a total of 11 outcomes which articulate more specifically the types of changes which the project is trying to achieve and which, it could be argued, contribute to the longer-term impacts. The outcomes are structured across three levels:

> **Participants:** benefits or changes for the older people who engage in Supporting Active Engagement
>
> **Providers:** benefits or changes for the sheltered housing schemes (and other organisations) which engage with and facilitate project delivery
>
> **Organisational:** benefits or changes for Advice NI as an organisation through developing and operationalising the project.

Finally, a refined set of illustrative indicators was developed, outlining what would be happening if the outcomes were being achieved; these were also aligned to the project's Big Lottery Fund targets (see Appendix 1). This provided the basis for collecting evidence about the extent to which SAE has achieved its outcomes, and the results of this are presented below.

2.3 How participants have benefited from SAE

SAE's key beneficiaries are older people and, as outlined in the Theory of Change, it was anticipated that for them, the outcomes would be as follows:

- Hard to reach older people would engage in the project
- Participants would develop their digital awareness, knowledge and skills
- They would develop their capacity to exercise their rights and access entitlements
- There would be increased benefit take-up / money resources
- Older people would have enhanced connections

The following section looks at the extent to which these outcomes have been achieved, drawing on SAE activity data, end-of-training surveys completed by participants, and consultation with consultation with older people, Radius representatives (including housing scheme co-ordinators), project delivery staff and volunteers.

Engaging hard to reach older people

In terms of engaging with hard to reach older people, the partnership with Fold Housing Association, and subsequently Radius Housing Association, has provided the vehicle by which SAE has been able to access the target group. From the outset, the project has actively engaged with both organisations to promote the training programme, secure support and engagement and recruit participants.

More latterly, SAE has worked to extend its reach beyond sheltered housing schemes, with promotional activities (including presentations and information-sessions) being delivered to other groups and organisations within the community. The current Programme Manager is also drawing on her experience to connect with groups from BME communities including for example, people from the Cantonese-speaking community and refugees/asylum seekers. Recently SAE staff and volunteers have undertaken training provided through RNIB to develop their skills and enable them to deliver the programme to partially-sighted people.

As a result, by the end of March 2018, 62 courses have been delivered through sheltered housing schemes; a further 4 courses have been delivered through other community-based organisations / groups. A total of 632 older people have participated in training; this exceeds the target of 600 for the original 5-year period of the project's operation.

Developing digital knowledge, awareness and skills

In terms of skills development, SAE provides participants with the opportunity to engage on a 10-12 week programme which covers a range of topics.

Rights4Seniors SAE course content
Introduction to the course and to your device: Using apps such as photos, time/clock, calendar
Notes: Learning how to use the keyboard
Getting online: accessing websites and using Google
Navigating websites: exploring Rights4Seniors as a sample website
Internet searching: using Google search, images and maps
Email: using Gmail, sending and receiving emails, sending photos; links and using the App Store
How to make a complaint online: Complaining to the Ombudsman and using Resolver
Social media: Facebook and Twitter

The data generated for the evaluation indicates the success of SAE in developing participants' digital awareness and skills. The end-of-training survey of participants indicates that, of 383 returns, 96% agreed or strongly agreed that they had increased their digital skills (against a target of 75%). A crucial aspect of this is in terms of developing older people's confidence in using a device:

> *'In the early days, they will not go near an iPad but at the end they are taking photos of each other using it when they get their certificates'.*
>
> *'In the first few weeks, people were scared to touch the devices, but you could see them grow. They had no apprehension a few weeks later, you could notice their skills improve'.*
>
> *'They aren't at the stage of being very advanced yet, but it is building their confidence'.*

Greater digital confidence in turn was then promoting independence in using the technology as appropriate to individual needs:

> *'It's not about how quickly or slowly they do something but about doing it independently, and they do get there in the end'.*
>
> *'We're empowering people in relation to the internet, its giving them something to do that they couldn't do before … joining up the dots, giving them the confidence to ask for help, starting them off on the journey'.*

An important aspect of the project in this respect is its delivery approach. It has been essential that the training is participant-led and while there is a core programme, the inputs provided by SAE and the volunteer trainers are flexible and responsive to what is needed:

> *'It has to reflect their specific interests, it's important to focus on what they really want and what is interesting to them'.*

Alongside this, it has also been important to build up a relationship of trust between the deliverers and participants, particularly given that older people may have had very different learning experiences previously. The value of this is evident from the qualitative feedback gathered for the evaluation, which highlighted the role of the volunteers in providing practical support to each individual participant and creating an informal, comfortable environment:

> *'The student / volunteer ratio is good and there are plenty of volunteers to help them'.*
>
> *'The volunteers are very approachable … they chat, they have a laugh, but they still get the job done'.*
>
> *'It's been very comprehensive –the laminated information sheet, the curriculum, spread out over a good timeframe … it's been very enjoyable … a good bit of banter'.*
>
> *'I didn't know what to expect but it has been very enjoyable, and not at all like school!'.*

Capacity to exercise rights and entitlements

The SAE course includes inputs to develop participants' awareness of their rights and entitlements, including information on Advice NI's own POP NI and Rights4Seniors websites.

Analysis of statistics relating to the use of these sites shows an increase in their usage over the time frame of the project; for example, unique page views for Rights4Seniors have increased from 60,878 views in 2013-14 to 145,767 views in 2017-18. While this change may not be fully attributable to SAE as the sites are also promoted through Advice NI's other work with older people and are accessible by anyone who wishes, it is likely that at least some of the increased traffic is as a result of awareness-raising through the training programme.

From Advice NI's perspective, this is an important indicator that older people who participate in SAE have better awareness of, and confidence in accessing the resources available:

'People are empowered to get advice … they are often frightened of government forms, but Rights4Seniors gives them a tool kit that they can go and search themselves …it's about helping people find solutions to their problems'.

It had originally been anticipated that older people would sign up to online discussion forums. However, this target was reviewed in agreement with the Big Lottery Fund when it became evident that SAE participants were reluctant to actively contribute to or engage in this mechanism.

Awareness-raising about the Ombudsman and the use of Resolver has also been built into SAE's course content, to provide older people with information and resources to support them in making a complaint. Data gathered through the end-of-training participants' survey indicates that 89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they feel confident to make a complaint (against a target of 50%). The same proportion also assert that they know how to access online information regarding complaints procedures (against a target of 75%).

Increased benefit uptake and money resources

Training inputs have been supplemented with individualised follow-up advice and support on specific queries to those who request this. As described earlier, this element of the project was previously delivered through SAE's Information and Advice Officer but is now provided by South City Advice Centre.

The work includes undertaking benefits entitlement checks and, as of March 2018, 2475 such checks have been carried out; the amount of benefit monies recovered over the five years of SAE totalled £777,905. The overall 5-year target for this element of the project was that 3000 residents would have had a benefits entitlements check but, based on project experience, this was subsequently reduced to 1500 so the data indicates that the revised target is now being exceeded.

This aspect of SAE's work can be fairly resource-intensive. South City Advice Centre is tasked with providing benefits entitlement checks to project participants from across Northern Ireland (as was the previous SAE Information and Advice Officer) and this represents a considerable level of demand both in terms of numbers and geographically. As residents will generally have already been advised and supported within their schemes about their entitlement to means-tested benefits, the focus of SAE's work in this respect is mainly on non-means tested benefits and can include complex and often sensitive issues, sometimes requiring involvement of a resident's family members. Despite these challenges, the benefits entitlement checks and individualised support is seen as a highly valuable element of the project and one which has been made available, not just to training participants, but to other residents within the housing schemes (for example, through 'clinics' or referrals to Advice NI); it was commented:

'The project has been amazing … it has brought a lot of money to people'.

The following short case studies illustrate how the benefits check element of the project has supported older people in terms of raising awareness about possible entitlements and assisting them through the process of engaging with the relevant agencies and organisations to access these; they also provide an insight into the complexities which can arise, and the nature of the support required.

Client A is an 85 year old widower who has been living in sheltered accommodation for four years; he had previously sold his own home and had some savings. He was concerned that, compared to other residents, his rent seemed quite high. Through SAE he accessed advice and applications were subsequently made to Land Property Services and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. This resulted in a refund of £900 and a reduction in his rent of £80 per month; his rates were also reduced. An application has also been made for Attendance Allowance; the outcome is currently pending.

Client B is a 67 year old widow also living in sheltered accommodation. Through the SAE benefits entitlement check, she was found to be in receipt of all her means-tested benefits. She requested assistance in completing a Blue Badge application but was not on the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) level to warrant an application. She did have mobility problems, but had never applied for Attendance Allowance (AA) or DLA as she found filling in the forms difficult. Through discussion, it was identified that she should apply for Attendance Allowance at the lower level. She did not have the medical evidence required so an appointment was set up with her GP to retrieve this. An application was completed with the medical evidence included, and a final decision on her award is pending; this should result in an extra £220 per month. The process has also generated the evidence needed for her to request a Blue Badge for her car.

Enhanced connections

Feedback gathered for the evaluation indicates the way in which developing their digital confidence, skills and abilities to use the internet for a whole range of purposes is providing older people with a means of connecting, not only with their families but with the wider world, creating opportunities to pursue and develop their interests:

> *'It opens up new spheres to them … they can email relatives, use it to FaceTime, do online shopping, they become part of the technological revolution'.*

Coming together in a group to engage in the programme has also been an important element of this connecting. Older people reported on the sense of enjoyment that they had from attending the weekly training sessions and commented on the way in which they were getting to know other people from within their scheme; this was reinforced by feedback from scheme co-ordinators who were able to see first-hand the impact which the course was having on participants. One volunteer summarised the impact of this aspect of the project as follows:

> *'It's creating connections - within the group amongst the people who take part, with family as they can connect better and talk to them and to the wider world, through Facebook.'*

Overall, data gathered by the project indicates that to date, of those 383 participants who responded to the end-of-training survey, 88% report that they feel less isolated (against a target of 50%). The same percentage report an improvement to their health and wellbeing as a result of participation in Supporting Active Engagement.

The following case studies provide examples of how Supporting Active Engagement works in practice, illustrating the benefits of the project as perceived from the perspectives of older people and scheme co-ordinators.

Case study: Fold A

Fold A is located in Belfast and provides accommodation for 46 people ranging in age from late 50's to early 90's. Within the scheme, there is a strong emphasis on promoting a sense of community and residents have the opportunity to engage in a range of activities – including intergenerational projects – to help connect them with each other and beyond.

In bringing the SAE course to the Fold, the scheme co-ordinator recognised that while many residents did own a device (and some had previously taken part in basic digital training), they were not confident in using it or exploiting its full potential. From her perspective, technology is a key element in tackling social isolation:

> *'You face great isolation when you want to go out socially but your body won't let you … the iPad is the key to connecting with the world'.*

SAE was seen as a way of helping residents develop the skills needed to use their devices safely so that they could make this connection. The course was delivered in early 2018, and 10-12 residents took part.

For residents, developing their digital skills was a key motivation for participating in SAE. Some had used Skype to communicate with family members living abroad, but they wanted to learn more about what else the device could do. They were concerned that technology is constantly changing, and that there could be a lot of *'jargon'* associated with it:

> *'I don't need to know all of that, I just need to know how to use the thing!'*

Participants have benefited in terms of both knowledge and confidence:

> *'Before, when I was using it (the device) I was making lots of mistakes, but I've learnt simple things so that I can do it better'.*

> *'Last week, when we had such bad snow, they learnt how to look up everything around the weather … when you know how to use the technology, you get a sense of security around what is right and wrong online … it puts them at ease'*.

They have subsequently been able to use the device for a whole range of purposes, including searching for information about restaurants, theatres, church and travel, as well as pursuing individual interests such as games and family history:

> *'It's having a really positive impact … connecting them into wider interests and into the wider world'*

All of the residents who had participated had been helped to set up email addresses and were using these to communicate both with family members and with other organisations:

> *'People were still thinking that they needed to write letters and then go and send them which they couldn't easily do – now they have email addresses and can get in touch with companies if they have a query … they are all set up for this'.*

Using the device to connect with family members was especially important, and residents reported now using email to send and receive photos and to engage with groups of people simultaneously:

> *'We now know how to send emails to more than one person … you can communicate with lots of people about the same thing at the same time – before you would have been copying the email to each person, one at a time'.*

Social connections have also been forged within the Fold through the group coming together for the training each week.

> *'We have a good laugh – it's good craic, we get on well together and are getting to know other people in the Fold'.*

> *'It gives a sense of community … they are all learning together and assisting each other outside the classes. It has been about breaking down barriers and creating a family in the Fold'.*

The focus on technology was seen as being a *'good way of getting men involved'*.

The course had also raised awareness of *'sites relevant to older people'* and provided access to information on things like benefits and entitlements and how to complain. This knowledge, combined with greater confidence in using digital technology, was seen as helping to increase participants' independence:

> *'Being able to go online saves a lot of calls – if you needed help you would have to go to an advice centre, but this has taught you how to look things up'.*

> *'We now know how to do it!'.*

Case Study: Fold B

Fold B is in Armagh and contains 35 flats for people aged 55+. The scheme co-ordinator had heard about SAE from her colleagues in other folds and knew that there was an interest in this type of training among some of the residents. She also felt that, as Radius increasingly uses technology, it was important that tenants would be able to go online to do things like report repairs.

The SAE programme was delivered during February and March 2018 and although it *'got off to a slow start'* with only two residents attending initially, that number eventually grew to eight; other people in the scheme are also now asking about the possibility of taking part in any future training.

For most of the participants, prior to the training programme they had been apprehensive about using digital technology:

> *'I had a tablet but I was afraid of it … I was worried and thinking that I needed to be careful about what you do with it … I wanted to be able to protect myself'.*

While some had previous computer experience, they were aware that technology had developed significantly and there was:

> *'… a feeling that I was being left behind – I knew how to work it all years ago, but things are*

moving on'.

'I heard everyone talking about 'asking Google' and I wanted to be able to ask too!'.

SAE had taken away some of their fears, enabling them to do things which they had not previously been able to including emailing, searching online and taking photographs. Although their confidence had increased, there were still some reservations:

'It's been marvellous to see what you can do, the information you can get … at the same time, you wouldn't want to get into it too far'.

Participants therefore saw the training as *'a start'* and agreed that *'more practice'* would help to build their skills. One commented:

'The language is all different – they talked about 'apps' but I didn't know what that was and I only thought of 'accounts' in terms of finance … we've been learning to deal with a whole new language as well as the machine. Other people take the language for granted but for us, this has been part of our learning too'.

Through the programme, residents had also learned about the information available through Rights4Seniors and were now aware that *'there is lots of money which is unclaimed out there, and you may be entitled to it'*. They felt that they would be able to make complaints using Resolver and saw the potential benefits of this:

'It makes you think that you could use this to make complaints online instead of hanging on to the phone for ages'.

Socially, SAE had created an opportunity for residents to come together and given them *'something in common to talk about'*. Participants in this group were not so interested in using tools such as Skype to connect with family and friends, but they had enjoyed having more contact with other residents: *'it's lovely to have a chat with others and have a good laugh'*. One emphasised the way in which attending the training had provided a focus:

'It breaks up the day and gives you something to do … it means you are not looking at the four walls all day … and keeps your mind active'.

2.4 How organisations / providers benefit from SAE

The organisations which can benefit from Supporting Active Engagement are the providers of support and services to older people - in particular, Fold and subsequently Radius Housing Association and the individual housing schemes which have engaged. The Theory of Change for SAE sets out the following anticipated outcomes at this level:

- Enhanced support to residents / users
- Improved digital infrastructure
- Enhanced awareness of sources of information, resources, services
- Enhanced relationships between older people and providers

The partnership relationship with first Fold and then subsequently Radius has been crucial to the success of Supporting Active Engagement. For Advice NI, it has provided the means of promoting the digital training programme, accessing the project's target group of older people and facilitating delivery. The transition period leading up to the establishment of Radius, coupled with staffing issues within SAE, did have an impact upon engagement and delivery for a time, but this was a short-term situation and did not impact adversely on the project in the longer term. By the end of the fifth year of project operation, in March 2018, a total of 49 housing schemes have participated, with 10 facilitating the delivery of the SAE course on more than one occasion.

Enhanced support to residents

From the perspective of Radius, partnering with Advice NI on the development and implementation of Supporting Active Engagement has been motivated by an interest in supporting residents with respect to three key areas - promoting digital inclusion, promoting social engagement and benefits maximisation – and the project is seen as having successfully delivered on all of these. The development of digital skills is perceived to have enhanced residents' ability to connect with families and friends and with the wider world, whilst the rights-based focus also enables them to access advice and support to obtain the benefits and resources which they may not previously have been availing of.

For Radius, it has also been important that SAE's training has been delivered onsite, thereby enabling residents – including those with physical impairments or people who may sometimes be reluctant to participate in activities – to engage:

> *'It's brought out people who wouldn't have come out to the coffee mornings but the digital bit was a carrot which got people into the common rooms … it has in part been about reaching people in the community who wouldn't normally avail of this'.*

Improved digital infrastructure

As well as helping Radius to meet its objectives in relation to enhancing the lives of residents, the project has had a number of other organisational benefits. In the first instance, it has contributed to the development of an IT infrastructure across the housing schemes with wifi connection now installed and available to both staff and residents via the common rooms (although not yet necessarily within all of

the individual residences); this represents a significant investment by Radius and the resultant coverage means that the project has considerably exceeded its original target that 15 schemes would improve IT accessibility within their environments.

Enhanced awareness of sources of information, resources, services

Scheme co-ordinators have been an important element in enabling the implementation of SAE and although not all schemes have availed of training, staff have generally been positive in terms of their engagement with the project. Co-ordinators have worked closely with SAE in promoting the training to their residents, encouraging people to get involved and facilitating delivery (for example, through preparing rooms, sitting in on the classes and helping out as required). They themselves report benefits from the relationship with Advice NI in terms of increased awareness of resources such as the Rights4Seniors website and enhanced ability to signpost residents to other sources of help.

Enhanced relationships

The project is also seen as having helped to strengthen the relationship between scheme staff and residents:

> *'People were looking more to the co-ordinators and able to say 'look at what you've helped us to do' – it's changed the way in which residents looked at the co-ordinators'.*

At the same time, the training has promoted greater awareness and confidence amongst residents, and empowered them to pursue issues independently without relying on the co-ordinator for assistance:

> *'Letters from service providers contain website addresses, so instead of always coming to me for advice, they will use that information themselves and follow up with queries'.*

> *'On the one hand, they're coming to me to ask for help with their devices, but at the same time, they can now Google and look things up for themselves'.*

As SAE has evolved, it has extended its reach beyond the housing association to engage with other organisations which support older people and other vulnerable groups. Much of this has been as a result of the current Project Manager's existing connections with a range of different groups within the community and has led to the delivery of training to participants from for example, older people from the Cantonese-speaking community and refugees/asylum seekers. For the project, this is seen as moving beyond the social inclusion element which currently underpins the project to a wider focus on *'community integration'* with digital training providing a means of helping to connect very excluded groups into wider society.

At this stage, it is perhaps early days to assess the benefits which have accrued to these organisations through their involvement in SAE. For the final extension year of the project, it may therefore be useful to establish a mechanism to gauge feedback from other providers in terms of their motivation for engagement and perspectives on what has been achieved for their particular target/user group.

2.5 Organisational outcomes

Beyond the outcomes which have been achieved for direct beneficiaries of Supporting Active Engagement, as an organisation Advice NI has also benefited significantly from the development and implementation of the project. The following section looks at this in terms of:

- Enhancing the organisation's capacity to deliver support to older people
- Contributing to learning and practice development

Enhanced organisational capacity

In terms of enhancing Advice NI's capacity to deliver rights-based digital inclusion training and support to older people, perhaps the most obvious outworking of this from Supporting Active Engagement has been through the development of volunteering. When the project was first established, this was a relatively new area of activity for Advice NI but through SAE, a set of resources have been devised to support the recruitment, induction and ongoing support of volunteers; these continue to be reviewed and currently include:

- Volunteer or 'internet champion' role description
- Advice NI volunteering policy and procedures for, for example, expenses, etc
- Volunteer registration form
- Volunteer induction checklist
- Volunteer agreement

It had originally been intended that SAE volunteers would largely be drawn from housing scheme residents who participated in the project but in practice, issues around the capacity and confidence of individuals to take on the role of 'internet champion' meant that this did not happen as anticipated (although the volunteer pool currently includes one scheme resident who has been volunteering with the project from its early days). Currently the main mechanisms for recruitment include the Volunteer Now website, general promotional activities and articles in Advice Matters (Advice NI's own newsletter).

SAE aimed to recruit 12 volunteers per annum and, the project has achieved this target with just over 60 individuals having provided voluntary input over its five years of operation; there is currently a pool of 13 volunteers. The current volunteers come from a range of backgrounds - educational, health and digital, for example – and include people from different ethnic backgrounds. They have been engaged for various lengths of time – from just a few months to almost five years. Their reasons for volunteering with SAE include sharing their existing skills and passion for digital technology and learning, as well as personal motivation around learning new skills and self-development.

Volunteers are required to go through a structured process which includes registration of interest, completing an application form, reference check and Access NI check. An important element of the process lies in assessing their motivation for volunteering with SAE, as well as their skills to act as 'internet champions' and ability to share their digital knowledge appropriately with SAE's target audience of older people. In terms of practice, volunteers generally operate under a peer support system whereby individuals shadow the Digital Support and Information Worker or are paired up with

another experienced volunteer to deliver training. They are provided with opportunities to access training including Advice NI's Advantage training and age awareness training; more recently, this has been extended to include, for example training on human rights and equality issues and on using online tools and software to support people who have sight loss.

From Advice NI's perspective, volunteers are seen as having contributed significantly to the effective operation of Supporting Active Engagement, and to the organisation more broadly:

> *'They bring different skills, motivations, with a huge level of commitment … we couldn't deliver the project without the volunteers … and there has been a lot of learning for us about why people volunteer and the value of having them … they have definitely informed our wider strategy around volunteering'*.

The volunteers themselves can clearly identify their contribution to SAE. While supporting the development of digital skills is the key part of their role, they see that they have a particular value in helping to address participants' fears and concerns about using technology and in building confidence:

> '*I wouldn't describe myself as a teacher, but it's about putting people at their ease – they are often frightened of IT and they can relate to me … I tell them 'if I can do it, you can!'*
>
> *'A tech background of some sort does help but it's about helping people not to be afraid … for some of them, that's as much as it is about – not being afraid, removing the fear from using it'.*
>
> *'It's about reassurance – that nothing bad can happen and that it is safe to try things out'.*

They have been able to see the tangible benefits which come through their input to the project in terms of empowering older people, creating connections both within the group and beyond and helping to address issues of loneliness and isolation. Volunteers also report that they themselves have benefited from participation in SAE including developing their own confidence and skills (including, for some, their language skills) as well as a sense of contributing positively not only to the lives of participants but to the development of the project itself (for example, through putting forward ideas such as the production of a laminated information sheet for older people).

Feedback suggests that volunteers generally feel well supported within Supporting Active Engagement. They value the inputs provided by the project staff in terms of practical technical support as well as more general motivation and encouragement. Volunteers were particularly positive about the peer support approach adopted within the project; this was seen as helping new volunteers *'shadow'* more established volunteers and develop their understanding of the SAE programme content and how it should be delivered:

> *'It's good to pick things up like how to deliver the training, how to pitch it to meet the customer base … everyone teaches differently, it's good to see other people doing it'.*

This element of mutual learning and support has the potential for further development. While there have been various opportunities for volunteers to come together over the duration of the project, this dropped off to an extent during the period when there were no SAE staff in place, although it is gathering momentum again as the new postholders have become established. This has included, for

example, a 'Meet the Team' event in September 2017 and a Christmas event in December 2017. All of the volunteers consulted for the evaluation indicated that they would welcome more opportunities to meet and share experiences and ideas.

This could be extended to include further training opportunities. All volunteers undergo an induction to the project which was seen as fairly basic and perhaps not fully relevant to the role of internet champion (the shadowing was seen as more useful in this respect). Some have also attended specific training around for example, dementia awareness, equality and human rights, and supporting people with sight loss. However, it was suggested that that there may be other areas for skills development. For example, volunteers are not currently qualified or able to give rights-based advice (although they can access Advice NI training on this if they wish); however, it may be useful for them to have a better awareness of the rights environment in which SAE is operating and which underpins its ethos:

> *'It would be useful to come together around Rights4Seniors … things are changing, new things are happening, so it would be about keeping us up to date, sharing resources, ideas on the development of the course and where it is going, as well as to think about practical things like whether iPads are the best approach …it's about this kind of discussion'.*

Developing opportunities for more training will become increasingly important as the project continues to evolve and deliver training beyond the core target audience of older people in housing schemes. As described previously, recent developments have included working with the Cantonese-speaking community and asylum seekers/refugees, and the volunteers have welcomed and embraced the opportunity to extend the project's reach. In the longer term, however, this may require different skills sets to meet the particular needs which these groups may have. This includes the need for bilingual volunteers for example, and the project already has successfully recruited a small number of such individuals. Beyond this, volunteers have also identified challenges faced by some ethnic groups in terms of very low levels of literacy (not only in English, but also in their own language), subsequent difficulties in using the letters on the iPads and high levels of exclusion in terms of accessing, understanding and using online information and resources.

Providing opportunities for further training and networking would of course have to be appropriate to volunteer needs and their capacity to commit the time required; some commented on the practical challenges of attending activities in Belfast when they were coming from other parts of the region and the delivery of any support activities needs to take account of the commitment which individuals are already making on a voluntary basis.

Learning and practice development

Learning and practice development has both an internal and an external focus. In terms of the former, there is a strong emphasis within Advice NI on sharing learning from the work with older people and using this to inform new developments, and this has also been important within the context of Supporting Active Engagement. As described earlier in this report, SAE emerged from the Rights4Seniors project and in its early years, up to 2014, was closely connected with the POP NI and Manage Your Money Better projects. The 2014 'shared measurement' evaluation of these three projects emphasised

the *'synergies'* which had been created between them, *'connecting and learning from each other in order to inform and support the development and roll-out of their respective areas of work'*.

This is something which has continued since that time, with learning from SAE feeding into the ongoing development of both the POP NI and Rights4Seniors websites; this has included the production of a number of videos which capture the views of participants on their experience of the project. The experience from Supporting Active Engagement has been used to inform the development of another project for older people by Advice NI – Building Resilience in Retirement (BRIR). This one-year initiative, funded through the Money Advice Service's 'What Works? Fund', aims to improve the financial capability of older people via a six-week digital inclusion training programme. It is targeted at older people who were identified through SAE as being particularly 'hard to reach' - older men, older people from BME groups and older people receiving general support services. BRIR's programme content and approach drew on the learning from SAE, and in turn, some of the materials developed through the project have been fed back into the Rights4Seniors website and Supporting Active Engagement.

Beyond internal learning and development, Advice NI has also actively sought out opportunities to engage with external organisations and agencies in order to deliver messages about digital inclusion, information poverty and older people. At a strategic level, the 2014 evaluation report on the three older people's projects, including SAE, was shared with Citizen's Online who were commissioned by the Department of Finance's Digital Inclusion Unit to provide a report on a baseline of digital inclusion in NI. Advice NI is also represented on Digital Assist, an initiative set up by Business in the Community which brings together public, private and voluntary/community organisations working in the digital skills arena which provides a means of sharing knowledge and experience with a broad audience.

Other recent activities specific to Supporting Active Engagement include:

- *Input to conferences* including the Digital Resilience Across the Lifespan conference run by Western Health and Social Care Trust in February 2018
- *Attendance at conferences and networking events* including the NI Impact Forum Conference: 'Setting the Agenda for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland', the Pensioner's Parliament Conference and the AONTAS Community Education Conference in November 2017
- *Submissions to awards* including the All Ireland AONTAS Star Awards for Adult Learning (which the organisation won in 2015) and the Age Friendly Volunteer Award (2017)
- *Representation on relevant strategic bodies or initiatives* including The European Platform for Adult Learners
- *Production of articles* including for the European Platform for Adult Learners on vocational learning and peer to peer learning
- *Others* including forthcoming delivery of a session on 'Issues for Older People' for the Western Health and Social Care Trust's Digi-PAL Training for Trainers pilot.

It is worth highlighting too, that Advice NI's Head of ICT who has been responsible for overseeing the project's work has just recently been awarded a Churchill Fellowship bursary to travel to Australia and Japan and explore how digital inclusion programmes there are motivating older people to go online and reap the benefits of the internet. This represents a significant opportunity to draw on and learn from others in the field, and use this to enhance organisational practice.

3. Strategic 'fit' of the SAE model

3.1 Introduction

The 2014 evaluation of Advice NI's three older people's projects concluded:

> *'This evaluation provides a validation of the potential role of digital inclusion projects in facilitating older people's access to rights and entitlements while also contributing to the achievement of policy objectives of reducing isolation, improving social engagement and enhancing well-being … Advice NI has coordinated different perspectives including digital technology, older people and volunteering and integrated these into a coherent programme which is more than the 'sum of its parts'.*

The model described in 2014 continues to pertain in 2018 as the project enters into its final stage of delivery under Big Lottery Fund funding. In the following section we explore in more detail the 'fit' between the core elements of the Supporting Active Engagement model - - digital inclusion of older people, tackling information poverty, supporting health and wellbeing of the target group, and volunteering - and the wider environment in which the project is being delivered. This is important in terms of thinking about the future development and positioning of Advice NI's rights-based digital inclusion work with older people.

The section draws on a review of some of the key policies. It also reflects the consultation undertaken with external strategic stakeholders from relevant fields; while they were not all familiar with the specifics of Supporting Active Engagement, they provided useful comment in relation to the strategic context for the project and the relevant issues and challenges.

3.2 Digital inclusion of older people

The development of Supporting Active Engagement was underpinned by a recognition that in Northern Ireland, a substantial proportion of older people are digitally excluded, not only as a result of limitations in the digital infrastructure across some parts of the region, but also because of a lack of digital skills. A baseline report produced by Citizens Online in 2017 - 'Digital Resilience, Digital Partnership' - indicates that more than half of those in the 65+ age group in Northern Ireland do not make use of the internet.

The current policy context places a focus on digital transformation of public services and reinforces the importance of all citizens (including older people) being supported to develop their digital confidence and skills. This is reflected in the draft Programme for Government which contains *Outcome 11: We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure* and indicator *Usage of online channels to access public services;* the associated delivery plan includes actions relating to digital transformation and increasing citizens' ability to use online services; it also emphasises the role of the third sector as a partner in supporting this. The Digital Transformation Team within the Department for Finance is tasked with taking forward this agenda via 'Digital First'; as part of its remit, the Team is currently working towards the development and implementation of a number of evidence-based 'pathfinder' projects relating to digital inclusion. These potential new developments will sit alongside other existing

government-supported initiatives which support people to develop their digital skills, including for example, Go ON NI.

The importance of digital inclusion of older people is reflected in comments from the external stakeholders consulted for the evaluation. They acknowledged the challenges facing older people – particularly as digital technology continues to evolve and become increasingly prevalent - and the benefits of providing support to help address these; they particularly highlighted the importance of strengthening both motivation and confidence to go online:

> *'There are specific challenges for older people – especially around the motivation of why do they need to get involved, but it's essential when you see the external factors such as cuts to transport, banks closing, renewing prescriptions … people are needing to be online, so it's about changing mind-sets'.*

> *'Older people do have fears about getting online and you could underestimate that as a barrier. Cost and access aren't as big an issue in many cases, but motivation, skills and lack of interest are bigger challenges'.*

Stakeholders also commented on the importance of the approach adopted to developing the digital motivation, confidence and skills of older people. They acknowledged the need for a model of delivery which is accessible – particularly to those who may have physical or other challenges to engagement – and the value of outreach within communities. Their feedback also emphasised the importance of delivering digital training in a *'comfortable'* environment and in a way which is conducive to the learning needs and styles of the target group, and which helps to *'embed'* skills:

> *'It's not just about silver surfers – useful though that can be – it's about a more fundamental use of technology in people's daily lives'.*

Some also commented on the value of training being delivered through a trusted, external source which can *'help people feel safe, giving them the confidence to learn and do it in a safe way'*, and there was reference too to the potential benefits of, for example, intergenerational digital projects: *'younger people who are technically savvy can be a good support'*.

3.3 Tackling information poverty

Being digitally excluded can present people with a range of difficulties in accessing all kinds of online information, resources and services. As noted above, the transformation agenda means that public services are increasingly connecting with people via primarily digital means, and changes in technology will mean that some elements of services such as health may increasingly be delivered in this way. This in turn excludes older people from the advantages to be gained from using the information, resources and services which are available online. As noted by one external stakeholder:

> *'Information poverty is having a financial impact … things like online billing allows people to get discounts but older people are missing out on this … they're getting hit with additional charges. For the younger generation, a lot of this is instinct …they are used to doing things this way, but*

for others it is like they are living in a different world … people without access are at a distinct disadvantage'

Through Supporting Active Engagement, Advice NI has as a rights-based organisation, established a vehicle for enabling older people - particularly those who are hard to reach and vulnerable – to begin to access the information, advice and support they need in order to exercise their rights and avail of benefits and entitlements. Strategically, this element of the work aligns with the Department for Communities responsibility for generalist advice services, and in particular *'Advising, Supporting, Empowering – A Strategy for delivering generalist advice services in Northern Ireland 2015-20'* (produced by the previous Department for Social Development). Particularly pertinent is *Objective 1: To empower and enable people to help themselves* through providing people with the *'tools, skills and confidence to better manage their affairs'*, and informing, supporting and empowering them to help themselves. *Objective 4: To maximise accessibility to quality generalist advice services* is also relevant, with a focus on increasing and promoting the use of digital and telephony services.

This aspect of SAE's work is also relevant to current developments around welfare reform and changes to benefits (including in particular, Universal Credit) which primarily takes a 'digital by default' approach, necessitating the provision of information, advice and support to enable people to understand their entitlements and how to access these. Whilst Universal Credit is primarily aimed at working age people, there are important welfare reform changes which will impact on Pension Credit if one of the members of a couple is under the qualifying age.

In respect of information poverty, Supporting Active Engagement may also be seen as aligning with *'Lifetime Opportunities'*- the government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland. Produced in 2010 by the then Office for First and Deputy First Minister, the strategy is structured around a number of priorities including *Eliminating Poverty* and *Eliminating Social Exclusion*. It includes specific reference to 'older citizens beyond working age' and emphasises the need for *'having sufficient income to meet needs, including through increasing awareness and take-up of financial entitlement, particularly for those reliant on benefit income'*.

In addition, responsibility for debt advice now sits with the Department for Communities and work is currently under way to develop a debt and financial capability strategy for Northern Ireland. While the propensity to borrow declines with age, there is concern that problems arising from borrowing and inter-generational issues related to debt and financial capability will be an ongoing problem for many older people.

Other relevant initiatives include work currently being undertaken by the multi-sectoral Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership (HASP) to develop a new Age-Friendly Belfast Plan for 2018-2021. The Plan, which will be aligned with both The Belfast Agenda and the draft Programme for Government, is anticipated to include a number of outcomes around the theme of 'financial security' of older people.

3.4 Promoting well-being

Within the context of Supporting Active Engagement, wellbeing has a number of interconnected dimensions and includes financial as well as social aspects. The former is addressed particularly through

tackling information poverty as described above, while the latter comes particularly through the connections which participants are able to develop - with each other, with their families and friends and with the wider community and 'outside' world.

Recent research demonstrates the importance of this connectedness against the backdrop of a growing 'epidemic' of isolation and loneliness within society. For example, the Rotary Club's State of the Nation 2018 survey which has just been published (February 2018) reports that nearly two thirds (64%) of those questioned feel lonely; this cuts across all sections of the community and not just older people. 2016 saw the establishment of a Commission for Loneliness, and the subsequent creation in 2018 of a UK Minister for Loneliness.

In Northern Ireland, the Active Ageing Strategy 2016-21 aims to enable people to enjoy longer, healthy and active lives, whilst ensuring that appropriate support is there for those who need it. It promotes an emphasis on rights, value and contribution of older people, as opposed to needs, costs and burden. Of particular relevance to the work of Supporting Active Engagement is *Strategic Aim 2: Participation* which refers to the need to *'achieve the active participation of older people in all aspects of life, including social participation and volunteering opportunities which help address isolation and loneliness'*. Other developments include, for example, the Commissioner for Older People's corporate plan and priorities which include *'social inclusion: ensuring older people remain connected to where they want to be and to their families and friends'* and *'highlight(ing) the benefits of older people getting online and encouraging digital inclusion'.*

Feedback from external stakeholders reinforces the value of digital inclusion as a means of promoting social inclusion, and ultimately impacting on wellbeing; as commented by one representative:

> *'Living longer healthier lives is about remaining connected to society, enabling older people to be connected to the world around them … digital inclusion is part of wider social inclusion'.*

3.5 Promoting volunteering

Volunteering is an underpinning feature of Supporting Active Engagement. It acts as a means of supporting organisational capacity to deliver the digital training programme, but also importantly has an inherent value in itself for the individuals who take up the role of 'internet champions' within the project.

This aspect of the project is relevant in terms of *'Join In, Get Involved: Build a Better Future: A Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan for Northern Ireland*' produced by the previous Department for Social Development in 2012; this aimed to re-energise and increase levels of volunteering. Subsequently, responsibility for volunteering has been vested in the Department for Communities, and work is currently underway to develop a 'refreshed' volunteering strategy for the period 2018-21.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Introduction

This evaluation report represents the completion of the original five-year Supporting Active Engagement project. While SAE has a further year to run under its extension agreement with Big Lottery Fund, the evaluation has presented a timely opportunity to reflect on achievements to date and also, importantly, to provide a basis for Advice NI to look beyond March 2019 when current funding will come to an end. The following section presents the key conclusions from the evaluation and highlights some issues for consideration in thinking about the future.

4.2 Key achievements

The table overleaf draws on the data presented throughout the report and summarises the key achievements relating to Supporting Active Engagement, structured across the three outcome levels – older people, providers and organisational.

Table: Summary of achievements of Supporting Active Engagement

Outcomes for older people	Outcomes for providers
SAE has partnered with Fold, and subsequently Radius Housing Association, to access and engage **older people** in housing schemes across Northern Ireland	A total of **49 Fold/Radius housing schemes have participated** in the programme
Onsite delivery of the training has ensured that it has been made **accessible** to scheme residents, including those with physical impairments	There has been **investment in digital infrastructure** and all participating schemes have installed wifi in their communal areas
Over the 5 years of SAE, **632 people** have participated in the programme	Scheme co-ordinators have **increased awareness of resources** - including Rights4Seniors - and enhanced their ability to signpost to sources of support
96% of respondents to an end-of-training survey report **increased confidence and skills in using digital technology** for a range of purposes	There has been **empowerment** of residents who are better able to find information and deal with some issues independently
They are **more aware of resources and information** relating to their rights and entitlements and 89% report feeling **confident to make a complaint**	SAE has supported Radius (and previously Fold) to **meet its own objectives** in enhancing residents' lives through digital inclusion, social engagement and benefits maximisation
SAE dealt with **2475 benefit enquiries** and **£777,905** of additional monies has been levered	The project has begun to **extend its reach**, providing opportunities for other groups and organisations to access the training programme for their users
Participants have **enhanced connections at different levels** – with other residents in their scheme, with friends and family and with the wider world	
88% of survey respondents report feeling **less isolated** after participating in SAE	
The same percentage – 88% - report **improved health and wellbeing**	

Organisational outcomes
SAE has been **delivered broadly in line with its original funding agreement** with the Big Lottery Fund, although it has had to **adopt and amend its approach** in response to both internal and external circumstances
A strong **partnership relationship** has been established with Radius (and previously Fold) Housing Association to support project development and implementation
There has been **collaborative working** with South City Advice Centre and with other voluntary/community groups and organisations to facilitate delivery
SAE has produced a **body of resources** including course content and website materials which have potential application to other elements of Advice NI's work
Policies and procedures to support volunteering have been developed, and the project has informed **Advice NI's wider strategy and approach to volunteering**
There is a **body of enthusiastic volunteers** bringing a range of skills and experiences who are **crucial in supporting the project's capacity to deliver**
Learning has been shared internally and used to **inform new developments** in respect of Advice NI's rights-based digital inclusion work with older people
Advice NI has actively engaged with external organisations and agencies in a variety of ways in order to **promote its message and learning**

The evaluation demonstrates SAE's significant achievements over the duration of the original five-year funding agreement with the Big Lottery Fund. It also demonstrates the 'fit' between the project, and indeed Advice NI's rights-based digital inclusion work more broadly, in relation to a number of strategic themes including digital inclusion of older people, tackling information poverty, promoting wellbeing and volunteering.

4.3 Moving forward

The evaluation has highlighted a number of issues for consideration in the future development and delivery of this project and Advice NI's digital inclusion work more widely; these are outlined below.

Strengthening the SAE programme

The evaluation demonstrates how the 10-12 week SAE training programme has benefited older people in developing their digital skills and enhancing awareness of rights and entitlements and how to exercise these. The Building Resilience in Retirement project which has run alongside SAE over the last twelve months has been built on a similar model, but of a shorter duration (6 weeks) and incorporating issues relating specifically to financial capability. BRIR has now ended (as of March 2018) and it will therefore be important for Advice NI to consider how to integrate the most successful elements of that project into Supporting Active Engagement – particularly those components which older people perceived to be most relevant and useful (scamming and price comparison).

Some thought has already been given to this in terms of the final year of SAE, but there is a need to think in the longer-term about how the experiences, learning and resources of both projects can be integrated and packaged to provide the foundation for future training programmes. In this, it will be important for Advice NI to retain its focus on the rights-based element of the work, with the digital training acting as a means to achieving the organisation's broader goals in relation to supporting people to access their rights and entitlements, and not just an end in itself.

Extending reach

Supporting Active Engagement has, in the first instance, successfully focused on targeting older people whom research shows are at particular risk of digital exclusion and in turn can be excluded from accessing the information, resources and services available online. There is potentially a significant 'market' of older people to whom the project could be extended – not just through Radius schemes but more widely including in other sheltered housing schemes, as well as different community settings (as has already been demonstrated by the BRIR project). The market itself is not homogeneous and different needs may emerge over time (for example, amongst older people who already have digital skills acquired through work, for example, but who would benefit from the rights-based component of the training). It would be important for Advice NI to think about how to harness the opportunities which exist to access older people more widely including for example, connecting with other housing associations and age sector organisations.

Recent work undertaken within SAE has also demonstrated the project's ability to reach and engage other vulnerable groups – in particular, people from BME communities. This is potentially a new and

much broader audience for Advice NI's digital inclusion training and support. However, while the current programmes for older people have a clear 'home' within the organisation's Older People's Team, targeting different audiences will require Advice NI to clarify and articulate the rationale and purpose of this new focus. This would be important not only in ensuring that it fits with organisational ethos, but also in terms of positioning the work and strengthening the case for future resources.

Within Advice NI, there is also a sense that the training could be packaged and targeted at other audiences. The increasing requirement for people to go online to pursue benefit claims – in particular, Universal Credit – is one particular area of concern for the organisation and while some support is currently available through advice centres to assist claimants complete and submit their applications, there may be a need for more indepth training and support. Within the remit of this evaluation, it has not been possible to explore this potential, but it would be useful for Advice NI to consider scoping existing needs to inform the development of a range of options about how they could extend the reach of their training programme.

Organisational capacity

Extending reach does have implications in terms of organisational capacity to deliver. Some of the issues which require consideration include:

- The need for appropriate skills sets, or the ability to access the support needed to deliver to particular audiences; depending on the target group, this could include the need for more bilingual trainers or interpreters and the ability to deliver to people with disabilities or impairments.
- The appropriateness of having only one provider of benefits entitlement checks and individualised advice/support; expanded or increased demand may necessitate commissioning additional advice providers who can assist with the delivery of this element of the project.
- The continued need to develop and support a sufficient number and range (including geographical location) of volunteers who can support delivery of the training.

Strengthening volunteering

The use of volunteers has been critical in providing Advice NI with the capacity to deliver Supporting Active Engagement. This has been essential in terms of supplementing the work of the small project staff team and the volunteers have become a considerable asset not just for SAE in its current format, but potentially for the organisation more broadly, as it thinks about how to build on its rights-based digital inclusion work as well as develop its wider volunteering strategy. In the first instance, it is clearly important to maintain the interest and motivation of existing volunteers, and consultation undertaken for this evaluation indicates the value of offering them further training, development and support opportunities, particularly as SAE moves beyond its current target group of older people in sheltered housing schemes.

Since the evaluation fieldwork was completed, some work has already commenced on this. Quarterly meetings have recently been initiated to provide an opportunity for project staff and volunteers to come

together to share information, identify potential training needs and look at how they can better standardise project delivery (for example, in terms of resources, approaches to teaching). Similarly, a shared system has been established to enable volunteers to access materials, resources, minutes of meetings and information about relevant training and events. This will provide a useful support mechanism for individual volunteers as well as a basis for promoting a strong group identity.

Looking ahead, the peer-to-peer support model provides a means of helping to build up a broader volunteer base to support any expansion of the work into other geographical areas or communities of interest. As part of building up this base, it may also be useful for Advice NI to consider other volunteering models, including for example, intergenerational approaches which engage young people to help deliver support to the target group, whilst also providing them with opportunities to develop their own confidence and skills (including skills to enhance employability, if appropriate).

Enhancing collaboration

Linked to the issues of extending reach and organisational capacity, it would be important for Advice NI to explore the possibility of further collaboration in order to take forward its rights-based digital inclusion work. The organisation has already demonstrated its ability to collaborate first with Fold and more latterly with Radius Housing Associations in establishing Supporting Active Engagement, and has worked successfully with individual housing schemes to implement the project. It is also increasingly developing connections with a range of community-based organisations.

It would be useful to consider forming strategic relationships and alliances with others involved in the field to explore the potential for further development and roll out of the training programme. As noted previously, Advice NI is already represented on Digital Assist – the multi-sectoral group facilitated through Business in the Community – and this could provide one vehicle to begin to explore and develop collaborative projects.

Strategic positioning

The evaluation demonstrates that through Supporting Active Engagement, Advice NI has developed an effective model which combines elements of digital inclusion, addressing information poverty, social inclusion, targeting older people and volunteering. Each of the elements fit within the wider environment, aligning in various ways with a range of current policies, strategies and initiatives. It will be important for the organisation to continue to effectively position and promote its work in relation to these. The work currently being undertaken by the Department for Finance Digital Transformation Team may be one starting point for engagement, but Section 3 of this report also illustrates some of the other areas of alignment. Positioning and promoting SAE within this strategic environment is essential in terms of garnering support for the project (or any future development of it), and potentially accessing resources.

Strengthening the Advisory Group

In taking forward this strategic positioning in the external environment, Advice NI requires its own internal champions. An Advisory Group was established at the beginning of Supporting Active

Engagement comprising project partners and other relevant stakeholders from the age and digital inclusion sectors, and this was essential in informing the early development and implementation of the project. As SAE has been rolled out, the Group has perhaps been required to play a less strategic role and more of an operational oversight function. It would be useful to re-galvanise it as the project moves into its final year; representatives from different sectors could play a useful role in supporting strategic thinking about how the rights-based digital inclusion work should evolve and help promote its role and value.

Resourcing

Despite the opportunities which exist for the project, a key challenge lies in the lack of clear government funding streams for the type of work which is being delivered, and the absence of a legislative assembly to make decisions about future planning or resources. Some new opportunities may be forthcoming through for example the work of the Digital Transformation Team and as described in the points above, Advice NI needs to be positioned to harness and take advantage of these.

In the absence of any such resources, the organisation is currently different options including securing funding from other independent sources, with applications currently submitted or being considered in relation to a number of funders. Advice NI is also considering the possibility of developing a social enterprise model for its rights-based digital inclusion work; the extension funding from Big Lottery Fund includes resources to commission external consultancy advice and support on taking this forward over the coming year. This could potentially offer one route, but it is not an avenue which Advice NI has previously pursued and would have implications for the organisation which would need to be explored. Another area of interest is in relation to those business organisations (particularly ones in the field of digital technology) which may be interested in supporting this type of work as part of their corporate responsibilities. The organisation has already developed connections with Apple who have provided financial discounts for purchasing the iPads and have expressed interest in providing inputs to volunteers on different apps, for example.

These provide a range of options to explore, but the key in all of this will be for Advice NI, as a rights-based organisation, to maintain its focus on its core ethos and purpose.

Appendix 1: SAE outcomes and indicators

Theme	Outcomes	Indicators (incorporating targets identified within Big Lottery Fund application)
Participants	Harder to reach older people engaged	• Project has successfully employed strategies to actively target older people defined as harder to reach • Number of participants from categories defined as harder to reach.
	Digital awareness, knowledge, skills	• Number of older people who complete 10-12 week learning programme (target - 600) • Number of beneficiaries who receive training in accessing rights based information online (target - 600) • % of beneficiaries who report increased IT skills after learning (target 75%, 450 in total) • Number of older people who have increased access to web-based resources, incl Rghts4Seniors, POP NI, forum
	Capacity to exercise rights / access entitlements	• Older people report greater awareness about how to access information about rights and entitlements • Older people have increased confidence to access money related information and advice eg via R4S • Older people have increased confidence to exercise their rights • % of beneficiaries who assert that they now know how to access online information regarding complaints procedures (target 75% (450 in total) • % of beneficiaries who assert that they are now confident to make a complaint (target 50% (300 in total)
	Increased benefit take up and money resources	• Number of beneficiaries receiving benefits checks (target – 3000; reduced to 1500) • Amount of resources levered through benefit health checks • Older people report that they have feelings of enhanced independence and wellbeing through increased money resources / benefit take up
	Enhanced connections	• Older people report that they are better able to interact online both with one another and others • Increased social contacts outside the home and feel more connected within their community • % of beneficiaries who report that they feel less isolated after engaging with online social networking opportunities (target 50%, 300 in total) • Number of beneficiaries who report an improvement to their health /wellbeing (target – 450)
Providers	Enhanced support to residents / users	• Housing Association representatives report contribution of project to own organisational goals
	Improved infrastructure / capacity	• Number / types / locations / range of providers engaged in the project • % of schemes which improve IT accessibility within their environments (target 30% - 15 in total) • Providers report other developments to support improved digital inclusion of residents eg strategies/policies, development of staff/volunteers
	Enhanced delivery of information and support	• Providers feel better equipped to understand and support the needs of older people in relation to social, political and economic rights information • Providers are better able to signpost older people to information, resources, support around welfare rights, money management, etc
	Enhanced relationships between older people and providers	• There are improved opportunities for providers and residents to engage with each other • Providers consult and engage more with older people on various aspects of their care and well being • Older people feel more confident, better able to engage with r providers with respect to care/well being
Organisational	Enhanced capacity within Advice NI to deliver support to older people	• Advice NI has enhanced strategic and operational relationships with providers and other relevant stakeholders • Advice NI has developed improved resources / materials / mechanisms to support delivery, including a body of skilled volunteers • Advice NI has a model which supports the sustainability of its work with older people
	Learning and practice development	• There have been opportunities for networking and learning from SAE internally including amongst volunteers and across Advice NI stakeholders • There have been opportunities and mechanisms to share practice and learning from SAE externally • SAE has contributed to policy and practice development around digital inclusion support to enable older people to access rights and entitlements

Rights4Seniors team with the Aontas Star Award

Photographs courtesy of Nigel Hunter

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