Exploring the role and impact of learning and transnational learning in the RemoAge project

RemoAge Deliverable D.T4.4.1

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Contents

Introduction

This reports focuses on the learning that took place among the project teams in the RemoAge project. It highlights the key lessons learned, the facilitators and barriers to learning and focuses on the role and relevance of transnational learning within the project. Transnational learning refers to the ways in which partners learn together and from each other, within regions and countries and between countries. Learning is undertaken by individuals, groups and organisations and may be about research, policy and practice in care and support for frail older people and about the practicalities of implementing new programmes and ways of working. By reflecting on the learning within the RemoAge project we can highlight key lessons but also explore the processes which support or hinder learning. The cross-national nature of the project provided new opportunities for partners to share ideas and learn from each other and this report engages with the transnational aspects of learning in the discussion below.

How the findings from RemoAge were shared outwith the project team is touched upon here in the later parts of the report but the dissemination and communications report provides more detail on this aspect of the project.

Methods

The findings in this report are collected from a number of processes taking place during the RemoAge project that provided opportunities for learning among and between teams as well as time to reflect on learning across the project.

These activities included:

- Annual project meetings with dedicated time to network with all project teams, take part in conferences and public meetings and visit services in the different countries
- Facilitated focus groups at each of these project meetings to discuss transnational learning
- Monthly online partner meetings to provide up-dates and share experiences
- Project newsletters and website that provide detail on activities in different fieldsites
- Project resources such as a literature review, ethical review and the decision support tool.

The direct quotations in the report below are taken from a final round of focus groups undertaken in January 2018 in Lulea at the final project meeting. These focus groups asked project partners to reflect on the learning that has taken place during the project, what had influenced that learning and the lessons that individuals and organisations had taken from the project. The data presented in table 1 comes from a short survey provided to project partners at the final meeting in Lulea asking them to rate the importance of different activities to their learning. Eleven surveys were completed.

Findings

The findings presented here reflect the main themes relating to learning and transnational learning within the project. They start by reflecting on the processes

and importance of learning for individuals and organisations within the project before looking in detail at examples of learning and transnational learning; considering the facilitators and challenges to learning; describing the impact of transnational learning for the project partners; and finally summarising how learning is being taken forward from RemoAge into future projects and new ways of working.

Individual learning

Everyone who took part in the RemoAge project reported learning from the project, sometimes this was learning new skills or ways of working relating to collaboration with multidisciplinary teams.

In the focus groups there was discussion of how different individuals learn and work and a recognition that these can be quite different between people. Some team members enjoyed the more emergent and flexible approaches influenced by the co-production approaches in the Scottish fieldsites while others preferred more planned and structured ways of working such as demonstrated in the Swedish fieldsites.

The main lessons reported by individuals related to the process of implementing new services and projects within their organisations, these are reflected in the examples discussed throughout this report. Individuals had learnt to be more flexible in their approach to implementation of new ideas and to value input from a diverse range of stakeholders with expertise and experience to share.

Individuals had all learnt about technology, about new and innovative devices such as GPS trackers and medication dispensers and about new ways of using existing technology, especially tablet computers. An important lesson was the need to involve technical experts at all stages of a project, involving them from the earliest planning stages to ensure their expert knowledge was utilised effectively.

Many participants stressed the importance of team working and developed new skills and knowledge of multidisciplinary working and how that can be supported. The need for inclusion of IT specialists alongside lawyers and data protection officers were all important lessons for those promoting the use of technology in new ways for frail older people. Leadership of teams was also noted as crucial, to ensure continuity of new projects and to support sharing of ideas and projects.

Organisational learning

Overall it was felt by participants that organisations don't learn, that it is the people in them who learn, however, it was noted that learning within some organisations was easier than in others. In Scotland both fieldsites reported the benefits of working with third sector organisations. These types of organisation are more flexible and can learn and move more quickly to implement new ideas and services. In both Scottish fieldsites third sector organisations became key partners in project implementation stages, supporting innovative use of staff and technology resources. These organisations were able to take on board new ideas and new learning more easily. The statutory organisations within all fieldsites were reported as slower moving and with less potential to learn and change within the timescales of the project. Sweden were able to work successfully with their municipalities and related that to their prior learning on the RemoDem project that enabled them to set things

up in a more appropriate manner, for example, by including key people from the start in the regional steering groups particularly ensuring the inclusion of IT competence in these groups.

Examples of learning within and between regions and countries
The cross-national nature of the project provided new opportunities for transnational learning as well as learning within local regions and examples of both are seen in RemoAge.

In some countries, notably Sweden and Norway, the innovations from the RemoAge project were successfully transferred within countries, learning took place between and within regions and municipalities. In Sweden 11 out of the 14 municipalities in the region of Norbotten became involved and delivered new services as part of the RemoAge project. This learning was supported by early and frequent dissemination of the project and sharing of experiences. It was also noted that a somewhat competitive atmosphere developed through engagement with elected members who would find out about work in another municipality and then ask why it was not taking place in theirs. This quote from a member of the Swedish team illustrates some of the ways that they did this.

> *"We also had a dissemination conference after we had done tests in the first year. It was for about 150 people from the staff from municipalities and from the region who were coming to hear what we have done and what we have just started. And after that we got more, the project got more partners. Others who wanted to come in and do the tests. So we inspired staff to work in other ways."*

In Norway two new municipalities joined the project as it progressed to learn about the technology being used in RemoAge and to consider the potential of doing something similar in their regions.

The teams from the two Scottish fieldsites, the Shetland Islands and the Western Isles worked together throughout the project, finding much common ground in their aims as well as the challenges they faced as rural local authorities in Scotland. The Shetland Islands took advantage of technical support and expertise available in the Western Islands and connections were also made between older people in both locations who linked up using videoconference for reminiscence sessions.

> *"Lots of learning between the two island groups."*

The Shetland Islands team also reported working directly with a software company in Northern Ireland. They describe both their learning from the company and the way in which the company was able to learn from the practical use of their technology by the Shetland team.

> *"We have been working with a software provider to create the app, from Northern Ireland, they are really keen to see us develop, we had some happy accidents where they were writing some software with a preconception about how it would be used but we are able to use it in different ways, so have opened their eyes as to how it might be used."*

The Western Isles were able to link up with RemoAge associate partners in Northern Ireland (NI) who had specific expertise in relevant technology.

> *"Associate partners in Ulster had a lot of expertise about technology and that was a good resource for us, we made the link with NI through RemoAge and are taking it forward to our next project."*

These examples highlight the possibilities for learning across and within regions and countries.

Sharing lessons from RemoAge
Many of the fieldsites undertook local dissemination activities as well as engaging with local media, to let the general public and other professionals and organisations know about their work. Engaging potential and current services users was an important part of this process, for example, in Shetland, questions from the general public resulted in senior management becoming interested in the RemoAge project where repeated efforts by the project team had failed. Dissemination through project videos was also reported as a powerful way to let people know about the projects. The support of elected members, as demonstrated above in Sweden, was also important.

Norbotten is now seen in Sweden as an example of good practice when thinking about how care can be provided in someone's home, there has been a lot of interest in the project and team members have presented the project at conferences in other parts of Sweden.

Much more detail on this aspect of the project is provided in the dissemination and communications report from RemoAge.

Facilitators of learning and transnational learning
A number of facilitators to learning within the project were identified. People were the main facilitators of learning and transnational learning in the project. A whole range of different people were required to make each project run well. Key groups included lawyers, technical support, and the service users themselves and their families. For several projects there were concerns raised in their wider organisations about how the IT devices might collect and share data and lawyers and data protection specialist were important in ensuring these aspects of the project were addressed. For all projects technological competence was vital and the staff providing this service often central to a project's success. When it came to learning from others trust was an important factor, in order to take on ideas from other people it was necessary to have a trusting relationship as simply highlighted by a team member from Norway.

> *"Learning is about trust."*

Teams were another vital element in supporting the projects and facilitating learning. In the Shetland Islands regular meetings of a core team enabled the development of new ideas, the implementation of these and close management of the project:

"Team meetings, small core team, set a calendar and met every time, quorum would be two people that would be good enough, we stuck to that and that was the single most important tool for us."

But the Western Isles team reflected that there limits to local teams and appreciated the opportunity to learn more from bigger, sometimes international, meetings where you could find out what others are doing and talk about shared challenges. The annual partner meetings provided the forum for this to take place cross-nationally during the project.

For others learning was supported by visiting services and talking to health and social care workers and services users there. The Western Isles team learnt about new housing models for older people and noted the importance of visiting the Shetland Islands during the project.

"We are looking at Shetland housing models, it was very important that we went to visit the service and see the service, until you actually see things in action it is difficult to really learn, understand and then adapt."

Another aspect of these visits that felt important to this project in particular were the journeys partners took to visit services in each of the project locations. These journeys emphasised the challenges faced by staff working in remote and rural areas in terms of delivering care and accessing specialist support. It was acknowledged that experiencing these journeys provided a more powerful message than simply talking about them. The Shetland Islands team reflect:

"Site visits are more about showing the remoteness, highlighting the length of time to get to place. It was the same when you came to Shetland, we took two ferries, demonstrating distance rather than the end product."

Another facilitator to learning was the similarities RemoAge partners shared due to the remote and rural settings that they live and work in. These meant they felt they had more in common with partners in RemoAge compared with people in other areas of their individual countries. This is illustrated by a member of the team from the Shetland Islands:

"It feels like living in a parallel universe. There is a lot of commonality in what we do, what we think, how we approach things, when you look at the nuances you see differences, such as sizes of organisations, but the direction of travel is spookily parallel"

These similarities support shared and transnational learning within the project.

As noted, different activities undertaken during the project offered opportunities and support for learning. A short survey was completed by eleven members of teams from Scotland, Sweden and Norway, rating the importance of different activities in supporting their learning on the RemoAge project. Table 1. presents the findings from this survey and demonstrates that the project activities played a vital role in learning, with key activities highlighted in yellow including the partner meetings, community meetings and visits to services. These findings reflect those from the focus groups and demonstrate that people found activities and opportunities for face

to face discussion the most useful tools to support learning. The written and online resources provided were of less importance to team members in relation to their learning.

Table 1. Importance of different activities in supporting learning

	Not Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Important	Very important	N/A
Regular monthly partner meetings on Adobe connect			3	5	1	2
Project newsletters		1	2	6		2
Project website		1	4	3	2	1
Decision support tool	2	2	1			6
Up-dated literature and technology review	1	3	2	2		3
Kick-off meeting in Lulea			1	3	6	1
Project meeting in Tromso			1	3	6	1
Tromso public exhibition		1	4	2	2	2
Arctic Light conference			4	3		4
Project meeting in the Shetland Islands			1	3	7	
Community open day in the Shetland Islands		1	3	3	4	
Visits to services in the Shetland Islands			1	2	8	
Final meeting in Lulea			1	2	8	
Email contact with lead project team in Lulea				3	6	2
Email contact with other fieldsite teams			2	3	2	4

Challenges of transnational learning

While partners could see the benefits and possibilities of transnational learning they also highlighted a number of issues that presented challenges to this process. While learning was thought to be possible it is important to take into account the differences between counties; differences in economic, political and social structures as noted by one of the Norwegian team:

> *"But we also need knowledge of the whole systems in different countries, legal, economics, to see if the idea can fit in other places."*

Complexity was a challenge for transnational learning, the complexity of the individual systems in each country mean that transferring ideas from one location to another is difficult. Implementing new interventions in your own country is complex and this challenges the possibilities and potential for transnational learning. This complexity is neatly summed up by a Norwegian participant as a 'symphony':

> *"So we learnt something about how to bring things into action, the legal issues, leadership, a symphony of different instruments with the users at the heart, staff, patients, families, a network of different actors, it takes time to make that symphony."*

There was also a lack of buy-in noted from some organisations that hindered possibilities for transnational learning. Organisations in some regions were reported to be less interested in and supportive of the transnational aspects of the project. Team members in the Shetland Islands described individual learning from the project but felt that the organisations they worked for were less interested in learning from other countries. There was agreement from all partners that leadership was a key aspect in ensuring the success of projects and supporting learning and with good leadership learning could be encouraged.

Impact of regional and transnational learning for partners
Several positive impacts of transnational learning were reported by partners.

Sharing common challenges and opportunities related to service delivery in remote and rural areas was reported to provide support, motivation and learning opportunities for all partners. Support, motivation and inspiration appear to be more important than specific learning. One of the Shetland Islands team members describes the impact of attending the project meetings:

> *"What this* [attending partner meetings] *does is, it's like putting yourself back on to a battery charger, seeing like-minded people, you get energy from things like that. Start to become a little bit jaded in isolation but the whole idea of this is that you are not in isolation."*

And a member of the Swedish team notes the empowerment that comes from working in international projects:

> *"When you see that other people see the same opportunities, face similar problems and find ways to overcome that, and come to not quite the same but similar conclusions on what to do next, it empowers us to say this is the way it is, it shows up in every country."*

These comments were echoed across members of all the project teams. Linked to this was the notion that working transnationally adds weight to local initiatives giving project members confidence to push forward with new learning and ideas. These quotes are from Western Isles team members.

> *"It gives you confidence, when people challenge you, you can say 'Norway are doing that.'"*

> *"If you can go back to your organisation, promoting the services, and say there are folk in Norway and Sweden who think this is interesting and who are doing similar stuff, adds traction."*

Another noted impact from the project was an increased understanding in Scandinavian countries of the value of including older people and people with dementia in service development. Both the Western Isles and the Shetland Islands

teams worked closely with older people in developing and designing the new services and this reflection from a member of the Shetland Islands team notes the challenges of this.

> *"We have just started on the co-production route…once you start asking people outwith the organisation, you need patience, resilience and resource to allow that to happen. It slows down the process. When you start to listen and begin to understand the different between wants and needs, and then to help your partners to understand this, it is challenging."*

Norway described the benefits of 'playing ping pong' with end users, both staff and older people, of the RemoAge projects discussing the projects with them and taking on board their views and wishes to better develop the services offered. In Sweden there was reflection at the end of the project of a need to do this more, even if it is difficult.

> *"We have to ask our patients and users what they want in a systematic way, in Norbotten they asked leadership, what do you plan? This worked, better than not but there are still barriers to doing things in a more participatory way."*

Key lessons going forward

It was not always possible for partners to integrate learning within the timescale of the RemoAge project so many of the lessons learned will be taken forward and influence future projects. An example was included above of how a previous project, RemoDem, had usefully influenced the working of the Swedish team in RemoAge. The example of transnational working between the Western Isles team and the associate partners in Northern Ireland will be carried forward to a future project.

A member of the Norwegian team reflects on learning from this project that will influence them in the future.

> *"I heard about the night camera from Sweden, I heard about the third sector, and about social belonging in Scotland, we know this is important for quality of life, these are ideas we can bring back to Norway"*

For many teams one key question was how to maintain the projects started during RemoAge and ensure their continuation. This was described by a Swedish team member as as trying to find way to avoid the '*projects graveyard.*' Sweden has managed to establish serval projects from RemoAge into normal working within Norbotten and attribute this success to strong leadership. In Norway continuation of the project has been facilitated through the development of documents that provide guidelines outlining ways of working and completed risk analyses of the different projects. These guidelines are intended for others who want to implement the services established in the RemoAge project. Another idea from the Shetland Islands was to develop 'learning log' where more explicit reflection on learning could be documented throughout a project, rather than relying on project meetings and end of project reports.

A broad lesson that several partners would be taking forward is that sometimes you just have to get on with things despite a lack of local and regional support.

Examples were given in Norway and the Shetland Islands of staff who were directly involved in the RemoAge project going ahead and purchasing technology rather than going through cumbersome and time consuming official processes. They were then able to get started on the RemoAge project and iron out organisational issues later on.

Conclusions and recommendations

While the focus for the RemoAge project was the improvement of care and support for frail older people living in the project regions this report highlights other benefits for project partners that have come out of the RemoAge project activities. Project team members reflect on the many opportunities for learning, within and between countries during the life of the project. All project team members report important lessons learnt from their experiences on the RemoAge project and that they will take forward to future projects.

Individual learning was clearly taking place but organisations were reported as less able to learn, although differences were noted between third sector and statutory organisations in their ability to change and adapt to new ideas. There were many examples of learning within regions and a number of notable examples of transnational learning, however, many of the transnational lessons reported by project partners will be taken forward for future projects. While project partners supported the idea of transnational learning and felt it was possible there were particular barriers to this process such as differences between particular contexts and the complexity of the projects being implemented.

For future projects similar to RemoAge, that involve implementation of new services to support older people or other clients that engage local service providers, regional and national bodies and academic institutions, we recommend that a specific focus is given to learning activities within the project and that team members are given opportunities to discuss and reflect on their learning from the project. The transnational learning work-package in RemoAge was useful in elucidating key learning from the project and also highlighting how learning can be supported within teams, regions and countries as well as across regions and transnationally. Cross-national projects such as RemoAge offer many opportunities for transnational learning but this is rarely emphasised or documented in project reports, missing important lessons about how to support and encourage learning.