

The Third Age programme AgeWell is proof that friendly regular contact reduces loneliness, reduces isolation, improves physical health and enhances emotional wellbeing.

The AgeWell programme is dedicated to supporting people as they age, and creating nurturing communities for older adults.

Third Age is a not-for-profit organisation headquartered in Summerhill, Co Meath. For over 30 years, the NGO has been working for social inclusion, promoting the value of older people and their contribution in local communities. All Third Age programmes, including AgeWell, train and value older volunteers in delivering programme services.

AgeWell is a peer to peer befriending service in partnership with the HSE. The trained AgeWell Companions conduct home visits to older people to provide social engagement. Referrals are made through local community services, Primary Care Teams, Gardai, family, and friends. Potential clients are aged over 60.

AgeWell is a successful international model, and the Meath programme is among the first such to be developed in Europe. Aine Brady is CEO of Third Age: 'It is our intention to scale the programme nationally, as we have successfully done with existing programmes. We have a three year strategy in place to achieve this outcome', she said.

102 clients joined the programme in March 2018, each receiving a comprehensive base-line assessment using five internationally recognised health scales. Each client is independently assessed every four months. The latest evaluation, (April 2019) shows an overall 40% increase in client wellbeing, and a 100% reduction in clients at risk of poor wellbeing. There is an 80% decrease in reporting loneliness since inception.

AgeWell Companions visit once every week and make two phone calls between visits to keep in touch. On every second visit, the Companions, with the help of a health screening tool – health App - ask a series of questions relating to general health and wellbeing. This information remains confidential at all times. Its purpose is to identify and address evolving health and social problems before they escalate, helping to keep the client at home in good health for as long as possible, and intervening immediately if any change in physical, mental or emotional health gives cause for concern.

Clients have received a total of 2,424 visits over the past year. A number of clients have been re-abled, i.e. improved to the point where they felt they no longer needed the service. A small number have died or have moved into long-term care. 74 clients are currently being visited, the majority over 80 years of age.

There has been a significant increase in perceived social support, and the proportion of clients reporting excellent self-rated health has increased four-fold. There were improvements in the way clients perceived their fitness levels. Clients also reported having more emotional and informational support. The proportion reporting they were seldom physically active and less active than their peers decreased significantly over time from over a quarter of the total to only six per cent. Avril Hevey is AgeWell Programme Manager: 'We meet our AgeWell Companions each week, and our independent assessments are confirming their experience with clients. Our Companions tell us how many clients look forward to their visits, about the conversations they have and the growing relationships built up week after week. Clients are getting out more, taking up hobbies they had let slip, and generally saying they feel they have more to look forward to in life,' she said.

For more information, contact AgeWell 046-9558238