

CASE STUDY: "You said, we did!" Age UK East Sussex expanding support, communication and training for volunteers after CAVEAT toolkit use.



Two members of staff from Age UK East Sussex tell us about their experience of using the Community And Voluntary Organisation EvaluAtion Toolkit (CAVEAT) and how this had helped them to better understand the needs of their volunteers and how this has led to greater support and training for them.

Introduction

Age UK East Sussex was the first of 4 community groups in East Sussex to agree to trial the free CAVEAT toolkit. Use of the toolkit encourages Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations (VCSEs) to collect and share feedback on what works and what could be better, therefore helping to shape activities and support that boost wellbeing, reduce loneliness, and create a sense of community. Such improvements benefit both the people using their services and their incredible volunteers who provide them, without whom many VCSEs would be unable to offer this essential provision.

By participating in this project, to implement and evaluate the impact of the CAVEAT toolkit in the region, Age UK East Sussex is helping us to understand how CAVEAT can work in practice and make a difference to VCSEs in their increasingly challenging and pressured operating environments.

What does your organisation do and who do you support?

Age UK East Sussex delivers a range of services, activities and advice to support older people aged 50+ across East Sussex, to live a better quality of life. We are a local, independent charity, affiliated to, but separate from Age UK (the national charity), and have been supporting the East Sussex community of people in later life for over 75 years. Services available include day clubs, where people come for meals, sports, socialising and other activities, charity shops and furniture stores, and information, advice, advocacy and support. We also run community-based services, e.g. our volunteers work with isolated older people (aged 55+) to encourage them to become better connected with the community through befriending.

**How did you hear about the CAVEAT toolkit and why did you become involved in the project?**

We work in partnership with East Sussex County Council, and their Contracts Manager told us about previous impact evaluation work undertaken with the university and other partners. She suggested that involvement in the CAVEAT-i project could be beneficial and, after exploring the toolkit, we agreed and decided to use it to help us with our befriending service.

We had already done quite a lot of work around evaluation with clients but had not done anything for the volunteers. Since we are interested in trying to develop a model around better supporting them, we thought it would be an interesting project to see how we could get some better-quality data on why people volunteer and what they get from it.

Tell us about the way you used the toolkit. Which parts were most relevant?

We knew we wanted to do a deep dive into doing surveys and, in particular, to create a bespoke survey we could send to our volunteers, which would be relevant to them and therefore, encourage completion. By having lots of useful information to hand and progressing systematically, we felt that using the CAVEAT toolkit enabled us to make the survey very focused and to hone it as necessary to meet our evaluation needs. In particular, thinking about the outcomes model, the 'social or interpersonal' and 'emotional or psychological' domains were the relevant ones for us, and we applied them at the 'volunteers' level.

In addition, we also referred to a range of guidance in the CAVEAT Knowledge Base and found the information about creating surveys (including using relevant software) particularly helpful.

How did you find using it?

We found the toolkit really easy to use and liked the website, layout, visuals, colour coding and simplicity of it all. We were able to access it easily, and view and understand the wheel and quartiles. We could then click on each one and see the sample questions which appeared.

Once we had drafted our survey, we checked back on how the questions we had chosen (and potential answers) aligned with the outcomes in the model. This was to ensure that the survey was outcome(s)-focused and that's what the CAVEAT tool did for us: it helped us to be - and stay - more focused on our chosen areas of interest.



Has using CAVEAT led to any changes?

The biggest thing to come out of the survey is our understanding of how volunteers want to feel connected with each other, but also part of the organisation. So, there are definitely some changes that have come from analysing the survey to make our volunteers feel more included. We will be making changes informed by their suggestions, which include regular drop-ins and team meetings, including bite-sized training on relevant issues, and are also looking at developing a volunteer buddying system, together with case studies to share knowledge and experience.

What difference did or could this make, including beyond your organisation?

Using CAVEAT to help us evaluate the ways we support our volunteers has made us even more aware of the integral role they play in our service and how they are feeling about it. It has made us more mindful of their needs and encouraged us to communicate with them in new ways suggested or inspired by their feedback. We have also noticed that some of our volunteers have engaged with us more proactively and shared more information with us since completing the survey, which we hope reflects the fact that they appreciate that we are listening to and want to involve them.

We are confident that the changes we are making will better support our volunteers to deliver our befriending service as we now have really clear evidence of what works for them – and, interestingly, could work for future volunteers. Such things take time rather than money to set up but are definitely worth the effort. If we invest in our volunteers, they're more likely to stay with us. So, if we have got happier volunteers, we are going to have happier clients. And, if we retain more volunteers, we are going to be able to support more people in the wider community.

Did you learn anything new by using CAVEAT?

Using CAVEAT has made us more aware of how useful information from our volunteers can be and how it can be used to better support them. The toolkit has certainly helped us to develop our evaluation skills, which include producing more professional surveys that obtain better quality information, and analysing the data generated by them.

We wanted our survey to be more outcomes-focused and, through using the toolkit, we learned to look at feedback forms more broadly, including from a recipient's point of view, and to hone the information we needed and how we could obtain and then use it.



Will you continue to use the toolkit?

We will continue to use CAVEAT for future evaluation work and anticipate using it every six months as an ongoing process to refresh the questions we ask our volunteers. If we do any other surveys, we will check CAVEAT out again in terms of relevant outcomes and how they fit what we're planning to do in the future.

Thinking longer term, we can envisage CAVEAT use being implemented across a range of services where we use volunteers and are now discussing whether CAVEAT is a model that could potentially be spread across the broader organisation. We are in the early stages at the moment, but this is certainly something that we are interested in exploring.

Any advice for other organisations considering using CAVEAT?

If a similar organisation said they were developing a new service and looking at how to evaluate it, we would link them to and recommend the CAVEAT toolkit.

We would also be happy to talk to them if they wanted to know more about our very positive CAVEAT experience.

Fran Highton, Befriending Coordinator at Age UK East Sussex, said:

“CAVEAT is a really good little package to guide you and help you to work out what you actually want to do in terms of evaluating a service. This is because you can direct it to what you and the organisation actually want to focus on.

"Using the toolkit was quite a learning curve, but an enjoyable one which has helped me to stay focused and given me creative ideas on how to direct the future.

"If I was in a different role in the future, and someone said to me, 'I want you to do a survey', CAVEAT would be my go-to now. I would think, 'Oh, I'm going to just check CAVEAT out ..."

Charles Sheldon, Health and Wellbeing Team Leader at Age UK East Sussex, said:

“We are fortunate to have 4 areas of volunteer support where we're looking at making changes as a result of using CAVEAT and these were clearly evidenced in the survey. They are all ones that can be relatively quickly implemented, and this should be achieved within next two months.



“Although it’s too soon to demonstrate improved outcomes such as retention yet, our expectation is that the changes we are making will result in reduced volunteer drop-out, which will mean that we can support more clients as a result. This will be a key benefit of using CAVEAT for us.

“In addition, there are some really positive evidence that came out of the evaluation that we can use in our marketing to potential volunteers. So, if we can say, which we can literally say, that 100% of volunteers who responded to the survey felt well supported, we can use this in our marketing campaigns. Such examples are likely to be really powerful going forward.

“More broadly, if we can retain our volunteers and recruit new ones because we have used the tool to direct our service, CAVEAT could influence the wider health and care system, e.g. through increased service provision. We also hope our CAVEAT journey will inspire similar organisations to use the toolkit to both demonstrate the impact of their services and, potentially, identify any areas for further service improvement.”

Dr Julie MacInnes, ARC KSS Research Capacity Building and CAVEAT-i Project Lead, said:

“The CAVEAT-i project has shown that when VCSEs have the commitment and capacity to use CAVEAT, the toolkit can help them to evaluate and explore the impact of their services. This is the case for Age UK East Sussex where staff have understood and engaged with the toolkit at both strategic and operational levels, and its application has already resulted in changes to volunteer support and training, as well as demonstrating service excellence and the development of staff skills (and confidence) around evaluation.

“We look forward to hearing about how the organisation will continue to use CAVEAT in the future and to learn from their real-world experience of CAVEAT use.”