



O4O : Older People for Older People  
Independent living - active communities - basic services



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# Achieving Social Enterprise Development in Rural Communities

O4O (Older People for Older People) was an EU Northern Periphery Programme Project (2007-2010). It worked with rural communities in Scotland, Greenland, Sweden, Finland and Northern Ireland to identify older people's needs for basic services and establish initiatives to enhance their quality of life.

In some regions, O4O worked with communities to set up social enterprises run by older people to provide basic services for other older people. These were intended to fill gaps or augment current public sector services and enhance older people's health and wellbeing.

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## Main Findings of Implementing O4O in Rural Communities

### Creating Social Enterprises:

- O4O initiatives generate positive community impacts, but developing them is organic, complex and fragile at all stages.
- Communities can be suspicious of developing social enterprises but, external leadership can assist in their creation.
- Some communities, and individuals, are more willing to be involved in the creation and development of social enterprises. Some see social enterprise creation as a positive opportunity, whilst others view it as a negative formalisation of existing helping.
- Communities often aim to develop 'concrete' services that require high human and financial resource inputs and public sector support.

### Key Policy Implications from O4O Implementation:

- Inclusive structures are needed to make community service delivery happen so that certain communities are not 'left behind'.
- Policy and service delivery motivations for co-production must be transparent in order for citizens to engage in the process.
- Communities would benefit from accessible and robust ways of identifying need and linking this with locally appropriate service provision models.
- Policies that support social enterprise seem disconnected from communities as citizens may not be aware that they are being asked by policy to engage with service design and delivery.
- Decreasing or removing bureaucracy at the local level could encourage community social enterprise development.
- New structures, such as integrated service hubs, are needed to make social enterprises work as service providers for rural areas.

## Background

O4O was designed in response to the costs and difficulties of providing services for rising proportions of older people within remote and rural populations. It tested policy ideas such as the promotion of co-production (communities producing services with providers) and social enterprise (community-driven not-for-profit 'business-like' services).

As many older people remain active and fit for decades after retirement, O4O saw older people as a resource; potential entrepreneurs with the life experience and wisdom to establish, lead and manage social enterprises to provide services for other older people. O4O suggested there is an opportunity to build on older people's willingness to volunteer: younger, older people could help frailer, older people by providing basic helping services such as 'good neighbour' schemes.

## Methods

The aim of implementing O4O in rural communities was to engage older people in the co-production of services. O4O project managers 'mentored' communities and captured information on the process of social enterprise development through an action research approach. Communities were supported to develop organisations that they felt met their needs; this was an organic process with communities opting for different organisational and service types. Project managers captured information through activity reporting – the completion of a template on a monthly basis that captured information on their perceived achievements, progress, issues and risks. This acted as a data gathering and self-reflexivity tool. The written reports were subject to qualitative analysis that identified the stages of social enterprise development and the policy implications emerging from the implementation process.

## Creating O4O Enterprises

It is possible to develop O4O initiatives that generate positive community impacts, but the process of developing community social enterprises is organic, complex and susceptible to breaking down at numerous stages.

### STAGE 1 Initiating Community Engagement

Ensure the community is 'ready' to work towards creating an O4O by engaging citizens with the idea of greater involvement in service design and delivery.

O4O project managers: meet community members; generate enthusiasm for the concept; meet existing voluntary groups.

The community may engage with the concept or may not be ready to take on O4O development.

**Community engagement is important at all stages of the O4O social enterprise development.**

At the start of the process, this is about generating enthusiasm and confidence within communities.

**Some communities are more 'ready' to engage than others:** previous experience within communities can hamper their willingness to get involved, e.g. failed projects, antagonisms with the public sector and conflict within the community. Communities are often suspicious of motivations for developing community-led services and a capacity to identify gaps in existing provision may not translate into a willingness to address these gaps through community action.

### STAGE 2 Needs Identification

Older people's service needs are identified through rounds of community dialogue.

O4O provides support: building confidence; avoiding duplication; accessing finance; accessing information.

Initiatives are selected to take forward if the community has the drive to turn 'need' into 'action'.





**Communities sometimes saw the presence of a credible 'outsider' (O4O project manager) as a catalyst to social enterprise creation:** catalytic leaders need a connection to, but also 'distance from', the community. They need to understand the relevant issues and context, the social networks and resources of the community, but also link with external resources, information sources and local and national politics/policy.

STAGE  
**3**

Building  
Community Skills

Community identifies the skills needed to take their initiative forward.

Community action/ entrepreneurship is catalysed by positive experiences: completing training, winning start-up funding, gaining public sector support.

Group dynamics are important: internal fractures can dissolve the group and local support may not be harnessed.

**The types of services that communities want to deliver and the nature of rural service provision mean that there is a high degree of reliance on public sector 'buy in':** communities often favour the development of 'concrete' services such as transport schemes that require a high level of human and financial resources to initiate. In rural areas, social enterprises will often rely on contracting with the public sector. O4O project managers met with public sector officials to discuss the types of services they would be willing to buy from a community enterprise.

STAGE  
**4**

Establishing the  
Social Enterprise

The community agrees on an organisational model for their initiative and takes forward business or voluntary service planning.

Conflict can arise over balancing social and commercial objectives.

**Communities need to be convinced of the benefits of operating a business-like model:** and of the responsibilities associated with it. There is a big jump between doing things as a community and a community-led business-like initiative. Community members may be passionate about their village and interested in helping to provide a service for it but are unlikely to be interested in the extensive bureaucracy involved in running a business.

**O4Os must negotiate tensions associated with moving from a community-reciprocity model to a market-exchange model:** citizens may resist the formalisation of altruistic activities within a business model if they see a shift in focus from helping to revenue generation.

**Older people in remote and rural areas may rely on existing high levels of informal helping:** some people are well connected to social networks that they are comfortable drawing on, but others do not have access to these resources. The former do not want to formalise the model of helping and the latter do, causing tensions within communities.

**Integrated rural hubs for services:** may be appropriate social enterprises for smaller remote and rural communities. Several O4Os involved collecting resources together into a hub format and creating new community spaces that provide opportunities for increased social interaction.

STAGE  
**5**

Sustaining the  
Social Enterprise

Community members take on roles in running the enterprise. Staff and service users should find the enterprise locally relevant. A service is provided to the community and bought by service users or procured by the public sector.

**Many O4Os have emerged as grant-funded initiatives:** service level agreements with the public sector could be a way of generating more sustainable funds.

## Key Policy Messages

**Structure is needed to make community service delivery happen:** without it, only a few communities will engage with the process; these will be reliant on exemplary leaders and access to funding. The importance of the 'credible outsider' (O4O project manager) to O4O communities and individual participants suggests potential for the state funding of such posts.

**Policy and service delivery motivations for co-production must be transparent:** communities need to be convinced that the public sector is interested in service improvement, not just cost savings. Trust must be established by building engagement organically with repeated meetings that respond to community questions and share service and cost information.

**Communities require accessible and robust ways of identifying need and linking this with locally appropriate service provision models that combine community goals and revenue generation:** entrepreneurial opportunity may not lie in basic service provision, but in more 'concrete' things like community owned residential care. These will often need to be procured by the public sector and, therefore, community social enterprises need to be seen as legitimate service providers and be able to engage in dialogue with public sector commissioners.

**Policies that support social enterprise seem disconnected from communities:** community members may be passionate about their village and interested in helping to provide a service for it, but not in the extensive bureaucracy involved in running a business. There is a gap between policy and the 'people': between high level policy and structural support for social enterprise development and putting this into action on the ground.

**Decrease bureaucracy or remove it from the local level:** A franchising umbrella-type enterprise could provide the administrative and bureaucracy support to local communities, meaning that they could provide services with local volunteers with the bureaucracy taken out.

**New structures are needed to make social enterprises work as service providers for rural areas:** Integrated service hubs may be suitable for small communities, but they, too, would need structure, force and leadership to function successfully. Structures such as enabling public sector employees to volunteer for one day a year could contribute to wide-scale changes.

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For further information about the O4O Project, please visit: [www.o4os.eu](http://www.o4os.eu)

