Hello and welcome, I’m Anna Dixon, I’m the Chief Executive for the Centre for Ageing Better.

We’re a charity focussed on helping everyone have a good later life, and as part of that we are supporting ageing and innovation and that’s the topic of conversation today and I’m really delighted to be joined by George MacGinnis, who is the Healthy Ageing Challenge Director with UKRI and George will be saying a little bit more about his role and the work of the Healthy Ageing Challenge, as part of this wider discussion about ageing and innovation. So welcome George, would you like to start by telling us a little bit more about the Healthy Ageing Challenge and why government picked ageing as a focus?

Well it’s a really good question Anna, so we’ve all been living longer, I think that’s a trend that is well publicised and about 5 years ago the government commissioned a foresight report into ageing populations, which stimulated the idea that not only were we living longer, we were living longer in poor health, and all sorts of other factors like we were not saving as much for retirement coming through. So there was a need to think about ageing differently and on the way it became apparent that ageing isn’t just a problem, there’s a real opportunity to be had, so the government framing this as a challenge was really saying that actually we need to respond. We need to respond as a society and we need to encourage businesses and all sorts of government organisations to respond to adapt to a new sort of world where people live longer.

Certainly you know we recognise that at the Centre for Ageing Better, that whilst it’s obviously a great achievement that we are all living longer, you know this fact that we’re not living longer in good health is a real issue that we need to face up to and obviously that’s not just a challenge for government though is it. It’s something that we’re also looking at how businesses across all sectors can sort of help respond to this. So do you want to say a little bit more about the business and innovation focus for your work?

There was a real opportunity to think about this differently and we hear so much about prevention and I suppose in the age of COVID, we’re now really understanding that arriving in later life in good health actually changes your life chances dramatically. So there is still lots of work going on in the NHS, in social care to look at actually how they manage better the sort of needs of ageing populations when they get to that stage. But this was an opportunity to look earlier and say what are the things that we do in our life that actually could make a difference and ultimately actually not only would save money on the NHS but actually give us better lives and you know that extends for a whole range of things. It extends from actually just thinking about remaining physically active and what that means in life. Actually it means thinking about work and work in later life and why do people fall out of work. Is it their health, is it actually caring for other people or a whole other thing? But that has a huge impact on the financial resources you have and then through to the stuff that you probably think of as more usual, so what are the adaptations to your home, what are the aids that help you overcome site loss, hearing impairment, you know actually sort of things like continence, things that serve to force you to be isolated from community or if addressed properly it will enable you to take full part in community and have a good later life. So that’s sort of how the challenge sort of shaped up and those are all things that are opportunities for businesses. And why is that important? Actually we know that something like three quarters of the financial wealth in this country is owned by older people. There’s clearly a huge need and for those people who sort of track what the baby boom has done through its life as it’s progressed you know early adulthood, middle age and now they’re all arriving in later life, actually this is a generation that has changed the world as it’s moved through life. So an opportunity for businesses to pick up on that and do something but something that actually is not only going to create good business finance but have a longer term impact on our population.

That’s great so really important there that you’re focussing on the whole of the life course, that this is about ageing not about older people, so I think that’s a really important focus that you’ve chosen there and also the breadth of issues that you’re covering with this challenge, the sort of recognition it’s going to need change across so many aspects of our lives, you know this is not just about as you say health and care but touches on lots of aspects of how we live and work and play and our communities. Can you just say a little bit about the sort of goal, what joins all this together?

Well ultimately there’s a government goal and mission as they’ve called it to enable people to live five extra years of healthy independent life. And to do that in a way that reduces the difference between the experience of the richest and the poorest. So that’s if you like a government ultimate goal. I think we have a slightly more modest goal specifically for the challenge, which is to enable businesses including social enterprises to develop services and the products that will support people as they age and also the innovative business models that are going to allow some of those services in particular to move to scale. And so moving down from five extra years of healthy independent living what we’re really focussed on is enabling people to remain healthy, active and socially connected across the generations actually interestingly for as long as possible.

That’s great. I sense that the sort of innovation that we’ve seen in the past maybe haven’t adopted that approach. Is that fair?

Oh I think yes. I think that if you think of innovations or just think of products for older people it tends to be really focussed on frail, older. The house that I bought actually came fitted with a grab rail and a key safe at the front door, some of the first things we prised off. So because it’s been focussed on that later stage that they have often been medicalised, they’ve often been addressing a small audience actually and that means that typically then that no economy has scaled, it’s expensive and it just snowballs from there. So what we’re trying to do is think through what are the sort of things that people would want, in my expression, as they age, so it means actually trying to think about how do you integrate this into people’s lives. So take a really good example, what’s the kitchen that someone actually can continue to use in later life and then ask yourself when do people buy their kitchen and if you’ve ever bought a house from an old person you’ll realise it’s probably about thirty years before they realise that they were getting old, so how do we influence that market and part of the answer is about thinking about intergenerational designs and that’s from a movement called Inclusive Design, which actually says if you design things for the extremes you also actually tend to design in features that are good for the mass of the population. And that’s an approach that’s worked in a number of places I suppose probably most famously about thirty years ago the Ford Focus, exactly that, designed to be a good car for old people and it just turned actually didn’t market very well like that because no one wants an ageing special, but when they realised that actually it was just a good car that you could get in to and out of if you were a young mum with children in the back seats and all the rest of it, it was just really really good. And I think that’s what we’re trying to do. Open up the idea that this is a market and if you serve it well, actually you’ll reach all sorts of other people that you weren’t expecting.

That’s great and certainly some work we did specifically around home adaptations at Centre for Ageing Better found exactly that, that because the products were ugly and clinical looking, people delayed making the changes in their home that could’ve improved their quality of life and increased their independence until it was really a crisis, so it really underlines this idea that we need to design much better products, more attractive products, inclusive products that as you say we can use earlier before we perhaps recognise even the need ourselves for those products and services. So really great to hear that that’s the ambition and focus of the Ageing Challenge.

How are businesses going to help meet the challenge and create this opportunity? Why focus on business specifically?

Well I suppose to start with I would say that any sort of government fund is going to be quite a small amount of money compared to what businesses if they see the value in this market would start to invest. And you know other studies have said talk off the top of my head, that if older people were a silver economy, they would be something like the third or fourth largest economy in the world. So, this is a serious opportunity. What government money can do has catalysed that. And encouraged people into it so that actually you get the fast followers coming in and saying ok we understand what the opportunity is. And actually we’ve had no shortage of businesses large and small showing an interest in what we’re doing and I’m really delighted. You referred to our really broad canvas of the things that we’re trying to do, so we’re seeing everything from building companies utilities through to specialist medical device companies and things like that and on the way consumer goods and other companies coming in and showing an interest. So what government is doing is trying to catalyse that and I’m delighted that we’re seeing really good positive early signs of businesses interest.

That’s great and as you say it should be a win win if we look at the demographics, this is a growing consumer market. So if we think about just those over 65, I think it’s about twelve million today in the UK. If we fast forward twenty years I think that’s going to be eighteen million, so it’s definitely a growth sector in terms of the consumer market. So we’ve got to hope that business cease that opportunity and unfortunately some of our work suggests that at the moment though there’s quite a lot of stereotypes particularly around the marketing and advertising of products to older adults and so I think it’s going to need us also to challenge some of that way of thinking and perhaps also to get more older workers into those businesses so that they can sort of bring that consumer perspective into the business and hopefully drive a sort of better customer perspective. So I think that particularly design, advertising and marketing and quite youthful sectors and we probably need to challenge that too as we do in our work. People recognise the benefits of having an age diverse workforce. But as you say the prize is there if businesses get this right in terms of the sort of money, the sort of consumer spend by older adults both in this country and globally and I presume that adds up to a pretty big economic opportunity for government, so hopefully it can be better for consumers, it’ll be better for business and at the end of the day better for us all in terms of the economy.

So as you mentioned the government goal is not only to increase how long we’re all living in good health but recognising that at the moment people particularly from poorer backgrounds experience the much earlier onset of ill health and disability. The idea of the challenge is to also address that inequalities gap. Do you want to say a little bit more George about how that’s influencing your thinking and how you’re approaching the challenge?

Yes I think just to reinforce what you’ve said, the inequalities piece is vital. We’re not actually going to make a difference at a population level unless we address inequalities as that’s actually where if you like most years of life are lost and also most years of healthy life are lost as well. So as I’ve sort of said COVID-19 has really heightened actually the value of addressing health across populations that are more disadvantaged and I think how does that wash through in what we are doing I think it is important that we think about the affordability in everything that we do. It’s important that we choose to work in areas with difficult problems so that actually the innovators that we’re funding in part really sort of encouraged to work on projects that address this head on and a really good example in our current sort of wave of projects we have a project focussed on home adaptations, it’s action extension of a utilities company fuel poverty work and then looking at actually when you go into a house where you’ve had a referral for fuel poverty to insulate it and change the boiler actually that often doesn’t make it a completely liveable house. So is there more that you could do in a kitchen and in the bathroom in access and all sorts of other things to actually make that house something that’s really fit for those people to live for many years more. So that’s a key part of it. I think the other piece that we’re doing is thinking about this in terms of the innovations that we’re bringing through from the early stage innovators and there’s sort of a classic way that this happens within the investment community where new technologies arrive, they arrive at a premium as volumes grow the price drops eventually they become pervasive, you know the mobile phone well certainly the smart phone will be a good example of that. But I think actually that we need to balance that with a bottom-up, an impact approach which is aligned to actually really good ideas around frugal innovation as well. Where designing with tough constraints can provide innovation that’s really relevant to the way that a large number of people who live in disadvantaged communities actually live their lives. So I think both approaches are relevant and we need to have a balance of the two.

Fantastic. So yes making sure that products are affordable as well as meeting the sort of needs and wants of consumers, that sounds great to keep that in focus and really important to encourage the innovators and businesses to design it from the beginning is what you were saying I think is really critical.

And we’ve had some really interesting experience this year of actually making this work. Because we’ve been incorporating the citizen voice in all our competitions and actually it’s often quite sort of levelling. You get experts in a room who sort of start debating on something and then you sort of have a citizen voice and they say there’s no way that would work or there’s no, you know, you’ve not thought about these factors and it really really enriches our decision making and supports that focus on inequalities.

Great.

So we’re going to come onto talking about the community of practice, so delighted that Centre for Ageing Better is partnering with UKRI to support the community of practice. So as an organisation we are supporting change in practice informed by evidence, that’s basically what we’re here to do. And obviously in some situations there’s been good evidence on what to do and so we can be quite strong on calling on people to take action but there’s lots of areas where we don’t really know what the solutions are and we need innovation to develop and test new approaches and that’s why we’re really delighted to be supporting the Challenge in general but also we recognise that to support this sort of change in practice, whether it’s trying out new things or taking things we know that work to scale. It’s really important to connect people through networks so they can share experiences, they can share learning with one another but also when they’re addressing common challenges as you know I’m sure some of the innovators in this market will be experiencing some common issues. I think one of them they’ve already been looking at is how to do that consumer engagement and co-production during COVID when obviously it was impossible to run ‘face to face’ focus groups and that sort of thing. So really valuable way of bringing people together to share and learn from one another.

But it would be great I’ll say a little bit more about how people can join the community of practice but just to hear a little bit from you about the value you see for a community of practice for this Healthy Ageing Challenge.

Well I suppose it starts at the beginning with what you were saying. This is a really complex problem, it’s sort of wicked and unknowable in that sense from where you start off and that sort of makes us think about approaching this probably in a way that’s very unusual for government programmes. So instead of deciding what you’re going to do and then having a master plan and executing it, we’ve had to take some bets and one of the bets is one of the approaches is to spread that bet, so instead of having one or two big projects that we back, we’ve backed a number of different things in different areas to see how they go but the other bit is that instead of having a master plan to get to the end goal you have a master vision and you’ve actually set off and you see what works and what doesn’t and you learn and you adjust and you go. In the sort of programme management world it’s called agile. But actually to make agile work we couldn’t just sit back as a funder and fund a number of different things because we thought that was a good way of doing it. We’ve actually got to really actively connect together what we’re doing and you know I’ll give you an example we are already seeing right from sort of the basic research projects through some of the early stage catalyst awards that we’ve recently given. Right through to the Trailblazers that are very strong built environment dimension and actually they could all learn from each other and benefit from that connectivity that the community practice will give. So that’s what we wanted the community practice to do and that’s why you’re now up and running and they’re bringing in and connecting people who are already funded by us.

Yeah so we want obviously not only connect those that you’re directly funding with each other and as you say extending that to the researchers who are going to be receiving some of the research funding but also to those beyond who are interested in or are thinking of either innovating, have ideas and want to develop products and services for this market. So hopefully creating an extended community of practice, a network where people can share and learn from one another, so that’s the hope so we are open to people who are listening today to join that community. As we say there will be different sort of levels of involvement and engagement and we’ll be sharing the learning from different projects, there will be themed publications. There will be a conference and some themed webinars that people can join. So if you are interested in healthy ageing and innovation we’d really love to hear from you, so please do find out more and get in touch with us or visit the Ageing Better community practice website, the link will be available on your screen.

So George, just to finish, what’s next for the Healthy Ageing Challenge? You’ve been very busy making awards and getting the different elements of the challenge off the ground, what are the key priorities for the coming months?

You’ve just reminded me that it was a year ago that we started, and we have a lot of things already in motion but there is so much more. So firstly, I would say if there are people out there, we have three initial investment partnerships. We’re currently looking for more investor partners to come on and that is money for early stage businesses to seek investment as a combination of government and private investment to help them sort of help develop their innovations and grow. So that opportunity is out there all the time. We’re also really excited that our Trailblazers are just coming to the end of their development stage and will just be going into another competition into a sort of three year deployment stage, so a lot of activity on that front. I think for researchers as well we’ve just announced our first-round of Catalyst awards. We’re delighted with what we’ve got, we’ve also learned a huge amount of the agony that we’ve put people through in applying. So we’re completely revamping how we do that and what we’re trying to do is make the whole sort of engagement and application process learning journey in itself so that there are more awards to be had but even if you don’t achieve an award what you might do is find an awful lot of help in actually taking your innovation forward in other means. So that’s going on and then in the background we have a bit of money that’s uncommitted and we’re just beginning to shape what we will do with that. Originally the idea we’d sort of put it out into sort of small sort of design competitions but we had such a huge amount of interest in our Trailblazer competition and when we looked at those that weren’t quite successful, there were lot of really really good ideas, but generally the feedback was they needed to understand their market a bit better, they needed to understand the state of play of what was already known, and we’re beginning to think about putting all that money together in to another competition that will give a fresh range of opportunities, not as a full Trailblazer but to help those sorts of companies and new ones that are coming through all the time, to develop their propositions in a way that actually they have a really really strong investment proposal by the end of that and will then be able to scale. So look out for things early in the new year.

 Great thanks George and then to just as we finish perhaps just a couple of quick fires.

So you’ve been going a year, it’s been a year in which the whole world has been turned upside down by COVID-19. How has it changed the Healthy Ageing Challenge, if at all?

So fascinating question really because in one sense just from a sort of selfish programme point of view, we’ve dodged a bullet if you like. It’s had relatively little impact because the people we’ve got have been able to work around the lockdown, they’ve been able to keep their plans on track and moving forward, the reality is that actually that come the spring we’re expecting an awful lot of on the ground work and so we would be quite significantly impacted if lockdown continues and sort of thinking that through that’s a really good example of how the community of practice is helping, you’re already sort of on the case of pulling together the evidence of how you do remote consultation and development work so that we can keep some of the momentum behind that. I think the other thing that has come through is that there were some specific COVID competitions that were put out, opportunities for people to receive funding and that was a time when businesses were suddenly facing a cliff edge. A lot of them were shutting down, furloughing staff, had lost their markets you know actually if your market is working with older people many of them would shut their doors and you wouldn’t get access to them. We were really delighted to see a whole range of innovations for relatively small projects done really rapidly come through, actually so much so that there were more applications for a competition in a matter of a couple of weeks than Innovate UK normally see in an entire year but embedded within that are a number with a really good, strong healthy ageing component. And we’ve been able to pick up some extra ones to make sure we have a really good range of things coming forward. Two ways that COVID has impacted us and we’re actually at the end of the day, what we’re trying to do is actually reinforced by what’s coming out of COVID , so the need for people to maintain their health in later life, the value of that actually has come forward even stronger. And the fact that we’ve actually had a sort of step change in the use of technology, you know even my ninety-two-year-old mother is being helped to Skype with me once a week so that we maintain contact with her in her care home. To see that sort of innovation come through so rapidly we need to sort of build on that and not lose that sense of community that COVID has generated.

What surprised you most over the last year?

I think I would just say I was delighted by the level of competition. I was always nervous as to whether we would show an interest and whether it’s getting big name bands like Legal & General and Barclays coming and backing our investment or bigger companies coming in and taking on Trailblazers We’ve got a whole lot of people who UK Research and Innovation doesn’t normally work with actually coming forward and wanting to be part of this.

 What’s your biggest achievement over the last year?

So I think we all feel that we’ve actually moved the challenge forward at a time when actually the team was really very small, so we’ve actually had to prioritise and focus on how we get this moving and what can we do. So I think we’re really proud that we’ve worked together as team, we’ve built contacts in the outside world and we’ve got something up and running and you know in a way the challenge has lingered for a year, year and a half and now we’re in a completely different situation.

Well congratulations George it’s been fantastic to see how this has developed from some of our early engagement to help frame what do we even mean by healthy ageing and what might be some of the issues that could contribute to this mission of people living longer in good health and independently and it’s fantastic to see already how many businesses and innovators are engaged and interested and we really hope through our collaboration, building this community that we can strengthen that and together hopefully we will address the Healthy Ageing Challenge and turn it into an opportunity. So it’s been great to talk to you today George, thank you so much for your time.

Well thank you Anna. We’re really delighted that we’re working with Centre for Ageing Better and really want everyone to benefit from that collaboration.