

# English Forums on Ageing: a first step in good practice

## Background

“Empowering Engagement: a stronger voice for older people” made the commitment “to embrace existing Regional Forums and provide impetus to establish forums where they do not exist already” and “to encourage all regional Forums to be represented on the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing”. Regional engagement was defined as encompassing:

- Older people’s groups and forums;
- Local authorities; and
- Voluntary and Community groups.

Many English forums on ageing also include statutory bodies such as the Department of Health, Jobcentre Plus and sheltered housing associations as part of their membership.

Membership of English forums on ageing is therefore likely to be made up of representatives of each of these four groups. It is important that forums on ageing, at all levels, truly reflect the needs and concerns of the communities they represent; but the very real variations between those communities means that forums are likely to vary in their composition and approach. DWP facilitated workshops with representatives from the English forums have confirmed that ageing forums are at different levels of development, and while some forums are progressing with confidence, others have been established more recently.

This document has been developed, in response to **suggestions** from some forums on ageing and national stakeholders, to offer some **non-prescriptive** proposals/ideas for discussion and progression by ageing forums, and their partners. It recognises that engagement is not an area where “one size fits all” and where sharing of good practice would be helpful, and draws on the work and ideas emerging from a workshop held in December 2009, much of which is recorded here.

## Membership & Representation

The UK Advisory Forum on Ageing states in its Mission Statement that it recognises “that all voices have a right to be heard” and that it will “provide a leadership model for other forums on ageing in collaborative working between larger stakeholder organisations, smaller stakeholder organisations, older people representatives and others.”

Forum membership is **for each forum to decide** and different forums are likely to define themselves and their position differently depending on their particular context. The evidence from successful examples of engagement, (e.g. LinkAge Plus, POPPs) makes it clear that the most positive approach is that of partnership working. Fundamental to partnership working is the recognition that all members of the partnership have equally valid contributions to bring to the table. Many

representatives also give of their time voluntarily and it is important to recognise and provide support for this.

There are many organisations and individuals across any locality that could make a valid argument for inclusion on an ageing forum but to be effective operationally the size of membership for most forums will inevitably be limited. Forums will need to **decide their own membership** numbers and representation. Effectively, this may mean that forum members are representatives of a wider community of organisations, e.g. local authorities, stakeholders, service users or older people, through local groups or forums. Forums will want to be confident that members understand and fulfil their responsibilities to those they are representing. There may be opportunities, through task and finish groups, or specialist sub-groups, for forums to directly involve these wider communities.

Each forum is best placed to decide its balance of membership but good practice from around the country suggests that it is vital to have **sufficient members from older people's networks** and people who can represent the **genuine voice of older people**. Equally important is involving those key delivery organisations and other stakeholders from within the locality whose services are vital for older people and who are important contributors to the broader later life agenda. A forum solely of older people's representatives could be effective at gathering the voice of older people but would miss the opportunity to influence directly the service delivery organisations within the area. While a forum consisting predominantly of delivery organisations might find it difficult to act as the voice of older people, unless linked arrangements were made specifically for this.

Attendees at the December 2009 workshop event explored the difference between direct representation and the range of engagement activities and data needed to increase the influence of under-served and seldom heard groups. Good practice suggests that a range of involvement and engagement methods are used – from consultation to direct participation, together with evidence such as focus groups and listening exercises, in order to hear from the entire community. For more information about the range of ways to listen and respond see [www.peopleandparticipation.net](http://www.peopleandparticipation.net)

Forums will want to be confident that mechanisms to provide direct representation are transparent, that they consider diversity and that the organisational members, e.g. stakeholders, providers and other agencies, are listening and responding to the voices of service users/members.

### **An effective Ageing Forum**

Forums will want to be confident that they have the right processes in place to operate effectively and deliver the right outcomes for their communities. This issue was discussed at the workshop in December 2009 and the following key points identified:

- Continuity of membership;
- Good two-way communications between forums, local agencies and 'grassroots' organisations to which older people belong;
- Have a work plan and decide priorities;

- Be able to gather or have access to local evidence and desktop research;
- Involvement in policy development at local level;
- Minutes produced quickly, with bullet points for action;
- Local reporting to forum, and good communication links to the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing;
- The option for task and finish groups.

## Approach

English forums on ageing have been established to represent the people they serve; therefore no two forums will be alike; for example:

**East Midlands** Later Life Forum is the main organisation for engagement with older people and stakeholder organisations. It can direct and influence a number of sub-groups, which examine particular strands or themes in detail. The particular themes or strands are identified in the annual Conference, which is open to all EM LL Forum individuals or stakeholder organisations.

Discussions on ageing in **Yorkshire and Humberside** are taken forward by Future Years, an organisation hosted by Age Concern. This currently operates a very different model feeding from the Future Years Executive Board across to a network of elected Older People Champions. The Future Years Board (and Chairperson) is very active across a range of older people and ageing issues including participation in rural ageing issues. The Future Years Board and the Older People Champions share the same Chairperson. The Older People Champions engage with local organisations and the community, identifying key issues.

**North East** ageing issues are taken forward by the Years Ahead organisation, hosted by the University of Newcastle. This involves 150 local forum organisations across the North East, affiliated to Years Ahead. It has a more formal structure with voting and non-voting members. Voting membership is split on a 50/50 ratio between older people and organisational representatives.

Conferences, particularly in the **West Midlands, East Midlands** and **East of England** have been useful in setting priorities for forums. These events have ensured wider engagement and provided opportunities for local priorities to be included and considered.

These are just a few examples to illustrate the different approaches taken to ensure that local people have the mechanisms in place to voice issues and concerns that are important to them.

## Resources

Attendees at the event in December 2009 discussed the issue of resources and offered the following ideas about what a well resourced ageing forum would look like:

- Co-ordinator/development worker time;
- Administrative support;
- Office costs for the above, including IT;

- Regular meeting and occasional events costs;
- Travel expenses, particularly for older peoples representatives;
- Resources to enable communications and publicity costs to be covered, e.g. newsletter, flyers, leaflets and strategies.

Sources of funding could include:

- local authorities;
- PCTs;
- Big Lottery grants;
- Organisations that are existing regional forum members;
- Local businesses.

Devolved nations have their own arrangements to support community engagement, including with older people.

### **Terms of Reference**

Forums will want to agree a short statement defining the forum's role, purpose and responsibilities in relation to both members and the wider community. This might be in the form of a Terms of Reference document or a Vision and/or Mission Statement supported by Terms of Reference. Key items to include are likely to be:

- the purpose/aims/objectives;
- any specific activities and/or outcomes intended;
- lines of accountability.

Forums might also want to include additional information on:

- membership, e.g. duration, numbers, etc.;
- frequency and location of meetings/a timetable of meetings;
- governance arrangements;
- communications approaches;
- contact details/point of contact.

Forums will want to ensure that working arrangements encourage the participation of their older people's representatives, recognising that these may need to be different from the sorts of arrangements that are possible when all members are paid officers of organisations.

The Vision and Mission Statements and the Terms of Reference for the UK Advisory Forum are posted on the Forum web pages and some English forums on ageing have also posted their Terms of Reference.

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/ageing-society/engagement-with-older-people/uk-advisory-forum-on-ageing/>

### **Wider engagement/Links to local forums & other groups**

Forums will want to be confident that they fully reflect the views, needs and concerns of the community they represent; and are positioned to be able to influence policy and decision makers using this information.

Discussions at the workshop suggested that key areas for engagement and possible approaches include:

- The wider community:
  - Make the message personal;
  - Target common areas - what is good for older people is good for others too;
  - Go out to people rather than expect them to come to us;
  - Include intergenerational work/activities/events;
  - Make use of partners who already have experience of engagement - stakeholder groups will already be using a range of engagement methods with their local communities and these could be harnessed to serve the cause of ageing society issues and in this we can piggyback onto existing events and involvement/engagement methods.
  
- UK Government:
  - Top level commitment is in place;
  - Use policy makers at local level who have already gathered the necessary evidence we want to use, e.g. Local Authorities;
  - Need the resources to undertake the necessary engagement;
  - Understand what different Government Departments are seeking and agree an action plan with Government.
  
- Local decision makers:
  - Use a bottom up approach – not one voice but many;
  - Use the direct voice of older people;
  - Recognise that local groups are not departmental organisations;
  - To engage effectively, resources are needed;
  - Inter-generational engagement is important;
  - Campaigns to reach out into the community.

The **Welsh Assembly Government** have forwarded an example of a practical, easy to use toolkit on wider engagement, which also includes helpful case studies; this can be found at: <http://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/50plus/english/home.html>

## **Representation at the UK Advisory Forum**

English forums on ageing and the devolved nations are **encouraged** to send a representative to the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing. Each forum will want to make **its own arrangements** for deciding on their appropriate representative, ensuring that their representative understands their responsibilities in representing the position of the forum, rather than any personal views or those of any parent organisation. In terms of good practice most Forums now put to a vote the election of a suitable candidate.

## **Sharing good practice**

Attendees at the December 2009 workshop identified that good practice should be shared at all levels, i.e. with local forums as well as across local authority boundaries and devolved nations; and suggested the following:

- Good examples of inter-generational projects;
- The involvement of older people in influencing policy making with local authorities, PCTs, etc.;
- Improved campaigning;
- Learn from established forums/structures, e.g. devolved nations;
- UK Advisory Forum on Ageing to include agenda items from members; (The UK Advisory Forum would welcome agenda items from both the English forums on ageing and the devolved nations.)
- Improve resources so that ageing forums can reach, communicate and hear the voice of local forums and hard to reach groups.

### **DWP Local Engagement Team**

DWP's Local Engagement Team also has access to a range of key stakeholders and organisations both within DWP and other Government Departments, and has a key role to play in supporting and developing forums and wider engagement including:

- Attendance at each of the 9 English forums on ageing;
- Undertaking presentations; giving feedback and updates on policy implementation;
- Providing a direct link back to DWP policy makers and Ministers
- Enabling a consistent approach across all forums, and promoting activities across all 9 English forums.

### **Conclusion**

This document aims to give some practical examples of what an English forum on ageing may comprise and how it might operate. **It is not intended to be prescriptive**, but does set out to stimulate discussion and offer a helpful challenge. Examples are not exhaustive and this document will develop and evolve along with ageing forums themselves. It is hoped that examples of notable practice and lessons learned can be added in a spirit of continuous improvement.

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