

Reference Group on Older People

Monday, 30th May, 2022

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE REFERENCE GROUP ON OLDER PEOPLE

Members present: Alderman Copeland (Chairperson); and
Councillors Hutchinson and Smyth.

In attendance: Mrs. G. McEvoy, Senior Environmental Health Officer;
Mrs. E. Greer, Senior Project Development Officer;
Ms. J. Derby, Project Support Officer; and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.

Apologies

An apology for inability to attend was reported from Councillor McMullan.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 24th January 2022 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of Interest were reported.

Development of Age-friendly Belfast Plan 2022-2026

Ms. A. Keenan, EOS Community Consulting, attended in connection with this item and was welcomed by the Chairperson.

Presentation from Alison Keenan, EOS Community Consulting CIC on "What we know and what we have heard"

Ms. Keenan stated that the new Age-Friendly plan was being developed under very unusual circumstances, given that older people had been particularly affected by the pandemic. She referred to the eight inter-connected aspects of Age Friendly cities which had been adopted by the World Health Organisation:

- Housing
- Social participation
- Respect and inclusion
- Civic participation and employment
- Communication/information
- Community support and health services
- Outdoor spaces and buildings
- Transportation.

She stated that she had met with older peoples' forums, from across the city, including dementia friendly neighbourhood steering groups and healthy living centres. The Members were informed that several organised events, incorporating representative groups from across the city, had taken place and that a range of stakeholders and voluntary sector organisations had been consulted to find out more about the needs of older people and explore options to improve their health and well-being.

Ms. Keenan reported that to support the consultation process some statistical data had been used, including NICOLA, a longitudinal survey on ageing, undertaken by Queens University, and data contained within with the BCC residents survey had proved beneficial also. She explained that, from the information collected, it had been possible to examine what older peoples' concerns were in regard to the four themes contained with the previous Age-Friendly Belfast Plan, namely,

- Health and Well-being;
- Social Inclusion;
- Physical Infrastructure; and
- Financial Security.

She confirmed that the top priority which had been extracted from the results was Health and Well-being, with most older people, regionally, rating their health as good or better. This did not however appear to be the case for older people living in Belfast. Ms. Keenan stated further that high blood pressure, high cholesterol and arthritis appeared to be the most relevant factors affecting older people in terms of their health and well-being.

The Reference Group was informed that the survey results had indicated that 40% of older people had confirmed that their illness or disability had limited their activity levels and that 50% stated that they suffered with pain, of which, 37% stated that their pain was chronic. Ms. Keenan reported that, with the onset of Covid, older people's physical patterns had changed and that many had reported gaining weight through a lack of physical exercise, important for both physical and mental well-being.

Access to healthcare and GPs was a significant adverse impact of Covid-19, with a large reduction in the number of face-to-face medical consultations, combined with lengthy hospital waiting lists. It was reported that these factors had impacted negatively on the quality of life experienced by older people. The research had shown that many carers were over the age of fifty and that 7% of older people spent more than twenty hours per week looking after children.

Health and Well-being

Ms. Keenan reported that support for carers was an essential requirement and was especially relevant for older carers. She highlighted the importance of dementia awareness and the need to support individuals and design dementia friendly programmes, including the need to train staff to enable them to support individuals with those specific needs.

Social Inclusion

The Members were informed that loneliness and isolation had been an issue, pre Covid-19, stating that, while support structures had been in place, the pandemic had created a much more acute problem. Ms. Keenan emphasised the importance of social inclusion, stating that older people had been involved with social clubs, exercise, and community groups,

while the pandemic had placed severe restrictions on such groups taking place. The Reference Group was provided with an update on many of the opportunities that existed now, post pandemic, including the tea-dances which had proved popular and had created social networks and support structures for older people

The research undertaken had evidenced that 46% of people, over the age of sixty, were more prone to feeling lonely and isolated than the general population, with many older people being unable to afford to socialise. It was reported that many older people had joined social clubs to save on home energy costs. On the positive side, Ms. Keenan stated that older people were more digitally connected, post-pandemic, with 43% stating that they had used the internet more during the pandemic than before. The Members were informed also that the level of volunteering had reduced significantly as a result of the pandemic.

Physical Infrastructure

Ms. Keenan informed the Members that the research had indicated that nine out of ten older people were happy living in their respective areas. This was however lower than the Northern Ireland regional average of 95%. The majority of older people in Belfast stated that their area was clean and that the city centre was vibrant, but felt that it did not necessarily cater for their needs. The survey revealed also that older people did not feel safe in the city centre. The primary mode of transportation for older people was public transport and the senior smart pass was deemed a valuable possession by that particular group.

The research revealed that 29% of older people used public transport at least once per week and that the costs of senior citizen car insurance, including the rising costs associated with running a car, acted as an impediment to owning a vehicle. In terms of public transport, older people stated that they were provided with insufficient time to access their seats. Older people had stated that access to toilets, disabled access and unobstructed pavements were rated as being of high importance to that group.

Financial Security

The Reference Group was informed of some findings contained within the Belfast Residents Survey, highlighting that 10% of respondents had identified reducing poverty as being a key priority. Financial security had appeared also to be rated as very important to older people. Information taken from the survey revealed that, 1/3 of older people felt that, pre-Covid-19, they had sufficient financial resources to meet their everyday needs and that one in ten older people could maintain their home, in terms of repair and decoration. The research revealed also that many older people relied solely on the state pension as their primary source of income, with the over 60s less likely to have sought any form of either financial or debt advice. Further results taken from the survey revealed that the majority of older people were happy with their homes and that most home adaptations undertaken were in regard to bathrooms, chair lifts and level access. The majority of older people indicated that they did not want to leave their homes and were reluctant to ask for external assistance.

Respect, Inclusion and Communication

The Belfast Residents Survey had revealed that ¾ of residents felt that older people were treated with respect and dignity. Sixty-two per cent of residents agreed that the Council consulted and listened to their needs. Ms. Keenan reported that Belfast was seen as being strong and inclusive. She referred to consultations, involving older people, in terms of public realm works, signage and design of the Glider bus service. The data within the survey had revealed that 79% of older people felt that they were well informed and that the majority of

over sixty-year-olds preferred to be communicated using printed material. The Members were informed that both the G6 and older peoples' forums provided connectivity and a means of sharing information and that communication, via word of mouth, was vitally important.

The Chairperson confirmed that access to GP services was a problem for older people and agreed that a lack of funding was exacerbating the situation. She stated that more information was required for older people to access carers and cited access to housing associations as being a particular problem for older people. A Member stated that he was aware that many older people could be property rich and cash poor and that their needs required to be recognised also. The Reference Group recognised that digital exclusion was a factor often related to poverty, citing the cost of IT equipment and broadband tariffs.

Ms. Keenan stated that there was no data available in terms of the level of digital exclusion. A Member stated that he understood how older people might feel unsafe in the city centre, referring specifically to the issue of rough sleepers and drug misuse as being of particular concern to older people. A Member highlighted the importance of incorporating younger people into discussions around older people and referred to the success of the inter-generational work undertaken in that regard.

The Senior Environmental Health Officer stated that older people had been consulted widely on issues pertaining to the city centre, citing the Bolder Vision, the Belfast Stories and work undertaken by the Police and Community Safety Partnership, as being examples of collaborative work undertaken with older people at the fore. The Reference Group was informed that 2 Royal Avenue had provided a useful venue to bring older people into the city centre and referred to the success associated with a number of tea-dances which had been held at that venue. The Senior Environmental Officer stated it might be possible examine the possibility of developing an older peoples' hub in the city centre which could be expanded to include Collin and Girdwood.

The Reference Group noted the information provided and thanked Ms. Keenan for her detailed and informative presentation. The Members thanked the officers for the work which had been undertaken to include older people in the design and life of the city centre and to tackle many of the issues affecting them.

Report and Outline of Draft Plan

The Senior Project Development Officer provided the Reference Group with an update on the work which had been undertaken on the future 2022-2026 Age -Friendly Plan and that, between April-June, the Council would be undertaking a presentation to the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership, the Belfast Senior's Forum, the Departmental Management Team, Strategic Policy and Resources Committee and the Community Planning Partnerships, for their information and approval. The Senior Project Development Officer reported that it was intended to send the plan out for consultation in June or July 2022 with an anticipated launch in the Autumn of 2022.

The Senior Project Development Officer welcomed the external input provided by Ms. Keenan and recognised that challenges which lay ahead in the delivery of services and physical infrastructure, targeted at older people. She confirmed that DfI had undertaken a consultation exercise in terms of the new Glider routes and the new Belfast Central Transport Hub. She stated that it was vital to continue supporting the Belfast Seniors' Forum, in addition to the local forums, including Translink and their accessibility forum. The Members were informed of the collaborative work undertaken with Sustrans, including the 'Share the Path' initiative. It was reported that older people were concerned particularly about the dangers

associated with cyclists using shared footways and the fact that it could impede pedestrian access. The Members were informed of the importance attached to undertaking a joined-up approach in regard to the engagement and design in local and city centre developments, including the need to have inter-generational discussions around public seating design, location of toilets and park benches.

The Reference Group referred to the work undertaken to reduce social isolation and referred specifically to work undertaken with the Claire Project and the Good Morning Project. The Senior Project Development Officer highlighted the importance attached to the reduction of digital isolation, including initiatives to reduce physical isolation and loneliness. The Members were provided with a range of development programmes, including the development of dementia friendly cafes and the support offered to age-friendly programmes. The Members were informed of the struggles experienced by carers, over the period of the pandemic, and the impact on access to medical facilities and hospital waiting lists.

In terms of financial security, the Reference Group was reminded of the work which was required to tackle this problem and of the need to remove the social stigma associated with benefit claims. She reinforced the need to support food banks and the support needed to encourage older people to stay in work. The Senior Project Development Officer stated that it was intended to bring a draft Age-Friendly plan to the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership, prior to it being endorsed by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee and ratified by Council.

Get It Project

The Senior Environmental Health Officer provided the Reference Group with an update on the 'Get It' project. She referred to the first year of the project, when the Council undertook to refurbish a number of second-hand computer tablets and re-distribute them to older peoples' groups. She referred specifically to work undertaken with Ignite, who were able to support the initiative by providing IT training. The Members were informed of the positive role provided by community groups in pulling their resources together in order to extend IT training sessions, including the provision of IT tablets to senior members of the Roma community.

Noted.

Update on Age Friendly Belfast Event

The Senior Environmental Health Officer provided the Reference Group with a range of Age-friendly events which had been undertaken. including the Belfast Senior's Forum, which continued to meet remotely on a monthly basis. She referred to the success of 2 Royal Avenue and a range of events organised to celebrate the Platinum Jubilee. The Members were informed of a range of Age-friendly walks which were being organised, including historical visits to the City Cemetery.

The Reference Group was informed that work was ongoing to encourage more volunteering work. She referred to the collaborative work undertaken with Engage with Age, Volunteer Now and the North Belfast Senior's Forum. The Senior Environmental Health Officer referred to the older volunteer awards, which would be held in December 2022, and Positive Ageing Month, which would be held in October 2022.

The Reference Group noted the information provided including the range older people's events, scheduled to take place during 2022

Date of Next Meeting

The Reference Group that its next meeting be held on Monday, 22nd August, 2022 at 12.30 p.m.

Chairperson