

Reference Group on Older People

Monday, 13th September, 2021

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE REFERENCE GROUP ON OLDER PEOPLE

Members present: Alderman Copeland; and
Councillor McCabe.

In attendance: Mrs. G. McEvoy, Senior Environmental Health Officer;
Ms. M. Higgins, Lead Officer- Community Provision;
Mrs. E. Greer, Senior Project Development Officer;
Mr. R. McClernon, Resilience Coordinator and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.

Election of Chairperson

The Reference Group agreed that Alderman Copeland be appointed to the position of Chairperson for the period ending June, 2022.

(Alderman Copeland in the Chair).

Apologies

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

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 16th November, 2020 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of Interest were reported.

Update by the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

The Commissioner for Older People (the Commissioner) attended in connection with this item, was welcomed by the Chairperson and thanked the Working Group for their invitation to address the Members.

The Commissioner stated that many of the issues affecting older people had been exacerbated by Covid-19. He referred specifically to the challenges faced by older people to re-connect and integrate with society, post Covid-19, and highlighted the fact that older people had concerns about travelling on public transport and the impact of Covid-19 in terms of restrictions on their social gatherings and interactions.

The Members were informed of many of the other adverse impacts for older people, including mental health, isolation, and a lack of community support and domiciliary care packages. He raised concerns in regard to hospital waiting lists which, while impacting

adversely on the population as a whole, could potentially have a much greater impact on older people. He referred to the need to initiate bereavement support for older people, particularly in view of the high numbers of that group who had succumbed to the virus and highlighted the work which was being undertaken by Patricia Donnelly, Head of the Vaccine Programme, in regard to the establishment of a Northern Ireland Bereavement Network.

The Commissioner referred to the need to establish a balance in care homes, in regard to maintaining family contact and keeping residents safe. He referred to his disappointment that the Draft Programme for Government had failed to provide a high-level outcome for older people and that he would be endeavouring to galvanise cross-party support for that issue to be addressed. He referred also to the need for the Adult Protection Bill to be enshrined in legislation as a matter of priority, including Age-Discrimination legislation in regard to goods facilities and services.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Working Group, referred to the inconsistencies within the residential home sector, specifically in regard to visiting rights and access by the residents to communal areas. The Commissioner, in response to a further question from a Member in respect of removal of the triple lock for pensioners stated that, with the future impact of rising fuel prices and the onset of a potential severe winter, the removal of the triple lock could have severe implications for older people. He reported that he was investigating with the energy companies the possibility of establishing an energy hardship fund to address those specific issues.

The Working Group agreed that Belfast City Council would support the Commissioner's efforts to secure a regional hardship fund to provide financial support for older people, given the future anticipated rise in energy prices. The Members requested also an update on the Dementia-friendly initiative. In response, the Senior Project Development Officer stated that the four Area groups had continued to meet virtually on a regular basis. She stated further that dementia-friendly would be integrated into the new Age-friendly plan and that the Council had sponsored an Age-friendly awards scheme to ascertain what initiatives the business community had undertaken in support of Belfast as an Age-friendly city.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Working Group, thanked the Commissioner for his attendance and the Members offered their support in respect of the work undertaken by his office in the provision of assistance and support for older people.

Update on Development of Age-friendly Belfast Plan 2022-2025

The Senior Project Development Officer reported that the Council was in the process of developing its new Age-friendly plan. She stated that development of the plan required a partnership approach as a result of the diverse areas covered within the plan, including amongst other things, housing and health. She referred to the coordinating role provided by the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership (H-A-S-P) in respect of the plan and the fact that it was a continuous process involving the development of ideas and actions carried forward from the previous action plan and continual consultation with older people.

The Members were reminded that the Age-friendly Belfast Plan action plan was included in the Belfast Agenda and included collaborative work to assess the positive impact of the plan, including the Age-friendly initiative, on the lives of older people. The Senior Project Development Officer stated that a number of partnership and older people workshops would be taking place in the new year, as part of a consultation process, to assess the views of older people in terms of their needs for services, social interaction and support. She referred to the process and timeline associated with the development and publication of the new Age-friendly plan with a view to launching the action plan in October 2022.

The Reference Group agreed that a joint meeting be held, with the Belfast Seniors' Forum, to provide the Members with an update on the work of that group, given the contact restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Noted.

Age-friendly Belfast Activities and Events

The Senior Environmental Officer provided an overview of a range of Age-friendly activities which had taken place since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. She stated that information had been provided to older people, support services and partners outlining which services were available to them under the Covid-19 restrictions. She highlighted the initiative displayed by older people in undertaking a number of zoom meetings and consultations, which had ensured that groups, such as the Greater Belfast Senior's Forum, had remained connected during a period of severe restrictions. The Senior Environmental Officer referred to the inter-generational work which had taken place with "Linking Generations" during the pandemic and reinforced the benefits and positive feedback in regard to the online training programmes which had been undertaken.

The Members were informed that the Council had been in a position to assist older people with the provision of a range of IT devices including refurbished computer tablets. This had permitted older people to communicate with each other and access online training videos which had proved both popular and beneficial. The Working Group was informed that handyman services were operational again, after being suspended during the pandemic. The Senior Environmental Officer stated that the handyman service comprised a free home safety check and included a low-cost repair service. The Members were reminded that October had been designated as Positive Ageing month, beginning with the Age-friendly Belfast Convention, in the City Hall, on 1st October 2021. She stated that the Convention would take the form of a hybrid meeting, with a reduced number of attendees to ensure social distancing and that a recording of the event would be made available for distribution to non-attendees. The Senior Environmental Health Officer referred to a number of activities which would be taking place, including a men's health day undertaken by Volunteer Now and a Silver Sunday event which would be held in the Ulster Hall. She referred to a range of additional events being held, including fix-it clinics at various community centres throughout the city and which included a number of on-line training sessions. The Senior Environmental Health Officer stated that it was hoped that a virtual tea dance would be held at the end of October, 2021.

The Reference Group was informed that 15,000 Safe Seniors' packs would be made available from 1st October 2021 and would be distributed from a range of venues, including Community Centres. She highlighted the 'hug in a box' scheme which had been well received and which had included a range of items, including vouchers and food parcels, targeted at older people. She stated further that it was intended to record the Age-friendly convention and distribute the recording widely. The Chairperson suggested that it may be beneficial to arrange, at a future date, a meeting between the Greater Seniors' Forum and the Youth Forum, as a means to encourage greater inter-generational participation and communication between those groups. The Senior Environmental Health Officer agreed to distribute the information packs as widely as possible and confirmed that they would be made available to assist Members of the Reference Group in their role as elected and community representatives.

The Lead Officer - Community Provision suggested that it would be beneficial if the information packs, covering issues such as community safety and developments associated with the Age-friendly Action Plan, could be made available to the area teams, advice centres

and the Council's Community Development Officers. She stated that this would assist in ensuring that all vulnerable groups could be targeted for assistance and support.

The Reference Group noted the information which had been provided, agreed to the suggestions and advice provided by the relevant officers and thanked those officers for their efforts to engage with older people during the pandemic, including the delivery of an extensive range of events to maintain contact with older people and thereby ensuring that they remained connected and valued.

Climate Engagement by Older People

The Resilience Coordinator provided the Working Group with an overview of the work undertaken by the Climate Commissioner and her staff in regard to the Council's strategy on climate mitigation. He reported also on the work undertaken by the Council in the development of its Resilience Strategy launched in December, 2020 and which culminated in its climate delivery plan. The Members were reminded of the three areas of work, within the plan, namely climate adaptation and mitigation, engagement with younger people and the economic drivers required to achieve zero-carbon emissions by 2050.

The Resilience Coordinator referred specifically to the need to deal with the following areas of work namely, transportation and the retrofit of public housing stock which had contributed significantly to the production of harmful emissions. He informed the Working Group that the Council was in the process of developing its own climate plan for the city and that a climate fund had been created to assist with the costs associated with climate mitigation measures. The Members were informed of the importance attached to ensuring that climate mitigation was incorporated within Council policy, including its procurement processes, and of the need to secure community engagement in respect of climate resilience and mitigation measures. The Resilience Coordinator referred to the benefits associated with the development of a green economy, including improved air quality and a reduction in traffic congestion. He explained that additional measures would be required to secure improved community engagement in respect of many of the climate change proposals.

The Working Group was informed that a carbon bus tour would be taking place in Belfast to raise awareness of the Cop26 event scheduled to take place in November 2021 in Glasgow. The Chairperson stated that she was concerned that older people had not been considered in the climate change agenda. She referred specifically to the issues of fuel poverty and the retrofit of housing stock as being issues which required particular attention. The Senior Project Development Officer stated that it was important that future green infrastructure projects afforded greater consideration to older people and their specific needs. The Members agreed that the climate change agenda needed to be more reflective of older people given the fact that Belfast was now an Age-friendly city. The Resilience Coordinator agreed to meet with Council officers to agree an approach on how older people and targets to meet their needs could be incorporated within the climate change agenda.

The Working Group noted the information which had been provided and thanked the Resilience Coordinator for his detailed presentation and expressed their wish that the needs of older people would be given greater importance and form a more integral part of the climate change agenda and its associated activities.

Chairperson