



## REPORT 4

### Engagement and Empowerment among Older People: A Case Study

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Empowerment  
Partnership



A Report to the Empowering Communities Consortium

## **A Note about this Case Study**

This case study was commissioned by the South West Regional Consortium of the National Empowerment Partnership. It forms part of a set of reports reflecting research and other activities undertaken through the South West Empowerment Development Project (October 2007 – March 2008). All the reports may be downloaded from the Creating Excellence website at:

[www.creatingexcellence.org.uk](http://www.creatingexcellence.org.uk)

- Report 1** An Overview of the Learning from the South West Empowerment Development Project
- Report 2** Engagement and Empowerment among Black and Minority Ethnic and other Equality Communities in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 3** Participation and Empowerment of Children and Young People in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 4** Engagement and Empowerment among Older People in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 5** Engagement and Empowerment in Rural Local Authorities in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 6** Engagement and Empowerment in an Urban Unitary Authority in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 7** No Boundaries: A Study of Networks and Empowerment
- Report 8** Engagement and Empowerment: Measurement and Indicators

All the reports were researched and written by a joint team from The Evaluation Trust and South West Foundation, with support from Professor Marilyn Taylor, Professor of Urban Governance and Regeneration at the University of the West of England. The team members were:

Philippa Chapman  
Maria Clarke  
Jan Crawley  
Andrew Edgington  
Lesley Frazer

Erica Lewis  
Lori Streich  
Sarah del Tufo  
Jenni Wilson

These reports, as with all research, reflect the views of those who took part and are a snapshot in time and there may be other perspectives that are not recorded.

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## Acknowledgements

The members of the research team working on this case study would like to express their sincere thanks to all the people who have contributed their time and shared their knowledge, observations and insight into engagement and empowerment among older people in the South West region (see Appendix 1).

Although not all of this material could be referred to within the case study, it has informed the project's wider learning and will form part of a continuing regional resource on community empowerment.

Front cover photograph: Launch event of the Beaminster Area Seniors, West Dorset, discussing what life is like for an older person living in the surrounding villages (Copyright: Dorset Association of Senior Forums).

## Research Team Contacts

| <b>The Evaluation Trust</b>  | <b>South West Foundation</b>   |
|--|--|
| Sarah del Tufo<br>Principal Evaluation Worker  | Jan Crawley<br>Director  |
| 0118 966 4864  | 01275 333666   |
| <a href="mailto:sarahdeltufo@evaluationtrust.org">sarahdeltufo@evaluationtrust.org</a> | <a href="mailto:info@southwestfoundation.org.uk">info@southwestfoundation.org.uk</a> |

## **1. Introduction to the Case Study**

This case study focuses on a number of different examples of older people's engagement and empowerment across the South West region, and identifies the key themes and learning from their collective experience.

Before considering these examples, however, it is important to note the changes in policy, demography, and in levels of activism among older people themselves that have taken place since the early 1990s. These provide an important context for older people's engagement and empowerment, both nationally and regionally.

## **2. The National Context**

Across the UK, the policy push to give older people a voice in local service planning can be traced back to the 1990 NHS and Community Care Act, which required statutory agencies to shift from being providers of a fixed set of services into a much more locally responsive commissioning role. For the first time, local authorities were expected to consult with their users in drawing up their Community Care Plans.

Initially progress was slow and statutory agencies tended to excuse their lack of engagement with older service users by saying that it was 'hard to reach' and involve them. However, a number of innovative projects showed that, with support, many of the most frail and isolated older people in the community were keen to have a voice in shaping local services and could certainly be enabled to do so. One of the earliest examples was the Fife User Panel Project<sup>1</sup>, set up by Age Concern Scotland in 1992 to bring together groups of actual or potential service users in order to influence the planning and provision of Community Care services.

By 2000, these organised (often 'top down') initiatives to engage with older service users around a fairly prescribed set of issues had been joined by others that empowered older citizens aged 50+ to develop their own forums, with much more open and self-selected agendas<sup>2</sup>. Accounts from these self-organised groups of older people have consistently shown that they home in on issues which directly affected the mass of retired people – ageism, Council Tax, pensions, transport, the street environment, safety, care charges, and rationing of health services.

There are currently over 400 Senior Citizens' Forums in the UK, with a total membership in excess of 100,000. This 'bottom up' approach to forum development has been very much supported by the national voluntary organisations concerned with older people: Help the Aged and Age Concern.

Help the Aged has been one of the prime development agencies working with older people to develop their own local forums, through its national 'Speaking Up for Our Age' programme which has provided funding, practical support, conferences and training sessions across the country:

*Although they vary in size from small groups to those with members numbering many hundreds, forums all have a number of important features in common: they are independent organisations which give a collective voice to older people, in order to influence decision-makers on matters which impact on their every-day lives.*

*They are run by older people, for older people. All members are volunteers. They are democratic and inclusive. They decide their own agenda, sharing information and raising issues of concern. Forums help combat disadvantage by providing a platform where older people can speak out on the issues that concern them.*

*As well as their campaigning efforts, many have social activities, run trips and hold open meetings, helping to break down isolation by providing opportunities for older members of the community to socialise, meet new people and keep in touch with local news.*

(Help the Aged<sup>3</sup>)

Age Concern has also supported a range of initiatives to enable older people to get involved and voice their views, through the delivery of national initiatives such as the 'Voice and Choice' training programme, and the development and administrative help provided by local Age Concerns to forums and other older people's groupings.

Running alongside these developments, the importance to Government of involving older people in decision making and future planning across a wide public policy and economic agenda has gained increasing prominence not only in the UK but across Europe, largely because of the growing recognition since the late 1990s that all the European societies are ageing and that national, regional and local policies which ignore the issues of ageing populations do so at their peril<sup>4</sup>. Government statistics indicate that there are now more than 20 million people aged 50+ living in the UK. Because of the ageing of the post-war 'baby-boomer' generations, there is a projected increase of a further 30% by 2031, which means there will be over 27 million older people living in the UK by 2031.

In the UK, Better Government for Older People (BGOP) was established in 1998 as a national public / Third Sector partnership to make national, regional and local Government more responsive both to the issues of an ageing society and the voices of older people.

The essence of BGOP's approach is for older people to be engaged as valued citizens in all areas of public life, contributing to service planning, delivery and evaluation and to their wider communities.

BGOP's Older People's Advisory Group (OPAG) works at the core of the BGOP partnership to reflect the views of older people nationally. OPAG is made up of approximately 200 voluntary members elected from older people's forums and groups across the UK, and is a resource frequently called upon by BGOP subscribers, partners, academics and by Government.

(BGOP<sup>5</sup>)

In recent years, a plethora of Government policies and initiatives have sought to place the engagement of older people at the heart of their plans for an ageing society. They have included:

- the National Service Framework for Older People (2001)<sup>6</sup>, which set new national standards and service models of care across older people's health and social care services, and which encourages older people, non-executive directors, and Councillors and in every local authority area to take on roles as Older People's Champions in order to press for full implementation of the Framework<sup>7</sup>;
- Opportunity Age (2005)<sup>8</sup>, the Government's strategy for an ageing society, which aims to end the perception of older people as dependent; ensure that longer life is healthy and fulfilling; and that older people are full participants in society;
- the *Our health, our care, our say* White Paper (2006)<sup>9</sup>, which sets out a vision to provide people with good quality social care and NHS services in the communities where they live. NHS services are half way through a 10 year plan to become more responsive to patient needs and prevent ill health by the promotion of healthy lifestyles. Social care services are also changing to give service users more independence, choice and control;
- the Partnerships for Older People's Project (POPP), in which the Department of Health has funded a total of 29 local authorities, their health and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector partners, to set up innovative pilot projects to test out new models of service delivery informed by the direct involvement of local older people. Two rounds of pilots are currently underway (Round 1 funded for 2006-2008; Round 2 funded for 2007-2009).

Despite these policies and initiatives giving high priority to the engagement and empowerment of older people, and the hugely successful forum movement, it is apparent that many agencies are still not involving older people as effectively as they could.

In November 2007, for example, a national Age Concern conference which focused on the involvement of older residents in the work of Housing Associations identified a number of continuing barriers to their meaningful engagement. These included:

- Ageism
- Lack of confidence amongst older people
- Fear of recriminations
- Lack of belief amongst staff
- Professional language and jargon
- Professionals believing issues are too complex for older people
- Costs - time and money

A number of ingredients were identified as important in 'making involvement happen':

- Confidence building, e.g. through training courses for older people
- An effective complaints system - process and outcome
- Senior leadership and commitment
- Staff training in communication skills
- Learning from good practice – with plenty of good examples around
- Developing networks
- Investment - ongoing not 'one-off'

It was concluded that:

- Involving older people is powerful
- It's about values as well as policies and procedures
- It's a dynamic process
- It needs to produce tangible results
- It should be enjoyable, if at times uncomfortable
- It can avoid myths taking hold, in an organisation, and in a sector
- We need to listen to the quiet voices
- Older people are 'experts by experience'
- It can help organisations feel connected with their users
- It can help to remind organisations why they do the job they do, and why it's important that they do it well.

(Age Concern<sup>10</sup>)



### 3. The South West Regional Context

The history of older people's engagement and empowerment in the South West has very much mirrored the national picture. Thus in the mid-1990s a few initiatives sprang up in different parts of the region that aimed to involve older people in local service planning, particularly in relation to health and social care services.

For example, the Strategy for the Care of Older People in Eastern Wiltshire was a time-limited project (1994-1996) that used independent facilitation to bring together locality-based groups of older service users and involve them in shaping a new multi-agency strategy for the provision of locality-based services.

This work highlighted again that older people (including those affected by poor health and mobility difficulties) were keen to voice their views and influence local plans, if offered a range of ways to get involved that matched their own circumstances and preferences.

They did not however want to be constrained by narrow agency agendas and instead decided to look holistically at all the local services that impinged on their quality of life. At least one of these groups subsequently developed into a larger older people's forum, independent of the statutory agencies.

(Wiltshire Community Foundation<sup>11</sup>)

From beginnings such as these, the number of independent older people's forums in the South West region has grown to over fifty. Help the Aged, through its 'Speaking Up for Our Age' programme has directly assisted the formation and development of 34 of these. A number have also been established under the auspices of local Age Concern organisations and groups; others have been helped off the ground by local Councils, or have been started entirely by older people themselves without any external support.

There are also a number of area 'panels' of older people, convened by local authorities under specific Terms of Reference to help them to evaluate and plan services within a more prescribed agenda. Some of these are able to influence in a small way the spending of certain Council budgets.

Although independent older people's forums have become the main avenues for older people to have a voice and exert influence within their local areas, there are a number of organisations and projects that have sought to engage with and involve older people in other ways. These include:

- **Wiltshire and Swindon Users' Network (WSUN)**, a user-led organisation that enables service users, including older people, to empower themselves and influence change. WSUN has become an example of good practice nationally and places emphasis on demonstrating innovative examples of user-controlled involvement in social care, e.g. in relation to Direct Payments whereby users purchase and manage their own care;
- **The Village Agent Project for Older People**, which has recruited local Agents to reach out to older people in dispersed rural communities across Gloucestershire, identifying unmet needs and providing information / access to services. This is a pilot scheme funded until mid-2008 by the Department for Work and Pensions (LinkAge Plus), delivered by **Gloucestershire Rural Community Council and Gloucestershire County Council** in partnership with a host of other local statutory and Third Sector organisations;
- **Exeter CVS**, which as part of the **Active Learning for Active Citizenship (ALAC) 'Take Part' Network**, has been training service users including older people to influence service planning and delivery. This has resulted in some older people helping to train local authority staff in good practice in engagement / involvement work, through the **'Learning to Involve' Project**.
- **'Beyond the Immediate' (BTI)**, a Wiltshire-wide partnership led by **Age Concern Wiltshire** that in 2005-2006 involved people aged 50+ in researching the needs, concerns and aspirations of the over fifties across the county, with 'seed money' from South West Regional Development Agency. BTI was effectively *'designed by older people for older people'*, in that older people sat on the Steering Group, helped to design and test questionnaires, and acted as 'BTI ambassadors' to present the research findings to audiences across Wiltshire.
- The **Partnership with Older People Projects (POPPs)**, funded by the Department of Health in Dorset, Poole and Somerset (Round 1, 2006-2008) and in Devon, North Somerset and Gloucestershire (Round 2, 2007-2009). Each of these is taking a different approach to involve older people in developing and piloting new, 'low level' local services aimed at promoting older people's independence and quality of life. Older people are taking on a range of roles in the different POPP projects. In the Round 2 **North Somerset POPP**, for example, older people sit on the Project Board and are being invited to join 4 Locality Panels, with agreed Terms of Reference, to advise on and evaluate local services. Each of the 4 localities is also served by its own independent older people's forum. The linkages and overlaps between these different groupings are not yet clear.

Although local statutory and voluntary agencies have understood for many years the importance of engaging with and involving older citizens, it appears to have taken much longer for regional agencies to acknowledge the same need, despite a growing awareness of the implications of the region's changing demography.

In 2004, 38% of South West residents were aged 50+, compared to 34% nationally. The South West region now has the highest percentage of people aged 65+ in Europe (18.7%). Since rural and coastal areas are particularly sought after locations for retirement, some of the South West's local authority areas are amongst the 'oldest' in the UK. In three areas, for example, (Christchurch, Rother and East Devon), older people aged 65+ already comprise more than 30% of the population.

According to the South West Observatory<sup>12</sup>, this regional trend is set to continue. People aged 50+ accounted for almost all (91%) of the region's population growth between 1994 and 2004, and ONS population projections suggest that the number of people aged 50+ living in the South West could increase by 16% between 2004 and 2014, raising older people's share of the population to 41%.

Demographic ageing is therefore now identified as among the region's top priority issues in the Regional Economic Strategy for South West England 2006-2015. In this scenario, there is clearly a danger that older people will increasingly be seen as a burden on the South West regional economy.

However, as the South West Observatory notes in *The State of the South West 2007*, it is important to realise that the characteristics, experiences and expectations of older people already vary dramatically and are likely to change over time. Crucially, rising incomes and advances in medicine are likely to result in longer years of healthy life so that older people will remain active for longer as workers, entrepreneurs, volunteers, consumers (the 'silver market') and informal carers – a huge asset in terms of the region's social capital.

*For this reason it is misleading to talk about older people as a homogeneous group and perhaps even more misleading to project current expectations of retired people on future generations. (South West Observatory)*

Although this presents a very positive and dynamic picture of the next generation of older people, and importantly recognises that older people (now usually defined as all those aged 50+) are not a single homogenous group, there is a danger that such a view may be working against the efforts of the present generations of older people to get their voices heard at regional level.

In 2002, these issues and challenges were taken up through the 'Taking Account of Age Project', funded by the South West Regional Assembly<sup>13</sup>. The partners to the project included the main regional statutory and Third Sector agencies concerned with older people, and two representatives of local older people's forums. Together they facilitated a series of events around the region, consulting on a range of regional issues and seeking older people's views on how best the regional bodies could engage with them and involve them in regional planning in future. Over 400 older people from a range of backgrounds took part.

The events culminated in a regional 'Taking Account of Age' conference which concluded that the regional agencies should be taking more active steps to engage with older people and that:

*The active involvement of older people in the design and planning of services is most effective when done at local level. Consultation with older people on wider issues can be effective at sub-regional level if it is done in ways which suit the circumstances of older people, but is more difficult to do successfully at regional level.*

*Research, expertise and co-ordination are particularly effective at regional level: a properly resourced Regional Forum on Ageing could make a valuable contribution in these areas.*

(Taking Account of Age, 2002)

Although there is as yet no Regional Forum on Ageing that brings the key regional agencies together with older people, an independent regional South West Seniors' Network has been successfully established under the auspices of Equalities South West, with significant development support from Help the Aged.

The Network has 39 local and sub-regional older people's forums in membership, and provides a means of communication between them, a focus for their interests and a channel for older people to pursue issues of their own choosing with regional and national authorities.

## **4. The Case Study Methodology**

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The history of older people's engagement and empowerment across the South West region shows that independent older people's forums and networks have now become established as the main way for older people to empower themselves and to engage with policy makers and service providers. It was therefore decided to focus the case study on a sample of these. Representatives of seven older people's forums and networks were interviewed from Devon, Cornwall, Somerset, North Somerset, Plymouth and Dorset, together with the Regional Development Team of Help the Aged. A number of key themes emerged from the interviews, which are discussed below.

In order to explore further how 'bottom up' initiatives such as the older people's forums are affected by and engage with the 'top down' strategies of public agencies, it was decided also to look in more detail at the particular example of Dorset, where a vibrant network of local forums is now feeding into the work of the Dorset Partnership for Older People Project (POPP), an initiative funded by the Department of Health and hosted by the local authority. Interviews were conducted with the county-wide Development Project for Older People's Forums in Dorset, the POPP Project Manager, the Director of Older People's Services in Dorset County Council, and with the three of the elected representatives of older people's forums who form the majority on the POPP Project Board.

Finally, the regional dimension was reflected in an interview with a representative of the South West Seniors Network, which connects member forums from across the region.

## **5. The Aims of the Older People's Forums**

The older people's forums provide a means whereby older people can come together and consider the issues both locally and nationally that affect their lives. They also provide the vehicle for older people to have a voice and to influence the policies and services that impact on them.

Most of the forums have giving older people a voice and enabling older people to influence the decisions that affect their lives as their main aims. Secondary aims are very much around improving quality of life for older people, alleviating the isolation that older people might suffer from, addressing economic disadvantage, and generally making the community a better place for older people to live in.

While some of the forums focus almost entirely on consultation, lobbying and influencing, others also undertake some direct services such as individual empowerment (by enabling and supporting older people to access their rights), signposting and advocacy. There is a strong social aspect to the forum meetings as well as the business element, and some forums provide lunches or Christmas 'get togethers', wobbly walkers, care schemes etc.

## **6. The Development of the Forums**

The forums have developed against a background of issues that have increasingly caused concern to older people as a whole - issues such as the perceived unfair effect of Council Tax on older people, low retirement incomes, the low level of pensions that women are entitled to, the increasing numbers of older people living on their own, and barriers to older people taking part in leisure activities. These are common themes running through all the forums, and for some forums have been the driving force behind their development.

The speed at which forums have developed has varied from county to county, depending on the level of developmental help that the forums have received.

In **Dorset**, for example, a strong network of Senior Forums (the **Dorset Association of Senior Forums**) has grown up across the County, with support from an independent **Forum Development Project** hosted by **Age Concern Dorchester**. There are now 11 established Senior Forums, with 6 others still at the developmental stage. The smaller forums each have around 100 members and the larger ones, such as Weymouth, have 400+. The forums all have regular meetings every quarter. They invite speakers along to talk about topics that are of interest to older people, and consult with forum members on issues that are coming up locally. The Chairs of each of the forums also meet as a Dorset-wide 'Association of Senior Forums'.

The development project has a dedicated paid development worker who provides support for existing forums in their development, and helps to establish new forums in parts of the County where no forum currently exists. Quite often the development worker has found that the members of existing forums have wanted to develop greater confidence and skills to put their views across to the authorities more effectively, and has managed to access training through Age Concern to assist them with this.

New forums and networks also need the assistance of the development worker when they first establish themselves. They need support, information and advice on structures and governance. Again, new forum members tend to voice a certain lack of confidence about whether they have the right skills and knowledge to develop a forum and to make it sustainable.

Inevitably, Senior Forum members become ill from time to time or are no longer able to continue their active involvement. At this stage the Forums become vulnerable; one forum for instance lost three management committee members within as many months. This is where the input and support of the development worker has proved essential in 'firefighting' and encouraging the Forums to keep going.

(Dorset Forum Development Project)

In **Cornwall**, by contrast, which has not had the advantage of a dedicated county-wide development project, there is so far only one very active forum in Penwith (see below), which has been largely developed with support from the District Council. One or two other forums, for example in Caradon, are at the initial stages in their development, but compared with Dorset there seems to be a lack of development work going on to encourage and support the establishment of forums.

### **Penwith Older People's Forum**

Cornwall has an older population than the English and South West regional average. One in five citizens is aged 65+ and the proportion of the population aged 85+ is also higher.

Penwith itself has a population of 63,000 with 21% of the population aged 65+. This area is also the 25th most deprived district of 354 in the country.

In 2003, Penwith District Council set up an older people's panel to focus on services for older people. This was the starting point for the development of the Forum. The Forum continues to be supported by the Council, which produces the newsletter, hosts the website, and assists the Forum with its development and sustainability.

Penwith Older People's Forum was created to provide an opportunity for older people and anyone involved in older people's lives or relevant services to get together to make Penwith a better place for all, and especially older people, to enjoy.

Meetings of the Forum are open to everybody. With a range of interesting and relevant speakers invited to each of the meetings, everyone is more than welcome to come to listen or take part. The Forum gives a chance to raise awareness, find ways to tackle loneliness and isolation, and ensure that older people are able to lead active and fulfilling lives - maintaining their independence and dignity.

Key to the Forum is its role as a voice for older people, contributing to improving the quality of life for the community in Penwith. The Forum now has over 1,000 members from the Penwith area.



## 7. Who Engages with the Forums?

Most of the forums have a core of older people who, on a voluntary basis, undertake the organisation of the forum, sit on scrutiny panels and act as representatives on other forums, utilizing their experience and knowledge to effect change and influence. Many of these 'core' members are skilled lobbyists and campaigners.

The Weston-super-Mare Senior Citizens Forum, for example, has an ex-Councillor as its Chair. He has a long history as a local Councillor and on his retirement from the Council was made the first Alderman in North Somerset. Having been involved in local civic life over a long period, the Chair understands the way that the Council operates. He knows who to contact and where decisions are being made. He has ensured that all the political parties are aware of the Forum and its activities, because *'to make any difference at all you have to work with and engage with the politicians'*. The same forum also has a number of retired members who have a good working knowledge of financial matters and can scrutinise papers and budgets and make these understandable to the wider membership of the Forum.

A number of the other forums have the engagement of existing or ex-Councillors but still manage to retain their independence from the local authority. This gives them a good working knowledge of the systems that they are trying to engage with and an understanding of the processes, which is essential when trying to influence. As one of the larger forums stated:

*This Forum has three elected members on our management group. This gives us an 'in' to the Council and improves relationships and communication between the Forum and the Council.*

There is no reliable breakdown of the membership or attendance of the forums with regard to gender or ethnic origin. According to government statistics the percentage of black and minority ethnic (B&ME) people over 75 is less than 2% nationally. Most of the forums interviewed, other than Plymouth, are operating in areas where the percentage of B&ME population is likely to be smaller than this. However, it is important to see who is engaging with the forums, and whether some effort needs to be put into encouraging those who are not attending to take part. When asked questions about the make-up of their membership, most of the forums interviewed replied simply that 'all are welcome'.

Several of the forums that took part in the study, such as the very large forum in Plymouth, are led by women, but most are chaired by men. The forums do, however, often concentrate their lobbying on issues and concerns that affect women in particular, for example carers' issues and pensions. They also show a good awareness of the difficulties that their members may have in taking part and attending and several are trying to find ways to overcome these participation issues.

## 8. Communication and Participation

Communication is an essential ingredient of participation. There is an issue for many forums about those older people who are not able to attend meetings due to ill health, lack of transport etc. The Plymouth Senior Citizens Forum for example has a concern that only one tenth of their membership is able to take an active part in consultation. The other nine tenths of their members are not able to attend meetings because of infirmity and lack of appropriate transport. The Forum therefore has to rely heavily on its newsletters to get information out, and on feedback from their members in response to the issues raised.

A number of initiatives are underway to try to overcome these barriers to older people's full participation:

- All of the forums have newsletters which reach out to those members physically unable to attend meetings. Circulation of the newsletters ranges from a few hundred copies being distributed to over a thousand.
- The Dorset Forum Development Project is piloting making transcripts of meetings and presentations available on the internet for people to consider and feed back their views. The results of this are yet to be reviewed but it is hoped that more people will be able to offer feedback on the issues raised at forum meetings.
- The Penwith Older People's Forum is well on the way to developing a community radio station which will be '*led by older people for older people*'. This will, among other things, enable older people to build their skills and confidence in presenting their views and arguments, and to inform and engage with a very much wider audience of older people in the local community.

Some forums have also used very creative and innovative approaches to communicate messages about the issues affecting older people and to attract media attention and the interest of the wider community, as in the Dorset example below.

### Getting the Message Across: The Tolpuddle Martyrs

Senior Forum representatives in Dorset came together with Help the Aged, Age Concern Dorchester and West Dorset District Council to organise an unusual event to get their message across about the issues that are facing older people in Dorset. They used the trial of the Tolpuddle Martyrs as a backdrop and staged a mock trial in the courtroom of Dorchester's Old Crown Court.

The Senior Forums across Dorset provided the evidence to be tried on 5 issues affecting older people in Dorset. The issues were general transport, care, affordable housing, health transport and loss of facilities such as toilets, libraries and post offices. Members of the jury, witnesses and guests who filled the public gallery, dressed in 19<sup>th</sup> century style clothes reflecting the spirit of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, whose trial was held in the historic court in 1834.

One member of Weymouth Area Senior Forum, said *'the Tolpuddle Martyrs fought their corner and eventually this paid off and thousands benefited from their stand. We may not be 'martyrs' but we have a cause – to improve the quality of life for older people in Dorset.'*

The Regional Development Officer for Help the Aged commented, *'This is working from the bottom up, getting the issues discussed and priorities identified at grassroots level and only then deciding on a course of action. The campaigns that will emerge from this event will be grounded in the real life experience of older people in Dorset, endorsed by the Forums and, with all the publicity the event received, supported by the populace as a whole – a recipe for success!'*

The Jury, made up of representatives from the Senior Forums, were tasked with finding three issues 'Guilty'. They listened intently to the witness statements, delivered by local actors. Evidence was scored on its content and the ability to deliver an effective campaign that would make a positive change to the lives of older people in Dorset. The three issues that were proclaimed upon were general transport, affordable housing, and care. All being found guilty, they were *'sentenced to being reformed, and will be reformed!'* Health transport and loss of facilities were *'free to go, **for now**'*.

The event attracted a great deal of media attention and focus for the issues raised. The Dorset Association of Senior Forums is now due to conclude its year-long Care Campaign with an event to debate the findings of its report on the situation facing older people in Dorset who need social care. In keeping with the Association's motto of *'entertainment with a serious purpose'*, the event will use the language and costume of the English Civil War.

## 9. Engagement with Other Agencies

All of the forums engage in some way or other with their local Councils, Local Authorities, service providers and external agencies. They do this through a variety of means. For example, in Devon, **AGILE** is an older people's network formed through Better Government for Older People (BGOP) that acts as a real 'hub' for engagement between older people and agencies across and beyond the county.

**AGILE**, an older people's network in Devon, undertakes activities as a county-wide consultative body for older people aged 50+. It also actively campaigns and lobbies for practical changes, which will improve the quality of life for older people. AGILE is involved in a wide range of consultation and feedback work. For example it contributes to and attends:

- consultation meetings with Devon County Council
- meetings and events to prepare for the Senior Council for Devon
- Older People's Advisory Group (OPAG) South West Region and Older People's Advisory Group (OPAG) UK
- LinkAge Plus Network (a DWP-led pilot initiative to involve older people in the design of joined-up, accessible services)

AGILE has helped older people to connect with local government and other agencies in the public sector including:

- Devon Primary Care Trust
- Devon Partnership Trust
- Devon POPP: the Partnership for Older People Project
- Devon County Council
- Exeter City Council
- Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)

AGILE is also connected with larger voluntary sector organizations including:

- Exeter CVS
- Age Concern Exeter : Senior Voices Group
- Help the Aged
- University of the Third Age (UTA)
- Devon Action Pension Forum
- Community transport associations

(AGILE)

Even the smaller rural forums such as Winscombe and Sandford find they are able to engage with their Local Authorities. However, while the forums are able to make their voices heard, many find that making the power-holders listen can be more difficult.

### **Winscombe & Sandford & District Older People's Forum**

The Winscombe and Sandford Forum began about 4 years ago. It was set up in response to issues over Council Tax. Older people in the area were living in houses which now attracted a very high level of Tax with no account taken of how many people were living in the property or their age. Older people had planned their retirement and, while not destitute, they were having difficulties managing the additional cost of the Council Tax which appeared to be an unfair taxation on many older people.

At the first meeting around 100 people turned up. The Forum now has 90 full members and 35-40 people typically attend the meetings. There were 4 meetings per year initially but there are now 6 due to the level of interest in the Forum. The focus of the Forum has broadened and they now cover a wide range of issues.

The rural area of North Somerset that the Forum serves has a very high proportion of people aged 60+. There is a lot of community activity going on with around 106 organisations active in the locality but they are organisations that have the aim of improving the quality of life for people in the community rather than organisations that are trying to influence decisions and services.

North Somerset Council has engaged with this Forum but members have encountered barriers in terms of the real power that the Forums can wield:

*The Forum has been asked to scrutiny meetings around health care issues and to look at council budgets. The main issue with the scrutiny meetings is they have no power. The Forum has also been invited to take part in the [North Somerset] POPP Project. The members are given papers before any meeting that they attend so that they are in a position of being able to comment, but the issue always remains that they can attend meetings, have their input but they have no real power and must just rely on their ability to influence.*

In the view of the Forums operating in North Somerset, North Somerset Council does understand that they represent older people's views and is beginning to pay attention to those views. The issue at the moment is that the Council is not compelled to listen or respond.

(Winscombe & Sandford & District Senior Citizens Forum)

There is therefore strong evidence from the forums that they are able to link into their Councils. For the smaller forums this tends to be the District Councils or Unitary Authorities. The larger forums also seem able to link into their County Councils.

Some forums have been successful in lobbying their Councils on particular issues and feel they have contributed to real change. For example, the Weston-super-Mare Senior Citizens Forum has made it a top priority to lobby North Somerset Council regarding Council Tax and its implications for older people. They have joined the national 'Is it Fair Campaign?' to give voice to their concerns that older people are being charged more than their fair share. Their campaign has, they feel, added extra power to the wider lobbying of the local Council to keep the Council Tax increase below inflation. This year the Council Tax in North Somerset has only been increased by 1.9%. Other areas in the South West are reporting increases as high as 4.9% The Weston-super-Mare Forum sees this as one of their main successes. While they are sure the 'success' was attributable to more than their own efforts, they do feel that they had a significant input toward this decision and helped to identify some areas in which funding could be saved.

There is therefore strong evidence to show that where the forums are proactive and engage with political representatives, then their influence increases.

*We need to connect politically to have an influence.*

Success may also bring different challenges, however, in terms of balancing older people's interests against those of other stakeholders. For example, the Weston-super-Mare Forum is aware that if Council Tax increase remains below inflation for a 2<sup>nd</sup> year, this will have an impact on jobs within the Council. They are now to meet with local union representatives to talk this issue through.

Health provision in GP surgeries is one issue that a number of the rural forums are working on, but there are a whole host of other health and care issues being taken up in different ways. In Winscombe and Sandford, for example, the forum successfully influenced the reorganisation of local health services, by highlighting the needs of older people in the more isolated rural areas. In Cornwall, the forums are also challenging the fact that only older people assessed as having the highest need are now eligible to receive full support.

Through their own pro-active approach the forums have engaged with a wide range of other service providers such as the Home Improvement Agency, Police, Fire & Rescue, utility companies, highways agencies, housing associations, bus companies, transport providers, and local media. This often takes the form of asking speakers and representatives of service providers to attend forum meetings. The forums ensure that at least a selection of their members are well briefed prior to meetings, understand the key issues and are ready to raise concerns and ask well-informed questions.

Again while these agencies are not obliged to listen to the views of older people when they attend the forum meetings, the forums consider that their issues are well-aired, that agencies become better informed about the needs of older people, and that some have actually been influenced by this contact.

Despite these many examples of effective engagement with other agencies, it does not yet appear that many forums are having direct input to their Local Strategic Partnerships or Local Area Agreements. Instead it seems that these connections are being made indirectly, through the Local Authorities' more 'top down' consultations with the forums.

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## **10. The Achievements**

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Although this case study has not been able to explore the impact of the older people's forums on individual older people, it is clear that participation brings a whole host of benefits to those taking part such as building social contacts, breaking isolation, and enabling older people to feel valued and listened to. Many older people have effectively empowered themselves to take on new roles and to develop their skills as activists.

In terms of how far the forums are able to exert influence and effect change, the minimum effect has been that the issues important to older people have at least been raised with the decision makers, and any decisions made have been taken in full knowledge of their likely impact on older people.

At best, service providers have listened to the issues raised and have addressed them. In Bath and North East Somerset, for example, the local older people's forum (Action for Pensioners) successfully campaigned to get the hospital bus service improved. In Weston-super-Mare, the Senior Citizens Forum won the support of the Council to increase the budget for pavement repairs in areas with a history of falls. In Weymouth, the Senior Forum campaigned for improved social facilities and achieved a new Day Centre under their own management.

A number of the forums have also had significant input into local plans and strategies for older people, by undertaking consultation with their members and feeding this back to the relevant authorities. Where older people have presented service providers with detailed reports on consultations, these have mainly been very well received. The most successful interventions have been where the service providers have addressed each of the issues raised by the forums and have identified where they can and cannot alter services, with explanations behind their decisions. This approach has been well received by the forums.

Overall, there is evidence to show that consultation undertaken by older people with older people produces some of the best consultation results, and the forums are clearly well placed to undertake this role.

**The Plymouth Senior Citizens Forum** has had a special input into developing the Council's local Strategy for Older People and the Quality of Life Survey that was intended to inform it.

The Council contracted Plymouth University to undertake consultation on their proposed Quality of Life Survey. The survey aimed to canvass older people's views about future services. The University, in the view of the Forum, designed a long and quite complex questionnaire that few older people would want to complete. They also felt that in any event this was not the best way to involve older people in the planning process.

The Plymouth Older Peoples' Forum therefore organised its own consultation meeting. Over 120 people attended and they also invited key people from the local authority and other service providers to hear their views direct.

A report of the event was drafted by the Forum and presented to the Council. The issues covered included leisure for older people, and the needs of single older people and those with disabilities. The report also commented on wider community issues. The Forum has since been told that the points raised will be included in the Council's Strategy for Older People.

(Plymouth Senior Citizens Forum)

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## 11. Independence of the Forums

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The forums require very little in the way of funding to keep them sustainable. Some say they need as little as £250 per annum to keep going; others require up to £2,000 depending on the size of their membership and the extent of their outreach work. This funding tends to be pieced together from a variety of charitable sources, fundraising activity by the Forums themselves, and in some cases Council grants. Help the Aged has been a key funder through its 'Speaking Up for Our Age' initiative, as has South West Foundation through its grants programme.

Investment in the development of the forums is a different issue. The clearest example is the Dorset Forum Development Project, which was funded by the Lottery for its first three years and is now temporarily funded by Dorset POPP. This development input has been viewed extremely positively. The Dorset Senior Forums have been able to retain their independence while benefiting from linking into sources of support, training and into wider geographical structures and networks. There is now concern about the future of this important development work, once the POPP funding ends.



The development input for most of the other forums has been widely variable. Many have benefited from support and training provided by Help the Aged through its 'Speaking Up for Our Age' programme, together with help from agencies such as a local Age Concern or a local Council, and again this support has been highly valued.

Some of the forums show nervousness however about the large investment that is being directed to the POPPs pilots and to other service-led structures which have certain agendas and which, while not intending to, have the capacity to swamp the forums' own agendas and capacity. There is also a sense of injustice that some of the newer structures come with funding to pay older people to undertake consultation and outreach activities, which the independent forums do not have the financial means to do.

*Our forum is aware that some consultation projects for older people within Somerset can pay their representatives to undertake consultancy work with regard to working with the Council and with older people. This is not the case with our forum and there is some sense of an unequal system.*

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## **12. Measuring the Difference the Forums Make**

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Very few of the forums have undertaken any sort of formal evaluation of their activities. They do however continually review, either formally or informally, their activities to ensure they are giving priority to the work that their members wish them to undertake and to alter their focus according to the results of the consultation.

The Dorset Forum Development Project has produced an evaluation report as part of their requirement to provide feedback to the Lottery, measuring their activity against their stated outcomes. The evaluation reflects the views of the forums about their influence and impact to date. The forums identify a range of impacts, from 'issue raising' to getting, for example, the Home Improvement Agency to alter its plans completely following consultation with the local Senior Forum. The report also looks to future activity and recommends that the Forum Development Project should in time become independent of Age Concern so that it is entirely autonomous.

The Department of Health funded Dorset Partnership for Older People (POPP), described more fully in the next section, is also subject to ongoing local evaluation and is contributing to an extensive national evaluation of all the POPP pilots<sup>14</sup>. This work is demonstrating that Dorset POPP is successfully involving older people in its design processes and governance structures, and as local evaluators. The final evaluation reports are due for publication in mid-2008.

The forums generally show themselves to be knowledgeable, skilled and able to use the skills of their members, their contacts and their knowledge of systems

and councils to the best advantage of older people. The forums have also shown themselves to have a wide reach. They consider and tackle local issues, national issues and in some case, issues relating to Europe. In order to do this successfully people have to be well informed and able to present their issues in a rational and appropriate manner. The forums are maturing and many of the forums have developed really productive relationships with public and Third Sector agencies that are now working to their advantage. In one county, the older people's forums have been able to access training in these skills, which has improved their effectiveness and influence.

## **13. Dorset POPP: Where 'Bottom Up' Meets 'Top Down'**

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### **13.1 Developing Engagement**

Dorset has clearly benefited from efforts over a number of years to develop a strong network of Senior Forums around the County, with significant input from Help the Aged and Age Concern Dorchester, and more recently direct support from the Dorset Forum Development Project. Dorset County Council (DCC) acknowledges that the most well-established Forums and the Dorset Age Partnership networks (see below) have become fundamental to its engagement with older people.

Relationships were not always so fruitful, however. Until 4-5 years ago DCC was not considered very proactive in talking with older people, who often felt that their only opportunities for influence were through questionnaires or open meetings where they had no clear role other than as members of the public. The turning point in opening up a more productive dialogue with the Senior Forums appears to have been the production of the Older People's Strategy (2004-2005) and a County-wide Older People Conference in early 2005.

### **13.2 Dorset Age Partnership (DAP)**

Building on this work, in 2005, Dorset County Council (DCC) and Dorset & Somerset Strategic Health Authority (DSSHA) convened meetings at various locations around the county, to discuss the feasibility of establishing a Dorset Older People's Partnership (DOPP). Representatives of all the Senior Forums, together with a wide range of public and Third Sector agencies, were invited to participate. It was agreed to form the Partnership, and to spread its work across 6 locality groups focused around 6 District Council areas, to reflect the dispersed, rural nature of the County. It was also agreed that the overall Chair of DOPP should be an older person elected through the Senior Forums, to provide a sense of ownership by the older people and to ensure a 'bottom up approach'. Each locality group was to meet quarterly and be attended by the Chair of the DOPP and DCC's Director of Older People's Services.

The groups started to meet in October 2006. At around the same time, the Department of Health funded Dorset Partnership for Older People Project (POPP) was developing and, to avoid confusion, it was therefore agreed to change DOPP's name to '**Dorset Age Partnership**' (**DAP**). Each DAP locality group now meets quarterly and brings together members of the relevant local Senior Forum(s) with staff from DCC, the PCT, and all the key local public and Third Sector organisations with an interest in older people's welfare.

The locality groups' business tends to fall into 3 categories: information sharing; consultation on particular plans and documents; and local issues affecting the lives of older residents. Key issues raised by older people through the meetings have been public transport, hospital/health transport, and affordable/appropriate housing.

A County-wide meeting in June 2007 brought all the locality groups together to review progress. It was thought at that time that the locality-based structure had proved itself and was becoming more robust. Older people approved of this method of involvement, which was described as 'inspirational', as they felt it gave them a voice in their own localities. The development of the Senior Forums was also helping older people to play a full role. More work was needed however to encourage more people to participate and to improve accessibility. A particular need was identified to achieve better communication with isolated or infirm older people. Partnership working was thought to be progressing well overall, although there was an identified need for increased joint working by local providers, and better links with the POPP project.

Since that event, DAP has continued to strengthen its role and, according to DCC's Director of Older People's Services, its priorities have been key influences and evidence for the development of Dorset's Local Area Agreement.

### **13.3 Dorset Partnership for Older People Project (POPP)**

At the same time as DAP was being developed, the Health Authority seconded a staff member 3 days per week to work with DCC in developing an application to the Department of Health for the funding of a POPP pilot project, by talking with Senior Forums members around the County about what they wanted to achieve. This series of consultation and discussion events culminated in a successful partnership bid for Round 1 funding (awarded by the Department of Health from May 2006 – April 2008).

Dorset PCT was also heavily involved in the POPP bid. They appreciated from the beginning that the POPP partnership would enable them to achieve contact with older people whom they found difficult to reach through their existing consultation structures. The PCT has subsequently been surprised at the breadth and extent of the reach of the project (described overleaf), which has been much greater than they originally anticipated.

**Dorset POPP** aims to place older people at the very centre of a County-wide partnership to improve older people's services and preserve independence & quality of life. It does this in a range of ways:

- Older people are in the majority on the POPP Project Board (with 4 older people sitting alongside DCC's Director of Adult & Community Services, Dorset Community Action (the leading Third Sector infrastructure organisation) & the PCT);
- A 'Community Leadership Programme' managed by Help & Care employs paid (mainly older) Leaders 7 hours per week in 33 locality clusters to infiltrate /influence /challenge / change, e.g. by going to meetings of the Council, to express views and bring out agendas to feed back to the Forums and other older people's groups. This work is believed to be influencing the nature and delivery of services.
- A 'Wayfinder Programme' managed by Age Concern Dorchester is offering signposting/support, through 2 paid Wayfinders employed 9 hours per week in every locality cluster. They make themselves available at libraries, GP surgeries, clubs etc. By default this provides good needs & gap analysis to inform DCC's commissioning of services.
- An 'Evaluation Programme' has been set up with a team of 15 local evaluators, all older people who have volunteered & been trained to go out and evaluate the whole POPP programme and its impact, e.g. by sending out monitoring forms to all users of the Wayfinder Programme.
- POPP has its own dedicated team of 4 Community Development Workers who play a more strategic role to bring people and activities together. They also each have particular thematic responsibilities, e.g. for outreach to B& ME older people, faith groups, carers, people with mental health needs, and to develop healthy living initiatives.
- The POPP Board has its own 'Community Initiatives' budget of £635,000 to seed-fund local initiatives. So far they have funded 65 projects from small (a lunch club) to large (Dial-a-Ride; a housing project to fund roving case workers; Dorset Food & Health Trust). All must demonstrate that they can be sustainable in the longer term.

(Dorset POPP Project Manager)

Since the project started, other agencies have been playing key roles in POPP alongside DCC and the PCT, including the key voluntary bodies (Help and Care, Age Concern groups around the County, Dorset Community Action). Dorset Fire and Rescue Service have also played an immensely important role, and have viewed POPP as an opportunity to engage with older people in order to reduce slips, trips and falls. They have been key players in the delivery of 14 Home Safety events around the County, and have given important financial support to an innovative POPP-funded slipper exchange programme.

### **13.4 Linkages between POPP and the Senior Forums**

In many ways the work of the Senior Forums, Dorset Age Partnership (DAP) and Dorset POPP have become very closely integrated. Older people from the Senior Forums are playing key roles on both the POPP and DAP Boards. Some older people are also in paid roles as POPP Community Leaders and Wayfinders, and as volunteer Evaluators. Many attend the locality meetings of DAP in these various capacities, and in turn have good links back to the local Senior Forums.

For the older people who sit on the POPP Project Board, these connections have brought important benefits. They feel there are now some strong Senior Forums and that older people do currently have a voice for influencing at both local and County levels. They see this as a two-way process: being able to progress issues that come 'bottom up' from the Forums; and being able to respond to things that come 'top down' through DAP and POPP. They see the Senior Forums as the bedrock of this system and the most tangible point of influence for older people around the County, because they are now so well seamed into the key strategic partnerships.

Across all of this work, the supportive 'championing' role of DCC's Director of Older People's Services has been identified by a number of interviewees as *'invaluable in opening doors and influencing hearts and minds'*. Having older people in the majority on the POPP Board has also been very empowering and has sent a positive message to other older people. The older Board members have been seen to play a full role and their presence is not perceived as 'tokenistic'. For example, they were fully involved in the selection of the Project Manager and the shortlisting of the Community Development Workers.

Dorset POPP has clearly been important in all this, not least because it has picked up the funding of the Forum Development Project, following the ending of its 3-year Lottery funding. This project has been viewed by everyone as absolutely vital to the grassroots engagement of older people. The availability of a POPP budget to seed-fund local services, and the ability of older people to influence its spend, have also been experienced as extremely encouraging and empowering. Often relatively small amounts of money, spent in ways suggested by older people, have made a significant difference to their health and wellbeing. POPP has also added significantly to the capacity within the County to engage with older people and get things moving, through the work of the POPP Project Manager and team of Community Development Workers.

There clearly remain some tensions and contradictions in such a complex set of relationships, however. As previously discussed, some Forum members fear that their agendas are in danger of being 'taken over' by those of such a large, externally funded project as POPP, and there can be difficulties in reconciling the paid roles of POPP's Wayfinders and Community Leaders with those of the older Senior Forum members who give all their time voluntarily.

There are also worries about the future sustainability of so much important work once POPP funding ends, given that, unlike DAP, POPP has not yet achieved the effective integration with the LAA processes. There are concerns about the vulnerability of the Senior Forums to the loss of important members and the need to maintain membership and secure their longer term stability.

*Two years is just not enough.*

Overall, the Dorset example shows how investment in developing independent older people's forums 'bottom up' can help to empower them and provide a solid foundation for really productive partnership working with public and Third Sector bodies, to their mutual benefit. The more holistic, joined up approach evident through DAP, backed up by the sort of capacity and funding that POPP has provided, does appear to have the potential to transform older people's engagement and make it a real force for change.

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## **14. The Regional Dimension**

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The idea of forming a South West Seniors Network was first mooted by forum representatives at a regional 'Speaking Up for Our Age' conference, held near Bristol in October 2003. The forums agreed to form a working group to explore the idea of setting up a network of forums covering the whole of the South West. They reported back on their proposals to the next conference in October 2004 and it was unanimously agreed to set up the South West Seniors Network. A management committee of 11 was elected and the proposed constitution was adopted. Everyone felt this was a positive step towards getting older people's voices heard as a united force, and influencing decision making at regional level.

The Network has received considerable development support from the Regional Development Team of Help the Aged, and funding from the 'Speaking Up for Our Age' programme and from South West Foundation. It is supported by Equality South West, the region's equality and diversity body. Equality South West aims to tackle discrimination on grounds of age, disability, race, religion & belief, sexual orientation and transgender, and is supporting dedicated regional networks for each of these seven strands. As one of these networks, the South West Seniors Network is represented on the Board of Equality South West, and therefore has an opportunity to raise older people's issues with Board members from the South West Regional Development Agency, the Government Office for the South West, the South West Regional Assembly, South West Forum, the South West Trade Union Congress and the South West Local Government Association.

Approximately 39 forums and networks are now in membership of the South West Seniors Network. These vary in size but altogether there are around 35,000 older people networked into the South West Seniors Network through the involvement of the member forums. This is a considerable number of older people and gives the Network real lobbying power. Representatives of all the

member forums are able to get together annually at the South West Seniors Network AGM and Conference, giving members an opportunity to shape the Network's priorities for the coming year.

South West Seniors Network therefore feels that its ability to act as the voice of older people and to influence regional policy is growing. It is also well linked into the national BGOP / OPAG forums, giving older people in the South West a voice in national matters too.

By working together in their local forums, older people are therefore aiming to make their voices heard on the things that really matter to them, influencing the planning and provision of local, regional and national services.

## **15. Learning from the Case Study**

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Although this case study has identified a range of organisations and projects that have sought to engage with and involve older people in a number of different ways, it is clear that independent older people's forums and networks have now become established as the main way for older people to empower themselves and engage with policy makers and service providers across the South West.

Overall, the case study research suggests that:

- The 'bottom-up' growth of the independent forums has been very self-empowering, and the ability to set their own agendas has been a key ingredient of their credibility with older people.
- One of the keys to the success of the forums is that they have enabled older people to choose how far and in what ways to participate, and have made involvement enjoyable through the social aspects of membership.
- Participation in the forums has thus brought a host of benefits to those taking part such as building social contacts, breaking isolation, and enabling older people to feel valued and listened to.
- Forum development has varied tremendously across the region, and there are still significant gaps in coverage, for example in Cornwall and some parts of Devon.
- The availability of development support, such as that provided by Help the Aged and the Dorset Forum Development Project, can make a tremendous difference to the start-up and sustainability of forums.
- Although the forums themselves may be very inexpensive to run, development support is more costly. It is not a 'one-off' activity and therefore needs ongoing rather than short-term funding.

- Training for older forum members, to build their confidence and skills in putting views across to agencies, has proved very effective in helping the forums to grow and enabling them to exert real influence.
- Although Council support is greatly welcomed by the forums, this needs to be done with sensitivity so that older people do not feel their forums are being taken over or their own agendas skewed.
- There are concerns about how far the forums are enabling more infirm and isolated older people to participate, and a number of forums are trying new approaches to extend their reach. These more inclusive approaches inevitably increase the forum's costs, however, and require financial support.
- There are also concerns about how diverse the forums are, and whether there is a need to reach out and include B&ME older people more effectively.
- Communication and participation are clearly interlinked and some forums have successfully addressed these issues in interesting ways through:
  - Newsletters
  - Providing transcripts of papers from meetings on the web
  - Community radio for older people
  - The Dorset example of the mock court
- There is considerable evidence that the forums have been able to influence at a local level and achieve real change in relation to:
  - Council plans
  - Health service provision
  - Transport provision
  - Council budgets
  - Council Tax
  - Community plans

As yet, however, few forums appear well linked into their Local Strategic Partnerships or Local Area Agreements.
- The Forums have been able to raise older people's issues successfully with a wide range of agencies. The key ingredients for influence seem to include:
  - The numbers of older people involved;
  - Councillors / elected members acting as a link;
  - The existing skills and contacts of core forum members;
  - The development support provided through Help the Aged, Age Concern and others;
  - Strong consultation with members;
  - Inviting a range of agency speakers to forum meetings;
  - Being an independent force and not having to rely totally on one funder for support.



- There is evidence to show that consultation undertaken by older people with older people produces some of the best consultation results, and the forums are clearly well placed to undertake this role.
- Very few of the forums have undertaken any sort of formal evaluation of their activities or impact.
- Where other 'top down' initiatives start up alongside the older people's forums, e.g. the POPP projects, these can provoke concerns about swamping the forums' own agendas and creating inequalities between older people in paid roles and those acting in an entirely voluntary capacity.
- Some forums also feel that there need to be clearer linkages between themselves and any Council-led 'area panels' that bring smaller groupings of local older people together under specific Terms of Reference, since they often explore common issues and feed into the same strategies.

The experience in Dorset, where the 'bottom up' development of the Senior Forums has been meshed with 'top down' strategic work to develop the Dorset Age Partnership and Department of Health funded POPP project, further suggests that:

- A network of strong forums working together can provide a solid foundation for really productive working with public and Third Sector bodies, to their mutual benefit.
- Historically difficult relationships between forums and public sector agencies can be turned around if older people start to feel they are being listened to and taken seriously. The process of involving older people in the development of an Older People's Strategy can be a powerful catalyst for change.
- Giving older people a voice in their own localities about their immediate local services (as in the Dorset Age Partnership locality groups) creates a high level of commitment and a real sense of ownership.
- Placing elected forum representatives in the majority on project Boards (as in Dorset POPP) is very empowering and sends a positive message to other older people, so long as their presence is not tokenistic.
- The role of well-placed 'champions' of older people and their forums can be invaluable in opening up opportunities and creating a more listening culture within public bodies.
- The more holistic, joined up approach evident through Dorset Age Partnership, backed up by the sort of capacity and 'seed corn' money that POPP has provided, does appear to have the potential to transform older people's engagement and make it a real force for change.

Finally, the establishment of a South West Seniors Network has provided an effective platform for older people's forums across the region to start to have a wider influence on regional and national strategies and services relevant to an ageing population.

## **16. The Future**

There are clearly still gaps and inconsistencies in the regional coverage of independent older people's forums. A number of areas would benefit from the kind of development made possible in Dorset by the Lottery and POPP-funded Forum Development Project, and the combined support of Help the Aged and the local Age Concerns. This would also further strengthen the reach and representativeness of the South West Seniors Network.

In terms of their future support and development, the older people's forums could benefit from an accessible evaluation structure so that they are better placed to demonstrate their worth, which is quite considerable. The local forums are not as visible as they could be outside of their own arena.

There is a need to look at which older people are engaging with the forums and how the membership can become more diverse. The forums will need additional support and funding if they are to be able to reach out and include those who find it difficult to attend meetings or get involved.

Where forums are led or primarily supported by Councils, while this helps with their development and sustainability and the range of services they are able to offer, it may also have an influence on their activities. Councils need to manage their relationships with such forums carefully, in order not to overload and skew their agendas.

If local authorities and other agencies are looking to set up their own 'panels' or initiatives to involve older people, they should do this with regard to the forums that are already in place, and build on these rather than competing with them.

It is also clear that, if older people's engagement is to become true empowerment, public bodies need to show as in Dorset that they are prepared really to listen to the voice of older people and mainstream it into their planning and service delivery.

In support of these objectives, there is scope for much greater sharing across the region about 'what works' in engaging with and empowering older people, bringing together the perspectives of older people and the public and Third Sector bodies who serve them.

## **APPENDIX 1 - Older People's Forums and Agencies that Contributed to the Case Study**

Age Concern Dorchester

Age Concern Wiltshire

AGILE Older People's Network, Devon

Dorset Association of Senior Forums

Dorset County Council Older People's Services

Dorset Forum Development Project

Dorset Partnership for Older People Project (POPP)

Exeter CVS

Help the Aged (South West Region)

Penwith Older People's Forum

Plymouth Senior Citizens Forum

South West Area Network of Rural Community Councils

South West Seniors Network

Taunton and Wellington Senior Citizens Forum

Weston-super-Mare Senior Citizens Forum

Wiltshire and Swindon Users Group

Winscombe and Sandford and District Senior Citizens Forum

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