

2008

HELP THE AGED

WE WILL



The Age of Influence Older People's Forums Come of Age



**SOUTH WEST
FOUNDATION**

Foreword

I have been writing for what are variously known as ‘grey’ or ‘mature’ readers for over 20 years - hoping to provide a rallying point around which older people can unite and achieve positive social change.

So far, getting them to speak with one voice on issues that really matter, not just to them, but to the whole of society, has not been an unqualified success. Different groups and outspoken individuals have all worked hard to make their point, but because the effort has been fragmented, the messages have been diluted - making it all too easy for the organisations that ‘make decisions on our behalf’ to ignore the experience and knowledge of a large part of the population. No wonder so many older people feel ignored and disenfranchised.

This has to stop. There are over 11 million people of retirement age in this country. They have a right to be heard. They have a duty to influence and shape the decisions that affect their lives. The country needs their collective wisdom.

This document sets out the bold and imaginative initiative of older people’s forums. If the success achieved on a local level in the South West can also be achieved nationally it might just turn the tide. And the timing could not be better. The political parties tell us they are ‘in listening mode’. Local authorities and other statutory bodies are being instructed to increase public involvement in decision making.

This is the chance for older people to be heard. To achieve that, it will be essential to put aside differences, and for people of all persuasions to find the common ground that binds us all. I believe that this document could be the starting point to everyone going forward - together.

Tony Watts
Managing Editor, *Mature Times*

The Age of Influence – a Study of Older People’s Forums in the South West region:

With great thanks to all those individuals and forums that took part in this study

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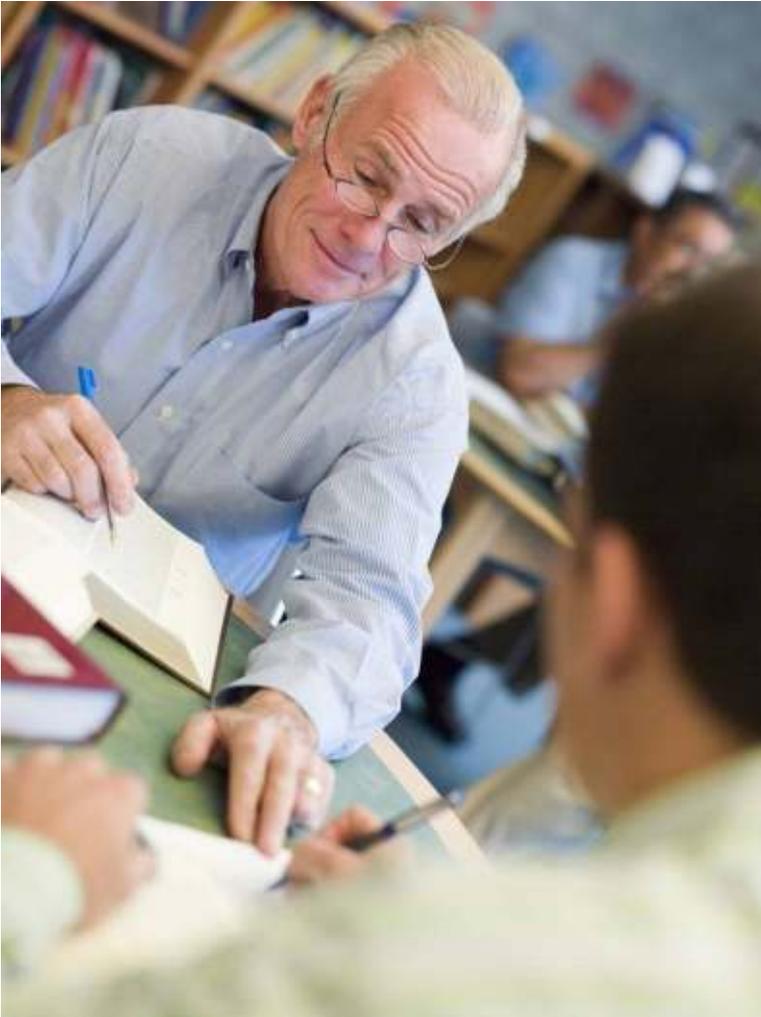
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1 Context and Background

The last five years have seen a growing and impressive movement aimed at giving older people a voice and greater influence

1 Context and Background

The overall aim of this study is to look at the background, activities and value of older people's forums in the South West Region.

In recent years, a range of Government policies and initiatives have sought to place the engagement of older people at the heart of their plans for an ageing society. However, despite these policies and initiatives giving high priority to the engagement and empowerment of older people it is apparent that many agencies are still not involving older people as effectively as they could. Continuing with the desire to involve people more in decisions that affect communities the Government's recent white paper '*Communities in control: real people, real power*' was launched on 9 July 2008. This White Paper is about passing power to communities and giving real control and influence to more people.

'The white paper is all about giving you a stronger voice, control, more power and influence in the system.'

Hazel Blears. MP

1.1 Older People's Forums

In the South West Region the last five years have seen a growing and impressive movement aimed at giving older people a voice and greater influence. This is the growth of older people's forums. These forums have not been set up in response to any Government agenda or policy drive, but have grown from the grassroots up, instigated by older people, led by older people for older people, with valuable developmental help and investment from Help the Aged. There are now approximately 50 forums in the region involving over 38,000 older people.

The core principle of the older people's forums is that they are owned and controlled by their members. Older people are at the heart of the forum movement. They establish the forums in response to local demand. The forums are independent and not fettered in their approach by the requirements of their funders or other agendas. As this report shows they are a force to be reckoned with and ignored by politicians at their peril. Older people's forums are finally coming of age, providing many thousands not only with a voice, but also with the means to influence things in their local communities. And as they grow in strength across the UK, supported by regional Help the Aged development workers and small grants, they look set to become a serious force for the future – having visible impact, especially at a local level, with the potential to influence policies at a national level.

The forums have tackled issues ranging from the closure of local facilities such as day centres and post offices, to ensuring that railways stations are manned for longer hours. In addition they have successfully lobbied for improvements to local transport, social care and disabled access to buildings. These forums are a serious force for the future.

1.2 History

There are currently over 400 Senior Citizens' Forums in the UK, with a total membership well in excess of 100,000. The 'bottom up' approach to forum development described in the last section has been very much supported by the national voluntary organisations concerned with older people: Help the Aged has been the prime development agency working with older people to develop their own local forums in the South West Region through its national 'Speaking Up for Our Age' programme. Through this programme Help the Aged has provided funding, practical support, conferences and training sessions. The approach of the Help the Aged development workers, who have provided advice, information and support to the forums, has been an essential element of their development and success.

The forums vary in size and in their way of working. All forums have a number of important features in common: one of the most important of these is that they are independent organisations which give a collective voice to older people, in order to influence decision-makers on matters which impact on the everyday lives of older people.

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

In the South West Region there are currently around 50 Older People's Forums and the number is still on the increase. Help the Aged has directly assisted the formation and development of 34 of these. Others have been helped off the ground by local councils or by Age Concern. A few have been started entirely by older people themselves without any external support, but often with advice from other forums. New forums are developing all the time, for example the forums in Caradon and North Cornwall, were only established in 2007. New forums are also springing up in Dorset, Gloucestershire and Somerset. In some areas such as Devon, Somerset and Dorset there are also county-wide forums that the local forums link into.

At least 36 of the forums are members of the regional body, the South West Seniors Network. This regional network is led by members of the management

groups of the more local forums. The regional network provides a means of communication between the forums, a focus for their interests and a channel for older people to pursue issues of their own choosing with regional and national authorities. The South West Seniors Network has operated with very little funding to date. It has been reliant entirely on the volunteer workforce of its management group, many of whom are already heavily involved in their own local forums. Developmental support funding has been provided by Help the Aged. The regional network now has an ever expanding remit to fulfill, but needs core funding if it is to continue to support the forums and take the agenda forward.

1.3 The Study

This study was carried out in June-August 2008. Initially the researchers met with a member of the South West Senior Network and considered the format and framework for the questionnaire. 84 questionnaires were sent out to the chairs of the 36 forum members of the South West Seniors Network. Some of the larger networks completed more than one questionnaire. The questionnaires were submitted largely by forum members who are involved in the management and running of the forums. There was a 52% response on the questionnaires.

In addition to the questionnaires a selection of more in depth face to face and telephone interviews were undertaken with leading members of the Forums throughout the region along with visits to the forums themselves.

1.4 Structures and Funding

1.4.1 Management Committees

Most of the forums have a management committee made up of their members. These individuals tend to be the most active in the forums and allocate between 2 and 100 hours per month to forum activities, ranging from administration, liaising with elected members and statutory authorities, to writing the newsletter and providing refreshments. From the questionnaires the average time a management committee member spends on duties associated with the forum is 9 hours per week. If this is spread across the forums in the region, older people involved in the management of the forums contribute around 156,000 hours in civic engagement each year.

1.4.2 Governance

The Forums govern themselves using a variety of operating documents, such as constitution or terms of reference, that best suit the needs of each forum. Some, such as Taunton and Wellington, while not registered charities, do appear charitable. A number of the forums in the study believed that they could not be classed as charitable if they undertook campaigning, but in fact this is not the case. Many of the forums have a charitable purpose as their aim, such as supporting older people, particularly older people in need. Where they are campaigning to support this purpose, as long as that campaigning

stays within the law, they are likely to be deemed to be charitable. This is important as a number of the forums may wish to access additional funding for activities and may therefore wish to go to independent funders for this funding.

As well as the activity of their management committees some forums also have different action groups looking at various areas of concern, such as housing and social care. These action groups enable more of the members to engage in policy issues in the areas in which they have the most interest and become involved and well informed about specific issues. They pass this knowledge back to their members. They may also act in a consultative role on health and social care issues directly affecting older people.

1.4.3 Funding

The majority of the forums are self financing with the support of small grants from Help the Aged, South West Foundation and Awards for All. Those forums that have received funding from statutory sources tend to be in receipt of small grants, which are mostly exempt from the usual prerequisite targets which accompany larger amounts of statutory funding. Many of the forums make up their finances through self-financing and rely on funds that they raise themselves through raffles, events, donations and membership fees. They cost very little to run because of the large volunteer input. It is only when they wish to undertake additional activities or expand that the need for funding is clear.

We work on the principle that every event we run should pay for itself

Chard Ilminster and Crewkerne

We now have an annual subscription so that we are solvent..we make all the rest of our money through raffles and refreshments.

Portishead Senior Citizens' Forum

1.4.4 Independence

The most important aspect of the structure of the forums is their independence. Mostly the independence comes from the fact that they are not reliant upon funding streams that can dictate their direction. It also comes from the fact that the forums have been established by older people in response to their own desire to tackle issues that affect them. This independence may also reflect the strong-minded spirit of older people, who with their life experiences, determine their own directions and course of actions. They have not for example, been established to support the needs for an external agency to 'tick a box'.

There is a massive range of forums in the South West. We are proud of the principle that each forum is independent. It is for older people, run by older people so they determine what they want to do locally-there is not central guidance or direction.

South West Seniors' Network

This independence is the very essence of the older people's forum movement.



2 Activities

We aim to decide our own agenda, sharing information and raising issues of concern. We provide a platform where older people can speak out on issues concerning them. As well as campaigning, we help to break down isolation by providing opportunities for older members of the community to socialise and meet new people and to keep in touch with local views and news.

Launceston and District Over 50's Voice

2 Activities

Through the questionnaires, Forums were asked to identify the activities that their forums undertook. They were able to identify all of the activities that related to their forum. The responses below indicate the main activities the Forums undertake in order.

- Giving older people a voice 84%
- Providing older people with advice and information 82%
- Acting as a signposting service to show older people where they could get help and support 70%
- Keeping older people informed about Government policy 69%
- Publishing a regular newsletter 68%
- Offering social activities 16%

Of all of these activities, the single most important activity identified by those who took part in the research, was giving older people a voice.

2.1 Giving Older People a Voice

The Launceston and District over 50s Voice sees the purpose of their forum as this:

We aim to decide our own agenda, sharing information and raising issues of concern. We provide a platform where older people can speak out on issues concerning them. As well as campaigning, we help to break down isolation by providing opportunities for older members of the community to socialise and meet new people and to keep in touch with local views and news.

Launceston and District over 50's Voice

All of the forums interviewed had giving older people a voice and the ability to influence as their main aim. Each forum has its own unique way of achieving this.

2.2 Providing Advice and Information

Another extremely important function that the forums identified was that of keeping their members informed on a wide range of topics.

There is so much going on out there that affects us. It is only by keeping ourselves well informed that we get to know what is happening. Being members of our forum makes us the lucky ones.

Chard, Ilminster and Crewkerne Pensioners' Forum

The majority of the forums invite speakers in to talk to their members at each of their regular forum meetings. Speakers mentioned include those providing services for older people, utility providers, transport providers, care providers and elected members. The meetings give a platform whereby older people can question those who offer services and raise issues with them.

2.3 Newsletters

Most of the Forums produce a regular newsletter. Forum members are involved in the production of the newsletter as well being able to contribute. The newsletters act as an information point as well as a means of communicating concerns and issues. The newsletters also have information on current topics. They reach a wide range of people. The Plymouth Forum for example has a circulation list of over 1,500. It is also trying to improve its communication for those who cannot attend the meetings by making information available on the web.

In Somerset the Forum holds an information fair which is widely supported.

At these information fairs you get 40 different organisations: the police, the PCT, the Disability Forum, the Alzheimer's Society - a wide range of organisations come together like a one stop shop. We have over 500 people coming in on the day.

Somerset Older Citizens' Alliance

Plans are well underway with Penwith Older People's Forum proposed community radio station for Penwith - run by older people, for older people. Again this will enable those members unable to get to meetings to be better informed and take part. Other forums make use of the hospital radio system.

It is difficult to identify many other Third Sector organisations who do such a good job at informing their members on such a diverse range of topics, using such a variety of means to achieve this.

2.4 Consultation and the Duty to Involve

The forums revealed themselves to be astute at consulting with their members. Again they do this via a number of means: through the forum meetings, through the newsletter and through questionnaires. An example is the Devon Pensioners' Action Forum which has recently consulted its membership to see what areas they should be giving priority to, and received over a 50% response rate on this. Given that there are around 36,000 older people linked in regionally through the South West Seniors Network, this could provide a wide-reaching network through which statutory authorities as well as government agencies could consult. Local authorities are now being charged with the duty, not just to consult with local people but also the duty to involve local communities in that consultation. The forums could provide that vital ready-made link for genuine consultation on issues affecting older people.

2.5 Social Activities

The provision of direct social activities was not identified through the questionnaires as one of the main activities of the forums. Few, but not many of the forums do provide direct social activities. A number of the forums in Dorset for example provide lunch and coffee mornings but it is not the main activity of any of the forums. The Caradon Forum organises summer days out for their members

Older people do not always go on holiday or get away very much, so the day out will give them a chance to enjoy themselves

Caradon Senior Citizens' Forum

Similarly the Portishead Forum takes on this role. Just because the forums tackle serious issues it does not mean that they cannot have fun.

We thought we would have a trip out..so we have had trips out to the House of Commons, to Portsmouth...Chew Valley and nether Stowey. It's always fully booked. Everyone wants to go. It's super everyone is so friendly.

Portishead Senior Citizens' Forum

Many of the forums do not have the provision of social activities as one of their main aims and activities. In a number of areas there are other older people's groups that undertake this role. However, there is significant evidence to support the fact that the forums themselves do provide the benefits linked to social activities. Networking and socialising are an additional benefit to forum members.

The monthly meetings are enjoyable social occasions where members can get together and socialise on relevant topics expressing their views.

Caradon Senior Citizens' Forum

Observing the forum meetings, the dialogue and connection between members is an obvious and beneficial aspect of these meetings.

2.6 Caring Role

While the forums do not have the stated aim of providing physical and emotional support to each other, for a number of the forums it is a role that they take on.

If we have anybody who is ill-they are visited. We look after the welfare of those in the forum

Portishead Senior Citizens' Forum

The Taunton and Wellington Forum are keen to champion individual pensioners in need of financial help and assistance and work with other agencies to this end.

Those forums which undertake direct action, such as protesting against the council tax, help and support their members through the process by appearing in court with them as in the case of the Devon Pensioners' Action Forum offering legal support as well as the moral support.

2.7 The Desire for Dignity

There is much talk at the forums about the desire for dignity in old age. Linked to this is the reluctance of older people to be forced to claim benefits to make ends meet. There is a huge reluctance amongst pensioners around claiming benefits. With regard to council tax benefit alone, it is reported that only 60% of those entitled to help with council tax are actually claiming. The situation seems likely to get worse rather than better.

All of the forums indicated that claiming benefits for many of their members is against their principles and is viewed as undignified. There is a strong move for pensioners to be supported, because it is their right to be supported, not because they are viewed as some sort of 'charity case'.

The Forum in Caradon has been working with the PCT to ensure that older people have dignity in dying.

Just give us back our dignity. That's all I ask.

2.8 Age of Forum Members

The Forums are open to anyone over the age of fifty. From the study the majority of forum members are aged between 65-75 (49%) but there are also significant numbers of people between 75-85 (37%); 12% are under 65 and 5% are over 85.

2.9 Gender

60% of the Forum members identified themselves as female and 40% as male. There is evidence than women are represented on the management groups although perhaps not at the level that reflected membership. The majority of the chairpersons and lead management members of the forums are male.



3 Models of Influence

We thought we would benefit more from feeding the cat on cream than from beating it up.

Caradon Senior Citizens' Forum

3 Models of Influence

The forums, while being linked and sharing many of their aims with each other, also have their own unique way of influencing. There is a division between those forums that opt for direct action and those who prefer the softer approach. For some forums direct action is an activity with which they do not feel comfortable. It is associated with militancy and it is not a route that they wish to take. However, it does not prevent them from admiring the courage of those who take this route.

Caradon Senior Citizens' Forum are certain that the best way forward is persuasion:

We thought we would benefit more from feeding the cat on cream than from beating it up

Caradon Senior Citizens' Forum

This preference for different models of influence is not a problem as long as each forum reflects the desires of their membership.

3.1 Making Use of Members' Skills and Contacts

A strong feature of the forums is their ability to make good use of the skills of their members in their campaigning.

*I have been very keen to get a good strong structure in place, so that older people have a voice with authorities that matter. It's almost food and drink to me. I've worked in private enterprise, in senior management..for the last 14 years I've worked for a health authority..*South West Seniors' Network

There are people involved in the management of the forums from all walks of life and with a real mixture of skills.

The forums are also very adept at making use of their contacts at the highest levels from directors of services, elected members and MPs

Always go straight to the top. You might upset the people in the middle, but that does not really matter. The ones at the top have the power... it is imperative that you get contacts. All the letter writing in the world is not as effective as a good contact.

Launceston and District over 50s Voice

Influence Based on Research

Bernard O' Neill in North Cornwall is a tireless campaigner with 'a strong sense of pensioners' rights and a determination to work for justice'. He has been an important factor in several successful campaigns, both locally and nationally. Bernard is a retired railway worker who was involved with the trade union movement (RMT union). He moved to Cornwall from the Midlands and is now a leading member of the local community. He is a founder member of the North Cornwall Senior Citizens' Forum (now the Launceston and District Over 50s Voice) and the proposed North Cornwall Pensioners' Alliance. He works relentlessly for pensioners in Cornwall, the South West and throughout the UK.

Bernard is one of 12 executive committee members of the National Pensioners' Convention (NPC). He is therefore in an influential position and can raise issues concerning pensioners in the national arena.

Bernard strongly believes in the power of facts and figures. He likes to conduct his own research, often using internet resources as, he says, '*doing your homework is essential (so that) you have all the facts in your pocket*'. Bernard is then fully informed when he enters into a negotiation or bargaining situation and cannot be embarrassed due to lack of information. '*You need to know what you are talking about*' and that information forms the basis for a relationship of trust and mutual respect.

Launceston and District over 50s Voice, through its members, now has a network of local and national contacts. They have a good working relationship with a leading Cornwall County Councillor and with the leader of the District Council. They also have a good working relationship (first name terms) with the local MP, the Liberal Democrat Dan Rogerson.

Similarly the forums in Weston-super-Mare, Weymouth, Taunton, Wellington and many others have members with high levels of skills, contacts and expertise that they can put to good use when negotiating and campaigning.

The chair of the Weymouth Forum has a strong background in the nursing profession and previous involvement with the National Pensioners' Convention. She has continued to use her skills in Weymouth to campaign for people who are self funding in private nursing homes to access their full right and protection. She has taken the campaign to government and raised the issue at very senior level.

The Weston-super-Mare Forum has a chair who had a long history as a councillor and who on his retirement was made the first alderman in North Somerset. Through his experience as a councillor, he understands the way that the council operates, whom to contact and where decisions are being made. To this end he has ensured that all political parties are aware of the forum and its

activities: *'To make any difference at all you have to involve all political parties.'*

Dorset: A Unique way of Influencing



Older people's forums in Dorset have used a 'media savvy' approach to campaigning. On 14th June 2007 five major issues for older people in Dorset went on trial at Dorchester Crown Court. The mock trial session was organised by Help the Aged, in partnership with Age Concern and the Dorset Forums and West Dorset District Council. The event was designed to be 'entertainment with a purpose'. The group made full use of the perfectly preserved 18th

century courtroom, the scene of the Tolpuddle martyrs in 1834. All those participating dressed in period costume and five witnesses gave impassioned testimonies in the language of the period about the issues at hand. The audience for the session included senior county officials, the Shadow Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs and other public figures. The event drew wide media coverage including the BBC, local radio and the local newspaper. Three of the issues on trial were declared 'guilty' (affordable housing, social care and transport). An early result of this action was the decision by the Dorset Age Partnership (a sub-set of the Local Strategic Partnership) to make the three 'guilty issues' its top priorities for action in the year ahead.

By playing out the issues in this way the forums and the organisers managed to gain the interest of those in power, highlight the issues to the wider public and influence future discussions on services. The events were preceded by a procession through the streets of Dorchester and were reported in the media to an extent that was inconceivable had they not been staged to ensure maximum coverage. Older people in Dorset are now a force to be reckoned with, and their creative approach to campaigning is enjoyed by a wide variety of people. A senior member of the Dorset County Council commented:

The quite splendid drama that was played in the old crown court was extremely interesting, very enjoyable and completely thought provoking.

3.3 Community Heroes and Heroines

From talking to many of the forum members it would seem that one of the main ingredients in their ability to influence is what we would call the community heroes and heroines that operate within the forums. These are the people who use their skills and give their time, energy and enthusiasm, sometimes at a risk to their own health, to move the agenda for older people forward. There are those who take direct action, not an easy path, others who are less visible, more bashful, but still effective in their determined approach.

Our organising group is a hardworking, industrious panel of people. They don't sit at home shrugging their shoulders at the latest inane direction from above introduced into our lives. These people go out and question, they challenge, they upset the apple carts and they do it all on our behalf without expecting a round of applause.

Chard, Ilminster and Crewkerne Pensioners' Forum

Sylvia's Story

Sylvia Harding hit the news in 2005 when she was sentenced to seven days in Gloucester prison for non-payment of her council tax. Sylvia was angry at what she saw as the unfairness of council tax to pensioners and decided to make a stand. As a former social worker she has a strong sense of justice and decided that you need to fight for it yourself.

However, frightening it was going to be. I made up my mind I was going to go through with it.

When she was sentenced Sylvia only owed £53 in council tax. Once in Gloucester prison, Sylvia's debts were paid by an anonymous donor and she was released. The cost of getting Sylvia back to Devon was far higher than the debt that she owed. Without the Devon Pensioners Forum Sylvia would have found it much harder to take her stand:

Psychologically it is very depressing. I would feel very alone and isolated and begin to wonder whether it was right to take action, even though I wanted to.

In 2007 Sylvia was up in court again but this time she owed several hundred pounds. The Devon Pensioners' Action Forum provided a solicitor for Sylvia. However, Sylvia and her supporters felt that she would not survive the three months in prison which she may well have been faced with. She reached an agreement to pay in several installments.

3.4 Direct Action

Older people have a long history of campaigning. Pensioner poverty has been a major issue throughout the 20th Century and it was through the efforts of people such as Charles Booth that the National Pensions Committee was formed. Through their campaigning they managed to establish the Old Age Pensions Act in 1908, which led to those older people in need being entitled to a pension of five shillings per week.

From the very early movement the campaigning was carried out by a mixture of political representation from the Liberal and Tory politicians of the time, working alongside the coalition of trade unions, churches and early Labour organisations.

A history of campaigning to end means testing, to ensure better pension rights for women and to ensure that the pension is paid at a 'fair' rate has continued throughout the 20th century and now into the 21st. Those campaigning have remained a mixture of political activists, church leaders, trade unions and national agencies with an interest in older people. Now the older people themselves have become more involved than ever in campaigning

The forums' motivation for campaigning comes from a sense of injustice for some, and a sense of inequality for others. For many the motivation is to bring about change for the better for the lives of older people in general.

The anger at the economic situation that many older people find themselves in hinges on the fact that older people feel they have been deceived about what would be expected of them in later life.

'They were offered a welfare state in which they were cared for from the cradle to the grave, and the changes which have happened to them have happened by stealth'.

Baroness Pitkeathley

According to some older people's forums, council tax is a classic example of this stealth.

3.5 Direct Action and the Issue of Council Tax

Many of the forums found their initial motivation for campaigning in the perceived unfairness of council tax for older people.

The Devon Pensioners' Action Forum, for example, was established in 2000 in response to the disproportionately high cost of council tax or community charge. At the moment around 11% of a single person's pension is estimated to go toward paying council tax. The issue is particularly difficult for single pensioners newly faced with being on their own when a partner dies. They only receive a 25% reduction on the Council Tax rate compared with a couple:

If you lose a partner, you don't lose a quarter you lose your other half
Taunton and Wellington Pensioners' Forum

From the evidence it appears that women are in a particularly difficult position when it comes to covering their council tax bill but the effect is hitting many pensioners of either sex.

The Government tell us to plan for our old age but the Council Tax has made this impossible. We never expected to have to be paying such a high proportion of our income just to cover the Council Tax.

A Devon Pensioner

The initial impetus for the Chard Forum to set up in 2004 was the increasing disaffection amongst the elderly community towards the disproportionate rise in council tax. The feeling amongst older people about the unfairness of the council tax is high and for many it has provided the impetus to get involved. In Chard, at their inaugural meeting, they never expected the response they got.

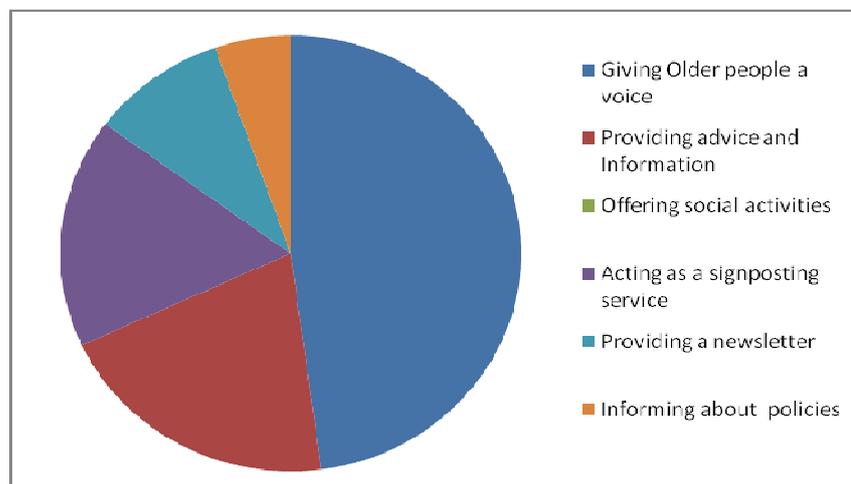
This was the first formal meeting and, uncertain of the level of interest, the organisers hired The Guild Hall – and thought that they'd be lucky to get 30 people turning up, but put 50 chairs out just in case. It was a day in March – raining, windy – and 200 people turned up, filling the stalls and the balcony, which was utterly extraordinary. That was the strength of feeling.

Chard, Ilminster and Crewkerne Forum

As with many community activists, the motivation to campaign and to try to effect change came from a feeling of social injustice and outrage. The issue of council tax continues to be a prime area of influence, not for all of the forums, but for a significant number.

Areas of activity identified by the forums in order of importance

Note: While offering social activities was one of the options no-one identified this as the main activity of their forum



Devon Pensioners' Action Forum



Devon Pensioners' Action Forum has gained a reputation for their direct campaigning. This is not their only means of campaigning, but it is the one for which they have gained a reputation, and through which they have had most impact in raising the visibility of issues that are affecting older people.

Devon Pensioners' Action Forum was started off by 6 people in a church hall looking at the issue of council tax. The Forum now has 1,300 members. The Forum has a president who is the

founder of the group and their executive group has representation from all of the local forum branches in Devon.

A number of the members of Devon Pensioners' Forum have taken direct action against council tax issues and have ended up in court for refusing, or being unable to pay their council tax. The cost of going to court is ever on the increase and the Forum feels that the Government and local authorities are now doing all they can to prevent the pensioners from undertaking this type of protest, because of the adverse publicity.

No-one likes to see an older person heading to jail for not paying their council tax. It does not make for good public relations.

Devon Pensioners' Action Forum

The Devon Pensioners' Action Forum campaigns on a number of fronts including pensioner poverty. Pensioner poverty is a strong driving force behind campaigning. Some of the most comprehensive data on this comes from the National Pensioners' Convention but Devon Pensioners' Action Forum also makes sure that they have their fingers on the local statistics and evidence.

Devon Pensioners' Action Forum has over the years, through their direct action, managed to raise the profile of issues facing older pensioners and have managed to keep these issues in the media with numerous high level newspaper articles and appearances on the local TV news.

3.6 Complexities of Campaigning

Campaigning for the older people's forums is a complex process. A number of the issues that they are tackling are both local and linked to local structures, but are also affected by national policies and decisions. To influence the council tax the campaign must bridge both national and local structures in that the

design of council tax is laid out nationally, while to a certain extent, the annual percentage increase decision is a local one.

The local forums raise the issue of the annual council tax increase and link into their local councils with their campaigning at a local level. Nationally they link into the National Pensioners' Convention and the 'Is it Fair?' campaign to raise the issue of the unfair structure of council tax as laid out by Government.

Post office closures are a similarly complex issue that the forums have been campaigning on. The forums have joined with local community campaigns on such issues as the post office closures and, through joining with others, the local campaigns have managed to bring about change and prevent closures. However, the overall number of post offices set for closure is a national issue and the forums cannot affect this. They know that if they prevent one post office closing in their vicinity, then another will close in a community that perhaps does not have such a strong voice.

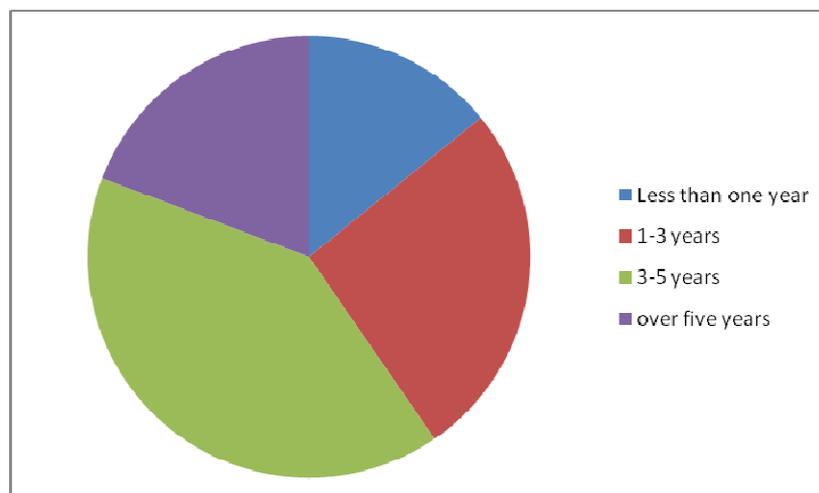
In Bath the BANES Action for Pensioners has joined the campaign to stop a local post office closing near the hospital. This campaign was a success but we are very aware that this will mean another community elsewhere in the area will lose its post office. It is a muted success.

BANES Action for Pensioners

As stated previously different forums interpret the notion of campaigning in different ways but overall, campaigning could be described for all forums as 'a series of operations energetically pursued to accomplish a purpose'. The older people are determined and whatever their mode of campaigning, they are not easily distracted from their cause.

Length of time members have been involved in the forums

Members were asked to identify how long they had been involved in the forums



Looking at Success

'Societies and ships of state are hard to turn round.'

Baroness Pitkeathley



4 Looking At Success

Tackling national issues and government policy is a tall order and has no 'quick fixes' but that is not to say that forums should not try.

There are said to be 11.5 million pensioners in the country and for the first time ever pensioners now outnumber people under the age of 16. The potential weight that this volume of voice can make to any campaign is significant. They are a force that politicians need to take into account when setting out their store of future policies and agendas.

Gillingham Senior Citizen's Forum-Tackling Transport Issues

As a result of meetings and work done by Gillingham Senior Citizens' Forum transport in the area is identified as "an absolute bugbear" by older people. They conducted a major survey on local transport issues. Gillingham Town Council provided funding and the forum hired a company to deliver letters to every single house in Gillingham.

The research found that hospital transport is a real problem for older people. Transport to the nearest available hospital at Salisbury from Gillingham can cost up to £100 by taxi. "One 93 year old man had taken his 90 year old wife to hospital and he was told he could go home at midnight, but there was no transport provided for him. Another lady did not attend chemotherapy sessions every other day, as it would cost her around £300."

The forum raised the visibility of the issue and worked with other agencies in other areas to seek a solution. They are in the process of setting up the Gillingham Area Voluntary Car Link scheme. This will be a registered charity providing essential transport for older people in around Gillingham.

4.1 Influence for change

Locally the influence that the forums are having is quite considerable. We have set out below just some of the areas in which the forums have been able to have an influence to date. This list is not exhaustive and there are many other forums in many other areas that have tackled similar problems with success.

The areas of influence make a real difference to people at a local level and include:

- Improving uneven pavements
 - The keeping of the annual council tax increase to a low level
 - Raising the profile of the issue of council tax at a local media level
 - Working with others to prevent post office closures
 - Looking at health and care issues
 - Preventing the closure of the local facilities
 - Campaigning on day care closures
 - Campaigning against high increase in day care charges
 - Tackling the issue of transport
 - Ensuring older people have dignity
 - Influencing local planning issues
 - Keeping public conveniences open
 - Free travel for older people
 - Retention of red telephone boxes
 - Concessionary fees for adult education
 - Improvements in street environment
 - Ensuring railway stations are manned for longer periods
 - Setting up other community projects for the benefit of the community
 - Taking up issues for mobile home owners
- And ongoing campaigns on national issues:
- Economic improvements for individuals
 - Council Tax
 - Pensions linked to average earnings
 - The rights of women to equal pensions

4.2 Enabling Older People to Feel Able to Influence

Within our questionnaire people were asked whether being a member of the forum helps them to make their views heard and to have an influence. 91% of

the people who responded felt that being a member of an older people's forum made it easier for them to make their views heard and to have an influence.

People were then asked to identify in what areas they felt better able to have a voice/influence. People felt better able to influence at a local level than at a national level. The top three areas in which they felt better able to influence were-in the running of local Health Services (70%); local council policy (68%), the running of local social services (63%) and other community services (54%).

This is perhaps one of the prime functions and benefits of the forums and while not aiming to link into Government agendas this aspect of the forums does clearly link into the empowerment agenda and the desire of local authorities to increase the number of people in local communities who feel able to influence.

4.3 Diversity and Reach

DIVERSITY AND REACH



The older people's forums in the South West work with a diverse range of people in terms of older people, women, disabled people and people on low incomes but forums such as the Action for Pensioners in Bath and North East Somerset have identified the need to reach out further. A notable gap in the range of people taking part in the forums is any significant numbers from different cultures, a challenge that faces many Third Sector Organisations in the rural areas of the region. Finding an older person's forum

representing the views of older people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups to take part in this study was difficult and it seems that there are very few if any such forums. Bristol Golden Agers is essentially an organisation which focuses on social activity with a view to reducing isolation particularly amongst black elders. The chair of the Golden Agers is on the board of the Bristol Older People's Forum and can take issues to this forum. However, representation from ethnic groups was not highly visible and this may be an issue that needs further consideration and could perhaps be taken up by the South West Seniors' Network if resources can be found.

4.3.1 Older Prisoners

One excellent example of widening the reach of older people's forums however is a move taken forward by Help the Aged in Partnership with other agencies. This is the development of older people's forums within the prison movement.

Prisoners aged over 60 are the fastest growing age group in prison. There are currently over 7,000 prisoners aged over 50 in custody. The increase in numbers is largely due to sentences becoming harsher and longer. Over half of all elderly prisoners suffer from a mental illness, the most common being depression which can emerge as a result of imprisonment. Some older prisoners will have a physical health status of ten years older than their contemporaries on the outside.

Isolation, lack of understanding of the needs of older people, poor health care are all issues identified in a recent report from the Prison Reform Trust about the needs of older prisoners. The stresses and demands of the prison environment make it even more difficult to grow old in the prison than in the community.

4.3.2 Leyhill Prison over 50s Forum

Leyhill Prison in South Gloucestershire is the only minimum-security prison in the South West Area. Rebuilt in the late 1970s to early 1980s with new accommodation added in 2002 enabled the prison to cater for 512 prisoners, and, as with other prisons, the number of older prisoners in Leyhill is rising.

The Age Concern Older Offenders Project aims to offer support and information to older prisoners in the region to reduce the re-offending rate. As a result of this work Age Concern and Help The Aged have come together with staff from the prisons to identify a core group of prisoners with the ability and interest to develop an older people's forum.

A report published by the Prison Reform Trust provides evidence that older prisoners face isolation and discrimination because the government is failing to meet their specialist health, social and resettlement needs, with some wheelchair-bound prisoners unable to join in day-to-day prison activities. The need for prisoners to have their own forum is clear.

For older people reliant on state pension the system can be unfair and inadequate, and those who are or have been in prison face even greater problems.

Mature Times

One way of making life better for older prisoners and to ensure that issues of older prisoners have a profile is through the establishment of an over 50s Forum. Leyhill, with its committed staff, has been an ideal place to pilot this in the South West. The make up and process of the Forum has borrowed a lot

from existing forums. Along with the management group, guest speakers and operating on a limited budget, the Forum has already begun to make a difference. At the inaugural meeting there was the opportunity for a question and answer session with the Prison Governor and there is the potential for regular 'Hot Spot' sessions with the Governor for future meetings. Work is in progress for members of the forum to produce a release pack specifically for older offenders designed by older offenders. Many of the potential benefits of the Leyhill over 50s Forum to the individual members are similar to those of the other forums. In addition the prisoners' forums are beginning to show evidence of breaking down the barriers between different types of offenders, assisting potential integration into mainstream society. It is also hoped that the forums will help to de-institutionalise older offenders.

5 Benefits of Older People's Forums

Action groups ... see for themselves what is wrong and they fail to see why everyone should sit around any longer waiting for something to happen.

Tony Gibson. People Power 1979



5 Benefits of the Older People's Forums

Throughout this research, the multifaceted benefits of the older people's forums are becoming clearer:

- The forums have the aim of enabling older people to have an influence and voice. There are many instances and examples where the older people's campaigning is making communities a better place for people to live. In some cases the benefits are directly aimed at older people, in other instances their actions are benefitting communities as a whole.
- The forums provide information hubs for older people about current policy and activities that affect older people. They use a variety of means to communicate this information to their members to make sure they are well informed.
- The forums provide a conduit for local authorities and other service providers to consult with significant numbers of older people.
- The forums provide the opportunity for and promote active citizenship. At least 150,000 hours of voluntary engagement takes place each year in the South West through the forums.
- The forums provide a place where older people can make use of their skills and knowledge and can continue to contribute these to society
- Many of the forums look after their members offering support, signposting to advice and services, and generally offering an informal caring role.
- Forums offer both social activity and the opportunity for social engagement reducing isolation.
- While not being led by any government agenda the forums provide a model of influence that offers a great deal to both the current local and government agendas.

6 Recommendations and Conclusions

The Future Role of the South West Seniors' Network

The South West Seniors' Network is the regional body which 36 of the 50 local forums are members of. The role of this body is now growing in importance. The Network however, has received very little in the way of funding. This year Help the Aged has provided a grant of £3,000 but this is about the only funding they have received. Few regional bodies could provide an effective service on this level of resource. The forums are rapidly growing in number. In 2004 there were 16 forums as members of the Regional Network, now there are 36 and the number is ever increasing. Not only are the forums growing in number but the membership of each forum has also grown rapidly and many of the larger forums have over 1,500 members, some as many as 3,000 members. As the numbers of forums grow so the potential role of the South West Seniors' Network grows with them.

The South West Senior's network has been reviewing its role and now has its business plan for the future. The regional network is clear that it cannot link itself to any one campaign.

It is not possible for the regional network to be a campaigning organisation because each local member is autonomous and can therefore hold differing views.

South West Seniors' Network

The South West Seniors' Network has the aim of increasing their membership and therefore their representation.

Our medium task is to represent 50,000 older people but this may involve having 75 forums.

South West Seniors' Network

The forums have shown themselves to be more than capable of taking issues forward themselves, from local negotiations to involving their local MPs and in getting a direct response from Government on the national issues they raise. However, through this research the following essential roles were identified as future potential activities for the regional body.

- The provision of a regional information hub that would gather statistics, information on policy, government agendas and make that information accessible to the local forums. In order for this role to be successful

there also needs to be an investment in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) equipment and training, not just for the regional network itself, but to ensure all of the forums are fully networked and linked in. It might be appropriate to have an ICT champion in each forum to take this communication issue forward.

- The provision of a regular regional newsletter that would capture information from a variety of sources but that would also enable sharing of information between forums.
- The production of guidance sheets based on the experiences of the local forums on such issues as funding, contacting MPs, campaigns. These would not replace any information produced by national bodies but would compliment this.
- The provision of a regional interface with the political parties.
- The promotion of a visible identity for the forums. It was noticeable in this research that at times it was difficult to know which organisations were independent forums and which were not. It would be helpful to the movement and to the outside world, if people were readily able to identify these older people's forums.
- The provision of a regional information hub which could gather information about each of the forums and their activities, their methods of influence, the issues that are being tackled and to what degree they are being successful. This is essential if the forums are to benefit from their combined weight of voice. The starting point has to be that each forum is aware of the others' activities and that the forums be given the chance to link up, if they wish to, with other forums. Currently this is being done on an informal basis and would benefit from some co-ordination.
- A pool of potential guest speakers. The forums spend quite some time trying to get this sort of information together.
- The provision of training on a host of matters including fundraising, finances, newsletter production, IT skills.
- A collection point for photos, press articles and 'media useful' material. It was noticeable in the course of this research that there are many photo opportunities that require the skills of accomplished photographers and yet it was very difficult to access these images.
- South West Seniors' Network could also work with the BME infrastructure organisations and Equalities South West to look at the issue of extending the reach of the forums even further.

The South West Seniors' Network needs investment to take these roles forward. They also need continuing development support. From the evidence gathered in this study the role of Help the Aged has been integral in enabling the forums to develop. They have magically combined small grants investment with an appropriate community development approach that has encouraged the forums to develop, with outside support but with inner integrity. This relationship with the forums and with the South West Seniors' Network needs to continue into the future in some form.

As local authorities struggle with new Government agendas and their duty to involve people in consultation, older people's forums throughout the region effectively involve thousands of older people, enabling them to have their say. Enabling them also to feel able to have an influence in their local communities and providing a vehicle where they can contribute significant amounts of time to civic engagement. Older people's forums often raise the profile of larger, more uncomfortable national political issues, such as the abolition of council tax and pensioner poverty. They may not yet be able to alter the course of these, but it is important that they keep trying and keep the issues in the public domain. The forums also tackle the smaller but equally important local issues that are of utmost importance to people in communities. Evidence shows they are having wide ranging and significant successes that benefit also the wider community.

Older people's forums are providing benefits to individual members who come from different backgrounds and political viewpoints, but who are united by age. The forums encourage their members to remain active citizens, providing motivation, focus, a vehicle to express their views and reduce their anger and frustration over national policies. They also provide the valuable means whereby their members can have a real influence. The local forums operate on very small resources, often from as little as £1,000 per annum. Most of the forums are self financing which gives them an independence that not many Third Sector organisations can achieve. In order for the forums to be more effective regionally, to be able to share good practice and to be more aware of each other's activities, there needs to be some significant investment in the South West Seniors' Network both financial investment and developmental support.

The current empowerment agenda and White Paper with its emphasis on community decision making could provide a valuable vehicle for the forums to move forward. The Empowerment White Paper is about 'passing power to communities and giving control and influence to more people.' As Gordon Brown states in his introduction:

This is not about making people sit in meetings on wet Tuesday nights, it is about helping citizens to get involved when they want to on their own terms – paving the way for a new style of active politics that not only gives people a greater say but ensures that their voices are heard and that their views will make a difference.

This is exactly what the older people's forums in the South West have been doing for some years now and have become very skilled in the process. The older people's forums with their reach, their ability to involve the local community and provide a vehicle for individuals in communities to contribute, are worthy of the attention and investment of both local statutory agencies and regional bodies alike. The Forums are a major force to be reckoned with and are now 'coming of age.'

APPENDIX 1

OLDER PEOPLE'S FORUMS THAT TOOK PART IN THIS RESEARCH

Bath & North East Somerset Action for Pensioners
Bristol Golden Agers
Bradford & District Senior Citizens' Forum
Bridgwater Senior Citizens' Forum
Bristol Older People's Forum
Caradon Senior Citizens' Forum
Chard, Ilminster & Crewkerne Pensioners' Forum
Devon Pensioners' Action Forum
Dorchester & District 55 Forum
Gillingham Seniors' Forum
Gloucestershire Older Person's Assembly
Launceston and District over 50s Voice
Leyhill over 50s Voice
North Dorset Older People's Forum
Penwith Older People's Forum
Portishead Senior Citizens' Forum
Plymouth Senior Citizens' Forum
South Gloucester Senior Citizens' Forum
South West Seniors' Network
Sherborne District Senior Citizens' Forum
Taunton & Wellington Pensioners' Forum
Weymouth and Portland Over 50s Forum
West Somerset Seniors' Forum
Weston-super-Mare Senior Citizens' Forum
Winscombe & District Senior Citizens' Forum

In addition to the interviews 42 anonymous questionnaires were received

Appendix 2

RESEARCH INTO OLDER PEOPLES' FORUMS

Section A. About your forum

- Q1 What are the main activities of your forum**
- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| <i>Giving older people a voice</i> | 84% |
| <i>Providing older people with advice and information</i> | 82% |
| <i>Offering social activities such as a luncheon club or outings</i> | 16% |
| <i>Acting as a signposting service showing you where older people can go for help and support</i> | 69.8% |
| <i>Publishing a regular newsletter</i> | 67% |
| <i>Keeping older people informed about government policy and or local policy</i> | 70% |
- Q2 Which of the answers in Question 1 do you consider to be the most important activity for the forum? Please tick one**
- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| <i>Giving older people a voice</i> | 45% |
| <i>Providing advice and information for older people</i> | 19% |
| <i>Offering social activities such as a luncheon club or outings</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>Acting as a signposting service showing where older people can access advice and information</i> | 16.0% |
| <i>The newsletter</i> | 9.0% |
| <i>Keeping older people informed about government policy and/or local policy</i> | 5% |
- Q3 Which geographical area does your forum operate in?**
- | | |
|------------------------------|------|
| <i>Devon</i> | 7% |
| <i>Somerset</i> | 21% |
| <i>North Somerset</i> | 14% |
| <i>Dorset</i> | 35% |
| <i>Bournemouth and Poole</i> | |
| <i>BANES</i> | 2.3% |
| <i>Gloucestershire</i> | 2.3% |
| <i>Wiltshire</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>Cornwall</i> | 12% |
- Q4 How long have you been attending the Forum?**
- | | |
|---------------------------|-------|
| <i>Less than one year</i> | 14.0% |
| <i>1 - 2 years</i> | 26% |
| <i>3 - 5 years</i> | 40% |
| <i>5 years plus</i> | 19% |

Q5 Do you undertake any activities to support the work of the forum?

Yes	No
86%	14%

Q6 If Yes what activities are you involved in? Please tick all that apply

<i>Administration</i>	61%
<i>On an action group</i>	37%
<i>On the management group of the forum</i>	70%
<i>Helping at the luncheon club</i>	0%
<i>Helping with the newsletter</i>	40%
<i>Providing advice and information</i>	44%
<i>Undertaking lobbying and trying to influence</i>	42%
<i>Volunteer Driver</i>	5%

Section B: About the Forum

Q7 How did you first hear about your older person's Forum/Network? Please tick one

<i>By word of mouth</i>	33%
<i>Website</i>	0%
<i>Local press</i>	27%
<i>Local Volunteer centre</i>	0%
<i>Through Help the Aged</i>	7%
<i>Through Age Concern</i>	5%
<i>Your Parish Council</i>	0%
<i>Local Council</i>	5%

Q8 Is it easy to take part in the activities of the Forum?

Yes	No
89%	7.1%

Q9 If no what would help you to take part

<i>Accessible and better Transport</i>	5%
<i>Different activities</i>	5%

Q10 How does the forum keep you informed? Please tick all that apply

<i>Sending a newsletter</i>	70%
<i>Through the internet</i>	22%
<i>Word of mouth</i>	72%
<i>Through the post</i>	37%

Section C: Having an influence

- Q12 Does the Forum make it easier for you to make your views heard and have influence?**
- | | Yes | No |
|--|-------|------|
| | 90.7% | 2.3% |
- Q13 If yes in what areas do you feel better able to have a voice/influence?**
Please tick all that apply
- | | |
|-----------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Local council policy</i> | 68% |
| <i>Running of Local Health Services</i> | 70% |
| <i>Running of local social services</i> | 63% |
| <i>National issues</i> | 38% |
| <i>Other Community Services</i> | 54% |
| <i>Respite / Recreation</i> | 14% |
- Q14 Can you think of any examples where the Forum has helped you to have an influence on Local decisions? This could be for example services connected to health, social care, pensions, Council Tax, Post office closures etc**
- Q15 Does the forum help you in any other way?** Please tick all that apply
- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Provide social contacts and activities</i> | 42% |
| <i>Keeps you up-to-date with policies and services</i> | 63% |
| <i>Makes you feel better able to raise issues that affect your life</i> | 58% |
- Q16 About yourself. It would be helpful to have this information but please only answer if you feel comfortable doing so. Which age range do you fall into?**
- | | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| <i>55-65 years young</i> | 12% |
| <i>65-75</i> | 49% |
| <i>75-85</i> | 37% |
| <i>85 plus</i> | 5% |
- Q17 About yourself. Are you**
- | | |
|---------------|-----|
| <i>male</i> | 40% |
| <i>female</i> | 60% |



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