

COMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS

The Future of Older People's Forums in the South West



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for South West Foundation

Foreword

This report is an update of the original Age of Influence Report undertaken by the South West Foundation and published by Help the Aged in 2008. It takes the views from the most recent South West Seniors' conference which took place in the autumn of 2009. It also takes into account recent publications looking at issues affecting older people and their ability to have a voice and influence.

The report gathers together potential activities and roles for the South West Seniors' Network so that the 56 member forums, and the 40,000 plus older people who are members of the forums can be supported, connected and continue to have a voice.

This document also represents a call for appropriate investment in the valuable work of the South West Seniors' Network and the older people's forums in the South West so that this work can come out of the shadows, be visible and thrive.

By hearing the views of individuals and the collective voice of older people as citizens there is an increased likelihood that increased influence will bring about changes in attitudes to how society views older people and will positively shape changes in behaviours for the future.

JOHN ELBOURNE: 2008

"It is no good having a voice unless someone is listening"

Philip Johnson, Assistant Director, Government Office South West
South West Seniors' Regional Conference 2009

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SUMMARY OF THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *The recent review for Government produced by John Elbourne recommended investing in existing structures such as the South West Seniors' Network, to ensure that the voices of older people can influence government. This needs to be acted upon by Government Offices, the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership and other agencies in power.*
2. *The strong connection between the work of the South West Seniors' Network members and empowerment needs to be better recognised.*
3. *The South West Seniors' Network needs to continue to build its links with national and regional policy but also it needs to strengthen its connections with the local forums.*
4. *South West Seniors' Network needs to continue to build its communication strategy, to make itself and the work of the Forums more visible. However, with only 27% of older people's households having access to the internet the South West Seniors' Network also needs to champion the cause for dual communication channels, to allow those who are not connected to the internet to be included in all forms of communication.*
5. *South West Seniors' Network needs to be supported in its continuing development to ensure that it has a robust structure that will enable it to be attractive to potential funders and investors.*
6. *Overall there needs to be recognition of the potential strong role that South West Seniors' Network and the forums play in bringing the views of significant numbers of older people to the fore and this needs to be resourced in a way that will enable the Network to reach its full potential.*
7. *It is apparent that for older people being a member of the Forums and of the Network can have a beneficial effect on the wellbeing of older people by giving older people a voice, a say and purpose. This aspect of the work of the Forums also needs recognition.*

PART ONE

1 Introduction and Context

1.1 Background

The aim of this report is to identify the challenges and opportunities that face South West Seniors' Network in taking forward the issues of engagement and empowerment of older people. It is based on earlier research (The Age of Influence: 2008), current documents concerning the engagement of older people, and certain views expressed by older people at the South West Seniors Conference in 2009.

This report starts with a synopsis of the findings of the earlier report to put the current views into context.

South West Seniors' Network is the regional body that works with and represents almost 60 older people's forums. In the South West Region over the last ten years there has been 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 grown from the grassroots up; instigated by older people, led by older people for older people, with valuable developmental support and investment from Help the Aged. (Newly merged with Age Concern to now form Age UK)

The main difference between these small local older people's forums and many of the other bodies that 'represent' the views of older people is that these forums, in the main, have been set up by older people for older people. They have a strong campaigning role in the very broadest sense. For many of the forums their role is to influence locally through consultation and persuasion. For some forums their campaigning role is based more on collective action.

1.2 The Age of Influence

The South West Foundation funded by Help the Aged undertook a study of the forums in 2008/9 (The Age of Influence).

The study found that at a local level the forums have the ability to influence local matters that affect the daily lives of older people. It also found that some forums from a local level also aim to influence matters of policy, including some matters of national policy. These

national issues are much more difficult to change but the forums are being effective in highlighting issues and inequalities, and bringing them to the fore both as local and national concerns.

The South West Seniors' Network is a regional body of growing importance for many reasons, not least because of the very significant numbers of older people and older people's forums that the Network has contact with. The number of individual older people involved in the forums that are members of the South West Seniors' Network in the South West is estimated at well over 40,000.

South West Seniors' Network contacts are essential, if older people are to have a voice. This voice starts with older people themselves, moves up to a regional level through the South West Forum on Ageing and through the representation of South West Seniors' Network. It is also represented at national level on the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing. This does not detract from the route of influence that the local Forums themselves have as independent bodies, but is an additional route than can represent the weight of a collective voice.

1.3 Benefits of the Older People's Forums

The Age of Influence identified the following as some of the benefits of older people's forums

- The forums have the aim of enabling older people to have an influence and a 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 benefiting 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.



2 The Future

2.1 The Elbourne Report

One of the most important and relevant reports to the future of older people's forums that has been published over the last two year must be the Elbourne Report. In November 2008 John Elbourne was asked by the Government to undertake a review of Government's engagement and consultation with older people

"In agreeing to undertake the review I saw there was a real opportunity to inform and improve the way government at all levels engages and consults with older people"

John Elbourne: 2009

Elbourne believed that by understanding the needs and aspirations of older people, policy makers and service delivery agents would be able to plan for services that meet the needs of older people. All of these words and aspirations from the Elbourne Report resound with the very core of the activities that older people's forums in the South West have had for many years and with the activities that the South West Senior's Network has been undertaking

The principles of the Elbourne Review were:

- 1 To ensure voices of older people can influence government at a national and regional level in order to develop policies and services that meet their needs
- 2 To ensure the voices of older people can be clearly heard
- 3 To ensure a diversity of views can be heard
- 4 To build on what is working already
- 5 To ensure central government funding provides good value for money

The earlier report by the Audit Commission which looked at the challenges and opportunities ahead for an ageing population, Don't Stop Me Now (Audit Commission.2008) suggested that, despite the growing number of older people's forums, listening to the views of older people was not a priority for significant numbers of Local Authorities. The South West, being one of the regions with the highest number of older people, fared worse than most of the other regions.

The Better Government for Older People initiative, started in 2008 had not, Elbourne found translated itself into the kind of influence that was hoped for with “patchy coverage and a lack of strategy for picking up the views” of older people. Elbourne could not see that Better Government for Older People had proved good value for money and was recommending that the funding of this cease in 2009 and funding be transferred to the new structures of regional and national forums on ageing. It was no good, he felt, having active forums if the people who should be listening were ‘not giving the issues priority’. Elbourne found that the solution lay in getting effective ‘buy in’ from those in key positions in local authorities.

“Engagement relies on leadership. If elected members, chief executives and directors of local authorities want it to happen then it often does.”

Elbourne 2008

What was needed was an effective strategy whereby Government could listen effectively to the views of older people.

All of this was great news for the South West Seniors’ Network, who had in effect, been operating such a forum and trying to support local forums, on very little resources for several years. It was also good to hear that Elbourne was not recommending setting up new and conflicting structures but clearly wanting the Government to build on what was already working well and support and develop those structures. *“Resources directed at Government Offices need to be used to establish, support, development and engagement opportunities for older people at a local and regional level”.* (Elbourne 2008)

The recommendation for the Regional Forum on Ageing was that the regional forums should *draw their membership from existing older people’s forums and groups forums.*

2.2 The Connection with the Empowerment Agenda

“I believe my proposals are consistent with developing central government policy and reform programmes in particular with the Empowerment Agenda being led by Department of Communities and Local Government.”

Elbourne 2008

John Elbourne could see clearly the connection between his recommendations and the Government's National Empowerment Agenda. Elbourne linked possible development of the Regional Forums on Ageing to the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships (RIEP). In fact any financial support that has been forthcoming in the South West to date has come mainly from the South West Regional Empowerment Partnership, Help the Aged (Age Uk) and South West Foundation. No support as yet has been forthcoming from the RIEP as Elbourne supposed it would.

Elbourne envisaged regional forums holding local events to gain people's views. The local forums and South West Seniors' Network have marched ahead at the bequest of those forums that attended their regional conference, and have arranged a local event in Cornwall in partnership with the Caradon Senior Citizens Forum for this Spring, but this has been undertaken with support and resources from elsewhere, not with any resources from the Regional Forum on Ageing.

2.3 Diversity of consultation approaches

Elbourne repeatedly mentions in his report the need to set up a diverse range of consultation strategies to seek older people's views. It is true that it must be recognised that not all older people are linked into forums; however it is also important to understand that the Forums themselves are very adept at using a diverse range of consultation methods to gather the views of older people as outlined in the Age on Influence.

The forums revealed themselves to be astute at consulting with their members...they do this through a wide variety of means..

The Age of Influence 2008/9

One way forward might be to support and utilize the expertise of the local forums and the South West Seniors' Network enabling them to engage with all older people not just their members.

Envisage local forums using their engagement strategy to ensure diversity of views

Elbourne 2009

2.4 Big Society Small State

At the time of writing this report the policies of the UK's new Coalition Government are still being formulated. However, the desire to shift power away from Westminster and to continue the move to giving local people a greater voice started under the previous government's empowerment agenda is clear:

The Government believes that it is time for a fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people. We will promote decentralisation and democratic engagement, and we will end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals.

The Coalition Programme : p11 (May 2010)

The big news is their promotion of the Big Society concept which David Cameron says he has been developing during his time as leader of the opposition. The main focus of the Big Society is

- devolving power to communities and local government;
- a greater role in public services for VCOs and other civil society organisations;
- supporting the voluntary and community sector

There is a much talk of Britain's broken society and how the Big Society concept can bring people back together again, increase the nation's community capital and give people more say in local decision making.

Our Conservative - Liberal Democrat Government has come together with a driving ambition: to put more power and opportunity into people's hands.

We want to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want

David Cameron: July 2010

No one quite knows at this stage what this will mean in practice but all indications are that putting more power into the hands of older people is again a key focus and exactly what the older people's forums do. It is how to engage local people in having a voice that often

challenges those in power. However, with the older people's forums in the South West, much of the framework for this is already in place.

2.5 Future Role of the South West Seniors' Network

Within the initial research (The Age of Influence: 2008) recommendations were made for the role of the South West Seniors' Network. The following were identified as essential potential roles for the regional body:

- The provision of a regional information hub that would gather statistics, information on policy, government agendas that is accessible to the forums. The hub would also gather information about each of the forums and their activities so that this could be shared.
- Through consultation provide a collective voice for older people.
- The provision of a regular regional newsletter that would capture information from a variety of sources
- The production of guidance sheets based on the experiences of the local forums on such issues as funding, contacting MPs, campaigns.
- 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.
- 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.

Despite what appears to be overwhelming success on the engagement and involvement front, with older people's forums throughout the South West Region, the South West Seniors' Network now also faces a number of significant challenges.

3 The Challenges for South West Seniors' Network

3.1 Funding

The South West Seniors' Network has achieved a great deal and has moved on even since the original research was undertaken in 2008/9. However, in comparison with other regional bodies, the network has received very little in the way of funding. Help the Aged has been a loyal supporter through the years providing small but essential pots of funding both for the South West Seniors' Network and the local forums as they developed. There are hopes that some funding will be made available through the Forum on Ageing but the South West Seniors' Network, despite meeting all the Government's current aims for empowerment and engagement of older people, for the last nine months, has been operating on its scant reserves. Few voluntary sector bodies could provide an effective service on this level of resource and even fewer have to.

The local forums are rapidly growing in number. In 2004 there were 16 forums as members of the regional network. When the research was undertaken in 2008 there were 36 within the membership of the Network. There are now 58 forums as members of the South West Seniors' Network and the number is still growing. 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. The largest forum states that it has a membership of 4,500. There are also smaller forums that have less than 100 members but as a collective voice, with over 40,000 individual older people involved, South West Seniors' Network must represent the largest collective voice of older people in the region. As the numbers of forums grow, so does the potential role of the South West Seniors' Network.

It is important to remember that those 'professional representatives' attending the South West Regional Forum on Ageing have their time and expenses paid for, while to date, the representatives from the South West Seniors Network have had to use their scant reserves to cover any activity and are now in the situation of having to ask their own Board members to accept a lower rate of travel expenses, if the South West Seniors' Network is to continue to be able to cover their costs of attending meetings at all. This cannot be what John Elbourne had in mind when he put forward his recommendations. Hopefully all

this is in the process of changing and appropriate resources are being made available in order that older people can engage effectively.

3.2 Developmental Support

The role of Help the Aged has been integral to enabling the forums to develop. They have magically combined small grants and investment with an appropriate community development approach that has enabled 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 in some form.

The Age of Influence: 2008

Help the Aged, over the years, has been providing support to the both the South West Seniors' Network and to the local forums through its Speaking Up for Age Project and beyond. The South West has had the benefit of a team of three development officers working alongside the forums for at least the last five years. The Forums complemented the work of Help the Aged and fitted in with its ethos of campaigning for older people's issues.

Help the Aged has now amalgamated with Age Concern to form the newly named Age UK. The forums and South West Seniors' Network could provide an extensive network for any national agency working with older people that might want to seek their views on issues or disseminate information but must retain their independence.

The time will come when South West Seniors' Network will require little in the way of development support for their own needs but will need their own dedicated development worker to support work and projects within other forums. However, at the moment the Network does need assistance to make it robust, viable and fundable, if it is to take on activities and projects that are needed. While the Management Group are taking on all sorts of tasks in an admirable fashion, some of the matters that they are faced with having to handle themselves, could be handled by their own development worker-if only they had one. It is heartening to see a management group using their skills to support the network in this way, but it is also important to have the resources to support those members, to enable this to happen, and to avoid members getting exhausted by the minor details when they need their skills and energies to tackle the wider picture.

Having new board members coming through with the time and energy to take on key roles can also be a challenge to the development of the forums and the network itself. The continued success of South West Seniors' Network is unfairly dependent upon the continuing involvement of older volunteers. The current leaders are all involved, or have been past leaders of local forum groups. This in turn also raises issues around who will replace existing board members, particularly to key positions such as the Chair and Vice Chair when they have to retire. The lack of funding puts unrealistic pressure on board members and the financial vulnerability also makes this task of finding people to succeed existing officers within the board difficult.

3.3 The Challenge of Independence

It is essential that if the South West Seniors' Network is to retain its independence, it needs to be careful about which agencies fund it and what the requirements of those agencies are. One of the advantages of receiving little in the way of funding is that the forums and the Network are independent and are therefore able to set their own agendas. However, asking what funding is appropriate for the South West Seniors' Network is a little like asking someone in the desert whether they would like water or wine when they have nothing at all to drink! The Network cannot take up its potential with no funding at all.

3.4 The Rural Challenge

For many older people in the South West the rural issues are ones that have a great impact on their daily lives and services. The South West is the most rural of all the English regions and with the longest coastline it has attracted increased numbers of older people who have moved to the area to retire.

However rural areas have their own challenges as well as their charms. An added factor in the South West Region is the number of people who come to the area to retire. 34.1% of the population of the South West Region live in rural areas compared with 19.3% in England as a whole. 33.1% of the population in the South West are economically inactive, 52% of these are retired.

"Communities with an ageing population and insufficient young people to continue the tradition of community spirit may yet come to experience their rural idyll as a rural hell" (Naaji and Griffiths 1999).

The Rural White Paper in 2000 recognised that many rural communities were going through difficult changes. "Basic services have become overstretched." The situation for rural areas has changed very little since the White Paper was published in 2000.

Poor accessibility to services in rural areas, compared to the more urban areas, is a frequently mentioned feature of the countryside. For people with additional needs, mobility problems or low incomes, this can be a major factor that influences their quality of lives and their ability to 'take part' in their communities.

77% of rural communities do not have access to a daily bus service
83% do not have access to a local doctor
38% do not have access to a local Post Office
26% do not have access to a pub
46% do not have access to a local school
36% do not have access to a local shop
22% do not have access to a village hall.
(Sources MAFF 2000)

The lack of services provides decreasing opportunities for people in rural areas to meet up and connect with their community. It also leads to a lack of opportunity for networking and the sharing of information and experiences. This also increases the need for good accessible provision of information and advice. All of this impacts particularly on older people in the South West.

PART TWO

4 The Way Forward (Including Views from the South West Seniors' Network Conference 2009)



*"We are not the problem; we are part of
the solution."*

Conference Delegate 2009

4.1 The Issue of Wellbeing and Older People

The issue of the contribution that older people's forums and South West Senior's Network make to the wellbeing of older people was only touched on briefly in the earlier report 'The Age of Influence'. It was found during this earlier research that many of the forums had a social aspect, arranging outings and social activities, alongside their campaigning and influencing role. They also had an indirect role in bringing older people together, keeping them informed and providing social contacts which were not their overt role, but there were many stated benefits gained by individuals through simply being involved in the forums and the South West Seniors' Network. Wellbeing is currently a much talked about issue. While influencing the agenda is the prime purpose of most of the forums, it is important not to miss the other benefits that involvement with the forums and South West Seniors' Network bring to older people by supporting them to become involved and influential in the future plans for older people.

A recent report, *Sinking and Swimming* (2009) published by the Young Foundation and funded by many of the major funders such as the Lottery, Comic Relief, Tudor Trust and others, takes a look at Britain's unmet needs with a view to signposting funders as to where their funding could make the most difference. It gathers together invaluable statistical evidence around perceived poverty and unmet needs alongside case studies and the more quantitative data associated with psychological well being.

Reading the *Sinking and Swimming* report from the view of older people it would be hard not to understand the reasoning behind those forums such as the Devon Pensioners' Forum for taking direct action to raise the profile of the issues facing older people in Britain today. To quote just some of the statistics mentioned:

- *18% of single pensioners live in sustained and persistent poverty compared with 9% of the population of the country as whole*
- *65% of single pensioners lack access to a car making everyday tasks such as visiting the doctor, the hospital, the supermarket almost impossible(particularly in rural areas)*
- *19,400 excess winter deaths are among elderly people over 75*
- *23% of people over 65 suffer from mental ill health. (while not the highest percentage group suffering from ill health this is among one of the highest).(Sinking and Swimming : 2009)*

The report acknowledges the psychological impact in facing prejudice and stigma for people on low incomes. This is particularly prevalent among older people who have tried to plan for their old age but through repeated alterations in policies and environment now find themselves among the poorest in society.

Older people also find themselves, by virtue of being on low incomes, among the groups more at risk of suffering from poor psychological well being.

However, there are a number of factors that the report identifies as being important to wellbeing that are not necessarily connected to unmet material needs. Self esteem and 'competence' are among the factors the report identifies as being important to psychological well being. According to the report 35% of people aged 85 or over identified themselves as lacking in competence, 19% of pensioners as a whole identified themselves as lacking in competence. This is compared with only 8% of teenagers. Single older people were the most likely to identify themselves as lacking in competence.

Another aspect that the report looked at was autonomy. "The need for autonomy is met when people feel in control of their own behaviour and making informed choices without external interference". Single elderly people were the most likely to suffer from a lack of autonomy at 48% compared with 28% of young adults.

As people get older so the quality of their relationships with others deteriorates, leading to unmet needs for companionship and social support.

- Half of older people over the age of 75 live alone.
- More than 50% of older people (4.6 million) consider TV as their main form of companionship
- Over 500,000 older people spent Christmas alone in 2006
- Over 1 million older people (11%) always or often feel lonely
- 17% have less than weekly contacts with friends, neighbours and relatives
- The research suggested that older people need to feel empowered to develop activities ...that enable them to remain socially engaged and independent.

There is a very strong observational evidence to suggest that the work of forums and of the South West Seniors' Network, while not their

main purpose, addresses and has the potential to address at least some, if not all of the unmet psychological needs of older people, particularly those identified through the 'Sinking and Swimming' research. The forums and Network do this through empowerment of older people, through restoring autonomy and a sense of purpose and control and also through providing increased social contacts and networking opportunity. This is one element of the value of the forums that has not been fully explored and recorded, but is never the less of great importance. This is another often unvoiced value of the forums and the South West Seniors' Network.

4.2 Consultation role

"This is our chance to effect government policy"

Conference delegate 2009

South West Seniors' Network can provide one of the largest routes to consultation in the South West, not just on older people's issues, although that is their main remit, but also on other issues. Their network is significant. It is difficult to identify another regional network that has such an extensive reach. South West Seniors' Network has access to over 40,000 members. Statutory authorities, such as the police, health and social care may want to work with the Network to get important and relevant feedback of the situation on the ground for older people. As such, results may be included in reports and may have great potential to influence future planning and policies on a regional and national government level. The numbers of older people who can be potentially consulted would give great credibility to any consultation.

However South West Seniors' Network members are clear that they need to be approached in an appropriate way and included at the consultation design stage. Older people need questionnaires to be appropriate, easy to understand and answer. They are often prepared to work with the statutory authorities but it must be as equal partners at an early stage, not just as an afterthought. Forums however, did raise the issue of the ways in which they are asked questions and often did not understand the relevance of some of the information they were being asked to provide. They felt that any consultation, of which they are part, must be designed in a way that is understandable and meaningful to those with whom the authorities wish to consult. The South West Seniors' Network can provide valuable insight to statutory

authorities on this topic. Members strongly felt that questions should be appropriate, using appropriate language.

For example, in Dorset, the police wanted to circulate a questionnaire to older people about trust and confidence. However, their language and phraseology was difficult for older people to understand, so they worked closely with forum members and successfully redesigned the questionnaire. There were similar issues in Plymouth over consultation.

Cited at South West Seniors' Conference 2009

Sometimes the forums feel that they are asked for information that is beyond their remit and with which they do not necessarily feel comfortable being associated with. For example the forums would not necessarily know how many members suffer from diabetes or a heart condition, as tracking these medical conditions go far beyond their remit and may be seen as too sensitive or intrusive.

As one member said:

"There are no buttons we can press and come up with a load of names. We cannot say how many members have diabetes as we do not know. This is not what the forum is for."

Conference Delegate 2009

Generally, forums are willing to participate in consultation and will generate views, gather information and opinions if they are approached properly. The forums need clear guidelines from the bodies requesting assistance. Prospective partners should have a definite time frame, allowing plenty of time for responses (bearing in mind committee meeting dates). Some partners like a response to requests for information within 10 days, which is unrealistic. One forum member pointed out *"You cannot give us 10 days and expect a brilliant response"* and another member added- *"our partners need to realise that they cannot have a quick answer as our overall structures, which are all different, do not allow us to give those answers"*

The deadline date should be signposted as a banner headline in any communication. *"not hidden down somewhere on page 3 at the bottom. The return date must be almost at the first line"*. Two-three months is the preferred time for response to consultation (12 weeks is

recommended in the Compact). They should use clear language and ask questions in a straightforward way, avoiding acronyms and jargon. The Forums wanted to approach consultation in a positive way but sent a clear message: " *help us to help you*". Some members felt frustration at the lack of official response. As one member claimed "*if the government does not like (our) recommendations, they just kick it into the long grass.*" A Conference Delegate

Consultation had a prominent role particularly in a conference workshop on communication. Degrees of forums' involvement and support varied, for example, several local councils involve forum members at their relevant committee stage. As one member said "*We believe the government is going to consult more – which means more time, more paper!*" Another question asked was:

"*What is the reward for the forums for participating with government?*" - this was an unresolved issue.

4.3 Dissemination role

Members of the network perceived a dual purpose in dissemination. The South West Seniors Network works in two ways, adopting both a "top down" and "bottom up" approaches. The Network has the potential to ensure that local forums are kept informed on national matters, but it has the equally important role of ensuring that the voices of older people get heard and it has the potential to do this in the way that very few, if any, other better funded organisations have. It therefore has a vital role to play in consultation issues, developing and influencing policy.

One workshop at the October conference recommended that each county should have the opportunity to feedback to the South West Seniors' Network about what is going on in their member forums on a countywide basis.

4.4 Communication Role

The Digital Divide

This section of the report has been written solely taking into account Network members views expressed at the annual conference. The digital divide appeared to be a "hot" topic throughout the conference, discussed at various workshops. Computer literacy skills varied from

group to group according to individuals' experiences, inclinations and resources. Whilst South West Seniors' Network and forum members acknowledge the validity and relevance of electronic communications, there are considerable problems over accessibility (please see pros and cons of email communications table below).

Generally, a few key members in each forum undertake responsibility for emails – receiving, sending and distributing information. However, an individual could not write a group response without consultation with other committee or forum members, which might take considerable time.

The South West Seniors' Network discussed in which format members would prefer to receive information by camel (!) snail mail (post) or email. Views expressed emphasised that South West Seniors' Network needed to continue to adopt a dual method of communication with both emails and hard (postal) copies of information and newsletters, with an emphasis on expanding online circulation via communication officers. It would be very relevant and appropriate for the Network to adopt this approach. Too many agencies completely ignore the fact that not everyone has access to computers or the internet. For their own convenience and not necessarily that of their service users, many agencies and funders rely solely on the internet for communication. So excluding a whole raft of people in communities, often the very people with whom they wish to communicate. This is not just an issue for South West Seniors' Network. It is also an issue for many communities and community groups. The Network could do a great service to many communities by highlighting the need for a dual communication strategy and championing this method themselves. As with everything there is a cost, but one that is worth paying. Remember only 27% of older people's households have access to the internet which means that 73% do not have internet access.

4.5 Website developments (www.swsn.org.uk/)

Despite the lack of access that many older people have to the internet it is still important for the South West Seniors' Network to have a public website and to at least in part, use this for communication between itself and its members and the wider community. The new website was launched at the conference, designed by Cosmic, a social enterprise. South West Seniors' Network members were urged to participate, provide contact details and essentially, claim ownership of the website. Recent events have highlighted the importance of keeping

individuals contacts 'hidden from view' but to have one single point of contact where relevant parties, potential partners and statutory bodies would therefore have links to contacts in each geographical area seems a preferred option.

Members pointed out the need for confidentiality. Everyone agreed that contact details must be kept up to date and that fresh, relevant data is put on the website. These tasks may be part of a development worker's role.

Individual forums and affiliated members also have their own websites. There should be two-way links between SWSN and individual forums' websites. In addition Parish Councils, local councils, infrastructure organisations, such as CVSs should promote links to SWSN website

There is a strong feeling that the website needs to reflect the forums' views and pre-occupations, particularly as regards campaigning



4.6 E-mail communications

This table summarises the views of those present at the South West Senior's Conference on the issue of e-mail.

Pros (advantages)	Cons (disadvantages)
Cost effective	Cost implications – can be expensive to print off emails (see below for dealing with full reports).
Almost instantaneous	Not always reliable; no guarantee that the email has arrived. Members do not always check their emails regularly; many emails bounced back as the "in" box is full; duplication of emails and problems with Spam
Good for group communications and handling "bulk" Cascade information throughout the SW region	A letter received by post is tactile and has a sense of importance : people more inclined to open and read written letters
	Not an inclusive means of communication: many members do not have access to a computer and/or internet access – this can be expensive, given that many pensioners are living on a limited income
Good for distributing a summary of important reports	Expensive to print off a hard copy of the full report; recommend reading summary, then phoning up and asking for a hard copy of the full report in the post – apparently most people comply!
Important tool for Consultation work	Limited value given the problems highlighted above

4.7 Blogging, social networking sites, online forums

Online applications did not appear to be appropriate at this stage of South West Seniors' Network's development. However, some individuals thought they might enjoy the advantages of expressing

their opinions through blogging or tweeting through Twitter...it just takes one brave person to start....

4.8 Possible Solutions to the Digital Divide?

The Network members discussed:

The possibility of undertaking a questionnaire or IT survey to plot members' resources and needs. A survey would identify strengths weaknesses and requirements for further support. The survey would be distributed in mixed media (hard paper copies and electronically). The data would be carefully collated and analysed

Each forum could appoint a volunteer communications officer with IT skills and delegated powers to act outside committee/forum meetings. The communications officer would accept responsibility for dealing with electronic correspondence, circulating and distributing information to members and cascading information electronically, as appropriate. The communications officer would have delegated powers to respond without waiting for the next committee or forum meeting.

Further solutions might include:

- IT training in each county
- Coaching/mentoring schemes
- Training manual – computer literacy skills for older people (Federation of Community Learning Development??)
- Use existing public library facilities or a host organization e.g. local council offices or CVS
- Bursary scheme to support individuals in need of IT equipment, internet access
- Enrolment in accredited training programmes and/or a certificate of IT competency (e.g. CLAIT or European Computer Driving License ECDL)
- Working in partnership with adult training providers (e.g. Colleges of Further Education)
- Promote online two-way links to relevant websites

Some of these suggestions might just require people to be informed about local opportunity for training, but others would require some dedicated resources if they stand any chance of being taken further.

4.9 Media

"We want to avoid small groups working in a silo without the weighty voice, they otherwise could have"

A Conference Delegate

Feedback from workshops held at the annual conference points out the importance of the media and emphasised *"The Network needs direct media access in order to get messages out to the wider population". . . . "We welcome engagement and we must use the media to get our information across from a central point"*.

One workshop recommended *"setting up a task group or working party to look at the PR situation and find a few people with experience in PR"*. However individual forums must pass messages and media information up to central point for PR distribution.

One member commented that the magazine Forum to Forum linking Older People's groups produced by Help the Aged was *"a good way to get information out to older people's groups around the country"*. It frequently features articles on events in the South West, such as the *"South West Forums unite to replace council tax"* (issue 41).

Whilst the forums recognise the need and importance of the media, without the appropriate resources it is frequently difficult for the South West Seniors' Network to have any role in co-coordinating action. It was acknowledged in discussions following Philip Johnson's presentation at the conference (GOSW) that the Network is well represented on a regional level, but one member urged there *"needs to be a higher profile within your own (GOSW) communication team for regional awareness"*. One member commented that *"we need a Jack Jones (former TUC leader) someone on that level to raise our profile"*.

4.10 Governance and Capacity matters

South West Seniors' Network has arrived at an important crossroads – it has credibility, influence and an increasingly important role, both regionally and nationally. However the Network's constitution remains that of an unincorporated association. Perhaps the Network should consider becoming an incorporated association (possibly as a

registered charity and a company limited by guarantee) to protect its management committee and wider membership.

There are almost never ending possibilities for the South West Seniors' Network to get involved in; however there is much to do to just keep the daily business of the Network together and as mentioned very little resources to buy in the help needed to deliver what the membership would like to see in place.

"the Network is not run by magic" Chair South West Seniors' Network

The local forums themselves also see the issue of opportunity without the resources to back this up

"Who is going to help us to set up new forums, as outlined in the Elbourne report?" delegate's query

Many member forums mentioned certain apathy amongst their members as a problem. This was more an issue when it comes to members actually committing time and energy to the running of the local forums. As with many small community organisations the lion's share of the work often falls to a few and indeed the Network management itself also occasionally suffers from a lack of commitment. All too often a few members undertake vital key roles, but they may become ill or have to relinquish their duties due to family pressures or caring demands through no choice of their own.

Several forums discussed the age differences and actively wanted to recruit younger members in their early 60s as they had far more energy, time and commitment.

Nevertheless, the forums function effectively on various different levels including with obvious benefits to participants.

As one delegate concluded *"We keep pushing doors open. Our members keep us on our toes"*.

In addition to the annual conference, delegates recommended holding smaller sub regional conferences throughout the south west. This is currently being taken forward by the Spring mini conference in Cornwall.

4.11 Campaigning

Although they vary in size from small groups to those with members numbering many hundreds, forums all have significant 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.

Campaigning is always a thorny issue for the forums often characterised by a marked division between individual forums' aims and the South West Seniors' Network aims and objectives which include to *"be a democratic, non party political, non sectarian and nonprofit making organization, embracing charitable ethics"*. This division was tacitly acknowledged at the annual conference and a compromise suggested:

"Although the network committee cannot sponsor or promote campaigning, we feel there needs to be a campaigning section on the website".

Conference Delegate 2009

Creating aspects of campaigning are now considered to be charitable so that the Network may find this is not such an issue as previously thought. The Age of Influence report acknowledged that many forums that do not align themselves with what they perceive to be the campaigning element, do in their own way campaign. The difference is more in the approach and process with some forums willing to take a more persuasive approach than that of confrontation.

Although South West Seniors' Network does not advocate direct action, it could use the website effectively to disseminate information. It might include:

- a campaigning section on the website
- links to individual forums and their campaigns
- a designated campaign contact point on the website.
- link to National Pensioners Convention (NPC)

Generally, the forums and their members have a high level of political awareness. Many individuals have been involved with politics on a local level as town, district and/or county councillors.

In a professional capacity, members might have been employed by the local government, primary care trust or health care services. The members are well informed and have strong opinions on issues such as the European Union, the Lisbon Treaty and MPs expenses scandal.

4.12 Equality and diversity

The annual conference (2009) contained a workshop focusing on equality and diversity issues. Members raised vital questions, such as "*Does our own constitution debar certain groups? Do we need to widen our constitution to encompass wider groups?*"

These discussions took place in the context that for some years groups which had a joint remit for disability and older people were unable to affiliate to South West Seniors' Network. This is no longer such an issue.

Further discussions included "*Whom do we mean by BME – black and minority ethnic groups?*" with some listings such as Black, Asian, Chinese, Polish, Eastern European. Some suggested inviting a wider range of speakers to address forum meetings, including those from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups.

The forum acknowledged gender issues. It highlighted the difficulties for *older gay men, especially those living in housing complexes where they may be stigmatized, because when they were younger homosexuality was illegal*. Members identified a need for best practice guidance notes on equality and diversity issues.

One workshop recommendation included researching "need to reach" groups, then offering support and affiliation to these groups. The South West Seniors' Network already includes older prisoner's forums, for example the Dartmoor Over 50s Club and Leyhill 50+ Forum.

Members of the forums themselves are often people with longer term life limiting illnesses and disabilities. A number of the forums have also shown the desire to bring in older people on low incomes. A further suggestion is that members of older residents associations may be included as members of the forum. This might include older people living in sheltered accommodation or with access to warden assistance, older people's homes and day care centers. Some forums could give

presentations to help recruit further members and *“try to overcome anomalies, by inviting all residents over 50 to come and join the forums”*.

A further suggestion is to rotate meetings, so that individual forums *“go to them, rather than them come to us, if at all feasible”*. South West Seniors’ Network could identify the housing providers in the public and private sectors and make contact with older residents.

The timing and accessibility of meetings might help promote a positive ethos of inclusion. The working definition of older people as over 50 or 55+ includes a wide spectrum of ages. Some forums are seeking to actively recruit younger members in their early 60s as they have far more energy *“to drive issues forward and take practical action”*. The younger members may not be able to attend daytime meetings and might prefer evening or weekend meetings. By varying the time and location of meetings, individual forums may attract and retain a wider, active membership.

“younger people are the senior citizens of the future”.

The forums are highly individual covering a wide geographical area. Each forum must decide which meeting format best suits their members’ needs.



5 Conclusions

Whenever we reflect on the older people's forums in the South West, their value, their activity, their contribution in ensuring that the voice of older people is heard is clear. On very little resources South West Seniors' Network has grown its membership and now represents a membership of 58 forums, bringing together the views of least 40,000 older people in the region. As such it has a far wider reach than many of the better resourced Regional Voluntary Sector bodies that receive far greater investment. Local forum groups the Network that supports them represent excellent value per pound that is invested in them. They primarily use volunteer, unpaid time to provide a voice for older people and guidance to local and national agencies.

There are many potential roles and future activities for the South West Seniors' Network as outlined in this report. The potential of both the Network and the forums is now immense. Those active members of the Management Committee have done an amazing task to date in raising the profile of the Network, ensuring older people are represented at a regional and a national level but you need to ask where is the investment from those that have the power? No regional agency can be expected to take on such a significant role with such large numbers of people without the appropriate support or resources. The time has now come for the Network and its members forums to come out of the shadows, be better recognised, resourced and supported.

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