

*South West
Seniors' Network*

**South West
Forum on
Ageing**



From Grassroots to Government

How to get your voice heard

Tuesday 1st March 2011

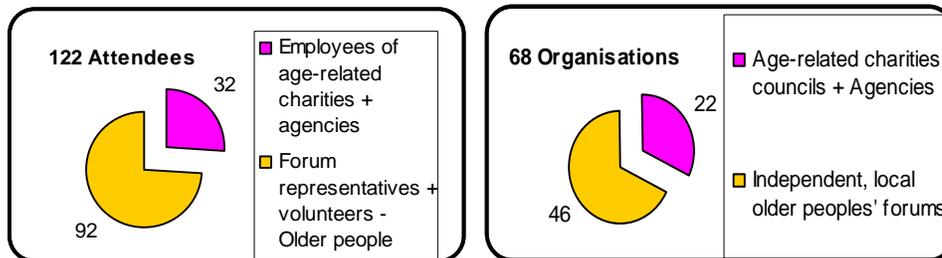
**Somerset County Cricket Club
Taunton**



“Age affects us all and touches all policy issues. So this conference is being held jointly by three like-minded organisations. Today we bring together older people and planning and delivery organisations to identify and promote issues relating to demographic ageing and to address their implications. Through working together, we aim to make a difference to later life in the South West and get our messages across to central government.”

Faith Davey, South West Regional Manager Age UK

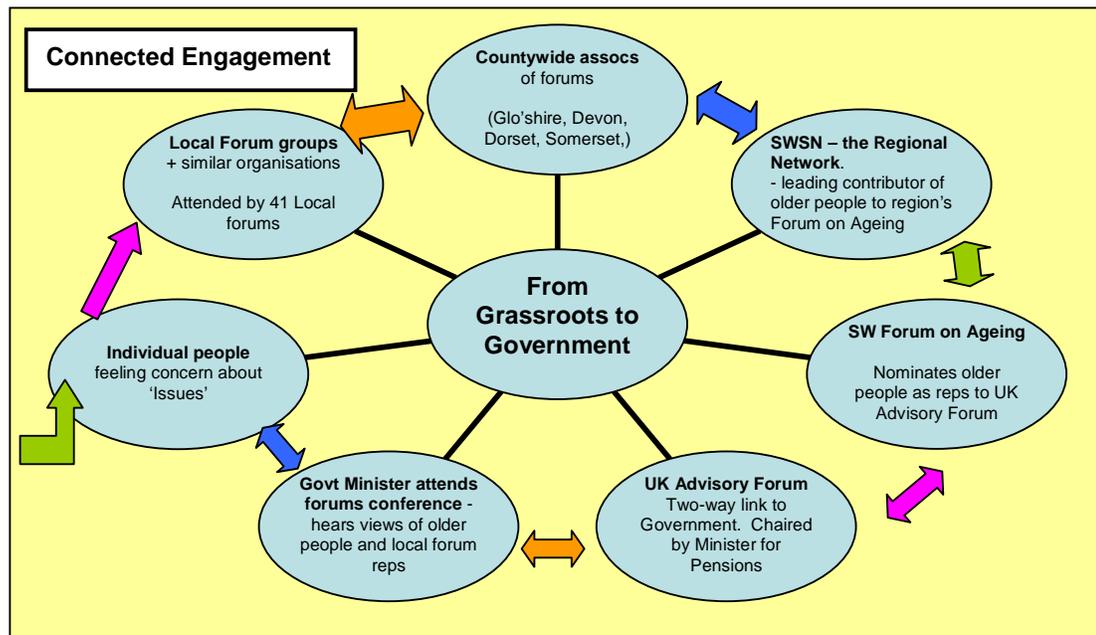
Over 120 people representing over seventy organisations including older peoples’ forums, voluntary organisations and public agencies attended the ‘From Grassroots to Government’ conference hosted jointly by Age UK, the South West Forum on Ageing and South West Seniors’ Network, whose Annual Meeting was held immediately following the conference.



The conference, jointly funded by Age UK and the South West Forum on Ageing, offered a unique opportunity for those attending to join in discussions and workshops that explored the different avenues by which older people, and specifically older people’s representative groups, may exert an influence on government.

- **Age UK** is the new force combining Age Concern and Help the Aged. Age UK provides development support for older people’s forums under the *Speaking Up for Our Age* banner.
- **The South West Seniors’ Network** provides a collective voice for approximately 40,000 older people of the region by supporting its fifty nine independent and local member forums.
- **The SW Forum on Ageing (SWFOA)** brings together older peoples’ representatives with planning and delivery organisations to identify and promote issues relating to demographic ageing and to address their implications
- **The UK Advisory Forum on Ageing** provides older people with a line to Government via SWFOA to comment on new policy ideas, services, legislation and what areas they feel the Government needs to address.

The conference perfectly illustrated the need for ‘connected engagement’ by demonstrating the linkages that exist between local forums, the South West Seniors Network of forums, the SW Forum on Ageing and the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing.



In her welcome address to conference **Faith Davey**, Chair of the Forum on Ageing and South West Regional Manager of Age UK, said the conference was inspired by the need for the older population and those who have their interests at heart to ensure that they are properly represented and given a voice in policy-making at all levels of government.

Faith Davey then introduced **Steve Webb MP, Minister of State for Pensions**, whose constituency lies in the region and who, along with Paul Burstow, the Minister of State for Care Services, represents the coalition government on the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing.

The Minister delivered a speech that ranged far and wide over issues of particular concern to older people, including social care, transport, housing and the wider social justice agenda.

The Minister also participated in a panel discussion with delegates.



Alongside the Minister on the Panel were:

- **Tony Watts**, the founding editor of *Mature Times*, the UK's only campaigning newspaper for the 'grey' market.
- **Jackie Allen**, Chair of the 55+ Forum
Dorchester & District

forum, a member of the SWSN Management Committee, and the Older People's representative on the South West Forum on Ageing.

- **Mervyn Kohler**, Policy Advisor, Age UK.

A range of questions had been submitted ahead of conference, with the potential impact of cuts on services to the older population high on the agenda. The question of how an ageing population on fixed incomes would cope with the rising cost of living was also a key issue for the audience.

The panel agreed that keeping fit was vital for older people and that food, heating and the basics were most important. It was recognised that older people were very good at living on a tight budget but the priority had to be their well-being.

The Minister reiterated that the Government recognised that the true value of pensions had dipped over the years but pointed out that the link with earnings had now been restored and it was hoped that there would be a decent income for people in older age.

Concern was expressed that older people were being blamed for all the current problems affecting the country, and reference made to an article written by David Willetts in 2007 when he was shadow Minister for State for Universities and Science, in which he argued that the housing, healthcare and financial needs of the post-war generation had been met at the expense of future generations¹.

¹ 'While the old get richer the young get poorer', The Times, September 18 2007.
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article2477765.ece

Tony Watts subsequently addressed the conference on the subject of getting your message across. His speech described a situation in which ‘... millions of older people live isolated lives, a stranger in their own communities; or feel they are ignored or a burden on society; or worry about the next bill to drop through their letterbox, and whether they can afford to both ‘eat AND heat’. They see their bus services being cut back, so they cannot even get out of the house; their public toilets being shut down, so they cannot go shopping or enjoy a day in town; their Post Offices disappear so they never even meet their neighbours or pay their bills in the way they feel comfortable’.

Tony Watts believed that ‘forums could become:

- THE focal point for the needs and aspirations of the older population in the South West,
- THE campaigning voice that’s crying out to be heard;
- THE ‘go-to’ organisations that local councils and health trusts consult with;
- THE bodies that can negotiate with the political parties at election time; and
- THE connection between the thousands of older people who live in isolation and the rest of society’.

He concluded his speech by offering his services, free of charge, to a core of ‘pioneer’ forums to take the project forward.

Six forums immediately took up his invitation.



Faith Davey drew the morning session to a close by summarising the discussions and thanking all those who had contributed to the programme.



“The Big Society and the Localism Agenda presents us with the opportunity and potential to intervene - being positively encouraged by Government to make ourselves heard, take the initiative, make decisions and be a force for change at local level - we need to rise to the challenge”.

During the lunch break attendees networked and took advantage of the opportunity to view Display Stands of eight organisations and local forums, all of which provided examples of effective engagement. The organisations represented were: Caradon Senior Citizens Forum; South West Forum; Somerset Older Citizens Alliance; Dorset Fifty Plus; South West Foundation; Carrick Over 50s Forum; South West Seniors Network; Age UK.



The afternoon session was introduced by **Daphne Pearson**, Chair of the South West Seniors Network, who welcomed **Berkeley Wilde**, Director of Minotaur Communications² to host a workshop designed to provide an informal, practical approach that gives people an understanding of how they can learn to influence decisions and policies.

VOICE is a tool that can help forum leaders identify where their own group is when assessed for their Degree of Influence and Power (capacity) to Influence. This information could assist committee members to ‘see ourselves as others see us’ and was invaluable for all that the forum did when approaching potential partners, funders, local councils, hospital trusts, etc - even in recruiting new forum members and supporters.

² Minotaur Communications is an independent research, evaluation and training management consultancy, specialist in equality, diversity and human rights: www.minotaurcommunications.co.uk

His presentation was followed by facilitated workshops, with each table tackling questions:

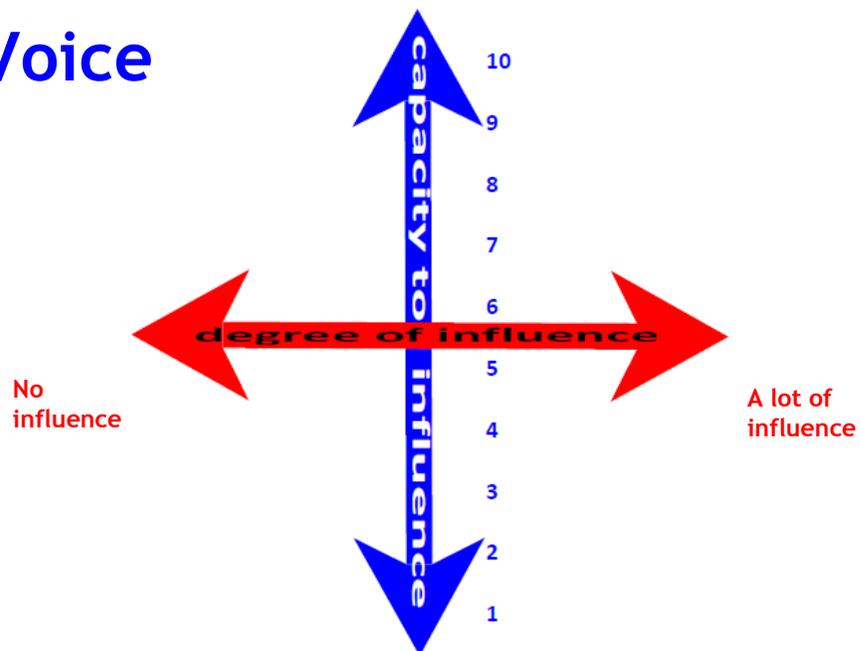
Q1 What is 'Influence' - what does influence mean to you?

Q2 How much influence does your group have?

Notes were taken and collected, including the following definitions of influence:

- 'Not necessarily changing minds but having the opportunity to have ones views listened to and properly discussed by the decision makers'.
- 'Have an open mind, only then can you listen...'

Voice

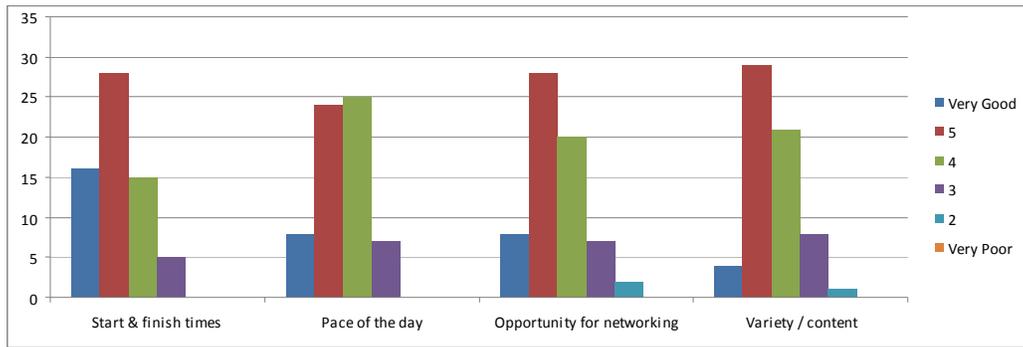


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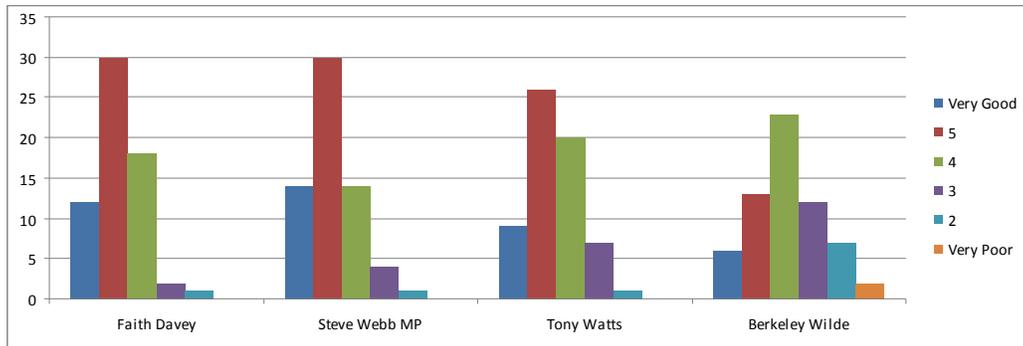
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www.changesuk.net

EVALUATION & FEEDBACK

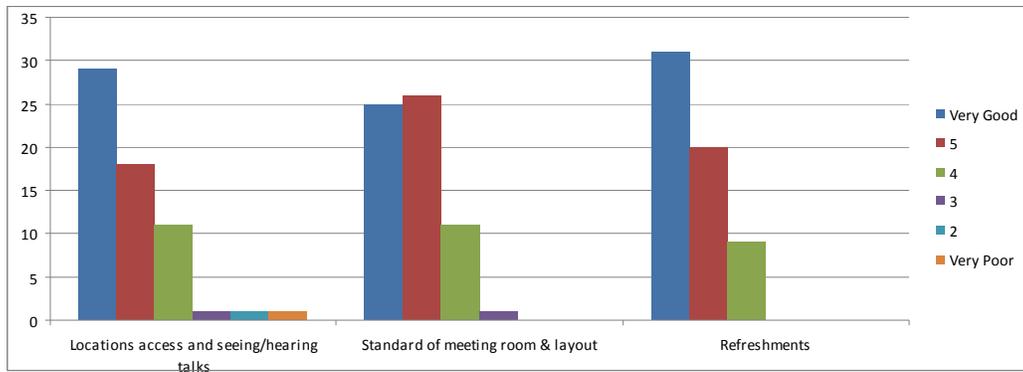
Structure of the event



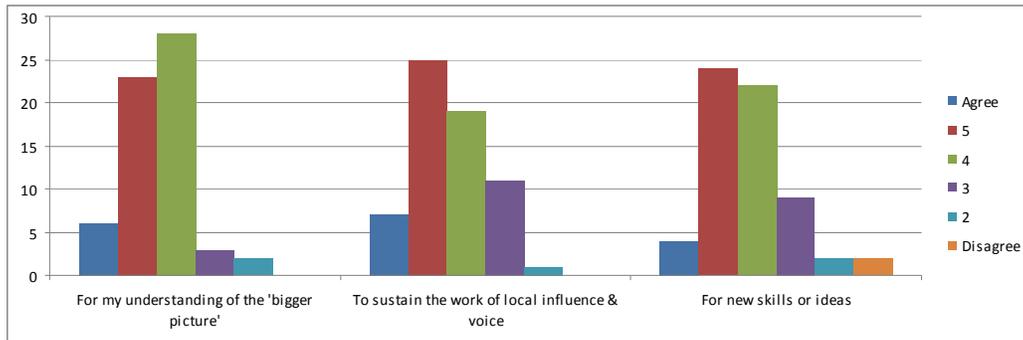
Speakers



The Venue



Usefulness of event





Over to us...



‘Ordinary people telling their stories about how their local forum has helped them to get their voice heard or to make a positive change in their lives.’

‘A very good & useful day. Thank you to all involved.’

‘Workshops on diverse people/groups learning how to work together for maximum effect.’

‘While we cannot immediately judge the ways of achieving, within ones group, some of the items covered at this conference, I leave wondering how well today can be "translated" at small & group level and will do my best to do this.’

‘I would like to hear more questions & less opinion.’

<p>‘Be tougher on questions - two minutes only - no comeback - no discussion by shouting out set out these "rules" at the outset.’</p>
<p>‘Find a more effective way of enabling everyone attending to have a voice, comment and ask questions rather than the majority of questions/comments going to the well known and more confident attendees for morning session.’</p>
<p>‘Venue superb, lunch delicious, coffee delicious - very worthwhile coming!’</p>
<p>‘It would have been useful to have had the workshop details prior to the event in order to study the questions as many were in grey areas.’</p>
<p>‘Please do not include workshops which are all to be led within one space - with hearing loss, at least one participant cannot take part!’</p>
<p>‘Very informative - Age UK needs to coordinate all groups present.’</p>
<p>‘Honest analysis of whether forums (given their varied contributions, membership & ambitions) have any real inclination or ability to work together regionally or nationally to influence Government policies.’</p>
<p>‘Excellent event that has been delivered through passion & commitment - a real example to other Regional Ageing Forums.’</p>
<p>‘Well organised thank you.’</p>
<p>‘An excellent day - thank you.’</p>

Overall, 96% of attendees told us that by the end of the day they had a greater understanding of the ‘bigger picture’, that they felt better able to sustain the work of local influence and voice, and that they had gained new skills and ideas. 84% of attendees scored the day between 4-6 (6 = ‘Very Good’).

APPENDIX 1: NOTES FROM PANEL DISCUSSION

(a full set of questions submitted ahead of conference is found in Appendix 2)

Panel members: Steve Webb MP, Minister for Pensions; Tony Watts (TW); Mervyn Kohler (MK); Jackie Allen (JA)

Wiltshire & Swindon User Network (WSUN)
When money is tight what do you cut?

The panel agreed that keeping fit was vital for older people and food, heating and the basics were most important. It was recognised that older people were very good at living on a tight budget but the priority had to be well being. The Minister re-iterated that the Government recognised that the true value of pensions had dipped over the years but the link had been restored and it was hoped that there would be a decent income for people in older age

The specific issue of funeral and other insurances was discussed along with the proposal to link such insurances with some form of Pension Credit, but the Minister was concerned that the system would become too complicated and that it was better to concentrate income into one payment to enable people to make informed choices. There was general agreement that age discrimination was rife in insurance and that this needed to be addressed.

Responses from the floor included:

- Concern that there was an assumption that older people had families to support them and that older people on their own were in danger of having inappropriate choices made for them. Tony Watts felt that this was a role for the 'Big Society' agenda and that the community needed to intervene in such instances, although there was uncertainty about how this would work.
- A Forum representative was concerned that it older people paying for funeral plans and similar end of life policies would lose all their contributions if they couldn't afford to keep the payments up.
- The question was asked when the weekly state pension worth £140 would be introduced. The Minister replied that the Government wanted a decent payment for those who had retired and those retiring in the future. It was

also important to make sure that people who were careful and saved were not financially penalised when they retired.

(There was a further question about care home payments, which led to a wider discussion about care homes and the need for joined up responses to people needing care, most of whom would prefer to remain in their own homes. The Government were expecting the result of review of residential care in the summer and were concerned that affordable answers needed to be found. There was a particular need for better day care for dementia sufferers, for whom residential care often caused a decline).

Chard, Ilminster & Crewkerne Pensioners Forum

'How will the government respond to calls to end pensioner benefits?'

The question was based on a newspaper article³ which said older people should bear a greater burden by the axing of above inflation pension rises, winter fuel allowance and free bus travel. In responding to the question the Minister condemned the report from the Institute of Economic Affairs think-tank⁴ that had inspired the article in the following terms: "I think those attitudes are loathsome. Older people are the real experts on issues that affect them directly, so consulting them at the grassroots is essential when developing our ageing society policies'.

He went on to say that these attitudes were also an anathema to the government.

There was general agreement that the South West was one of the most expensive places for older people to live with higher water charges, difficulties with public transport etc. The Panel offered advice about how to avoid some of these expenses such as getting a water meter, looking for preferential rates from fuel providers etc.

³ 'End pensioner benefits', Daily Telegraph, Tuesday 22nd February 2011.

⁴ The report's author, Philip Booth, wrote: "The Government has imposed many new burdens on the younger generation. They have let older people remain largely insulated. It's time this changed'. This aspect of the conference was later focused on in the BBC Politics Show (SW) report which further elaborated on the Institute of Economic Affairs description of pensioners being 'protected from spending cuts'. The case for defending the universal rights of pensioners (e.g. concessionary fares) was emphatically made on the same BBC programme in interviews with Tony Watts and Faith Davey.

The issue of 'bed blocking' was raised and the difficulties for older people being admitted to hospitals. The Minister agreed to pass the comments and concerns on to his colleague Paul Burstow, the Minister of State for the Department of Health.

Somerset Older Citizens Alliance

With so many consultations having in the past proved the point that consultation as often as not confirms decisions already made, what faith can we have that any future consultations will be any different?

There was broad agreement across the Panel that everyone was tired of bogus consultations and that people's views should be sought before decisions were made and not just to ratify them. JA felt that Dorset had a good record of consulting with older people and that things had changed through this process. She felt strongly that no one had the mandate to speak for older people - they could speak for themselves.

MK felt that there were opportunities in the Localism Bill for 'wilful citizens' could use to make a difference. TW added that the recent change of mind over the sale of the forest showed that action could change decisions. Jackie Allen stated that the best response was not to complain, but to influence and infiltrate.

It was pointed out that the Department of Health had broken its own rules in a recent consultation on hospital parking fees by only allowing 8 weeks for comments instead of the stipulated 12 and only using the internet. The Minister agreed that this was unacceptable. There was a lack of trust in those making decisions and there needed to be transparency in the decision making process at all levels. It was felt that people needed to use their votes wisely and that it was interesting that older people's voices were being heard at last, particularly in the media who were starting to recognise their importance. JA stated that the best response was not complaining, but to Influence and Infiltrate.

(At this point the Minister left the conference).

Community Service Volunteers Retired & Senior Volunteer Programme

What simple measures and mechanisms do the Panel feel should be introduced in order to enhance and promote volunteering opportunities in the over 55s?

There was broad agreement that older people had a wealth of skills and experience to share and many were vital to their communities. JA felt that society at large needed to stop putting a chronological value on people and the perception that older people were a burden needed to be constantly challenged.

It was felt that intergenerational work was extremely valuable in building more positive attitudes. There was a need to celebrate those older people who volunteered and gave their time to public service. There was also much to be learned in families from grandparents.



APPENDIX 2

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED AHEAD OF CONFERENCE

This section includes written responses subsequently provided by the Minister. Any outstanding responses will be circulated when received.

Malcolm Hipwell: Plymouth & District Pensioners Action Group

Plymouth & District Pensioners Action Group demands that demands that the Government take immediate action to ensure that older people are granted at least care that is within the terms of the court of Human Rights and inform us what exactly those terms are.

Geoff Winchcombe: Swindon & District Ex-Service Association

Many of the Pensioners I have met living in Nursing Homes tell me they keep putting up the charge but they have no increase with their pension money. 3 people I know are widows whose husbands' fund did not include them when they died.

Jim Law: Wiltshire & Swindon User Network (WSUN)

When money is tight for pensioners should they cut out the costs of life and funeral insurance or make savings on food bills? Unfortunately there is no form of tax relief on end of life insurance if you are on benefit, should it therefore be reflected in some form of allowances for pension credit?

Ms Glen Burrows: Somerset Older Citizens Alliance

Public consultation and engagement are clearly issues which are at the heart of the current government's vision for decision-making and delivery of services.

In parts of Somerset at least, people have grown weary and cynical of "consultations" which either ignore the views expressed or are clearly only paper exercises. How does the government intend to change both the cynicism of local electors and the attitude of so many of our elected representatives, who clearly regard public involvement as a nuisance?

Colin Cant: Chard, Ilminster & Crewkerne Pensioners Forum

The Daily Telegraph (22.02.11) ran an article entitled 'end pensioner

benefits', in which it reported a think tank's recommendation that pensioner benefits should be abolished on the basis that 'older people enjoy a "privileged position" with non-means tested benefits and should "suffer" their share of the burden to reduce the national deficit'. The Institute of Economic Affairs claims that reforming the state pension, raising retirement age and cutting benefits would save the Treasury £16 billion each year'.

Can we be assured that these proposed policies will not be implemented?

David Brown: Community Service Volunteers Retired & Senior Volunteer Programme

Too often the older generation are viewed as simply the recipients of benefits and services ignoring the potential for the positive contribution they can continue to make to society and local communities. The benefits of volunteering both to volunteers and the community are well documented. What simple measures and mechanisms do the Panel feel should be introduced in order to enhance and promote volunteering opportunities in the over 55s?

Brian Warwick: Melksham 55 Plus Forum

Is the Government doing sufficient to ease pension poverty and improve end of life support? Almost 1 in 4 pensioners are living below the bread line. More than half of pensioners are on such low incomes that they are entitled to means-tested benefits, yet many don't get the extra help & support they need because they are put off by complicated forms and sharing personal information. Should grass roots Older People organisations be campaigning for a stronger role in Local and National policy making, if so, how best can that be achieved?

Jim Kent: West Somerset Seniors Forum

In April 2009 four of the eight most rural R80 Districts each became part of a newly created Unitary Authority. Yet all eight have retained the key structural features of geography and population that characterise their communities - they do not become less rural by being relabelled.

How can we persuade the government to recognise the reality of the inevitable consequences imposed by unavoidable constraints of sparsity and demography on small rural communities?

Bernard Endacott: Devon & Pensioners Action Forum

Given that the British State Pension is amongst the lowest in Europe whilst

the cost of living in the UK is amongst the highest, currently the single pension being £97.65 which is a massif £73.35 below the poverty level of £171 per week. I would like to as the Pension's Minister, "why did the Government have to hit the pensioner even harder by taking the decision to fix any future increases to the CPI and not RPI. When can the British pensioner expect to have a decent living pension?"

Currently the inflation rate for CPI is 4% and the RPI stands a 5.1% whilst food inflation is at 6%. The Joseph Roundtree Foundation reports that the inflation rate those living on a minimum income always outstrips general inflation figures because a large percentage of their income is spent on essential items for living such as food and fuel. The pension will therefore fall further and further below the poverty level. It really feels like we are being kicked when already down!

John Alexander Parry Latham: The Devon Pensioners Action Forum

Our question for Mr Steve Webb is why has the Green Paper Pension Reform which was so promised before the end of 2010 has still not been produced and presented and therefore received.

The Minister subsequently provided a written answer to this question:

'The Government published the Green Paper 'A state pension for the 21st century' on 4th April 2011, setting out options to simplify the State Pension for future pensioners. A public consultation has been launched on the Government's proposals. The full proposals are available to read on the DWP website. The consultation ends on 24 June 2011'.

Jim Kent: West Somerset Seniors Forum

I was most heartened to hear that advice from ecologists may help TM Treasury better understand how different factors may interact to severely penalise small but discrete rural communities far more than major urban populations.

When can we look forward to the spread of this enlightenment to other government departments?

Michael Rose: Devon Pensioners' Action Forum

When the House of Commons Library says that the National Insurance Fund is "ring-fenced" and cannot be used for anything outside the Social Security Admin. Act 1992, how can ministers and MPs claim the £37 billion excess balance is being used for "other purposes" and is not available to increase State Pensions?

If the National Insurance Fund is receiving interest on its “excess balance”, the fund must be independent of the Treasury. So how can the Government prohibit investment in Gilts at 4-5% and force it into an “easy access account” at 0.4-0.5%?

The Minister subsequently provided a written answer to this question:

‘Any surplus of contributions over social security benefits in any one year (the NIF surplus) is held in a short-term investment account run by the Commissioners for the Reduction of the National Debt called the Debt Management Account Deposit Facility. The surplus is invested in public services such as schools and hospitals. In practice, this means the Government will borrow less from elsewhere. The National Insurance Fund operates within the wider fiscal framework and it gives a Government the flexibility to determine its spending priorities in light of the overall economic conditions prevailing in the UK’.

Derris Watson: Caradon Senior Citizens Forum

Should the government restore ring fencing to at least some parts of the funding they give Local Authorities in order to ensure money is spent appropriately.

The Minister subsequently provided a written answer to this question:

‘The process started under the previous government, for example, the removal of the Supporting People ringfence. By unringfencing funding we are giving Local Authorities greater freedom and flexibility to decide how best to allocate and spend their funding in line with local priorities. This will encourage Local Authorities and service providers to think more innovatively about how services are delivered. With greater transparency in how public money is spent, and the knowledge that local people will be able to hold them to account, local authorities will have an added incentive to spend the money they are entrusted with wisely’.

Geraldine Fernandes: Unison Swindon Retired Members

Age Concern had a very active branch in Swindon. Since its closure Age UK has not taken over the work and there is therefore a huge gap in the help available to the towns elderly. Is there a chance that in the future a branch of Age UK could be established?

Gillian Newcombe: Senior Council for Devon

Could the Minister tell us why cold weather payments are being paid to pensioners now living in Spain/France etc?

SUMMARY

No conference report can ever adequately capture the mood of an event, any more than a Government Minister can answer every question to the satisfaction of all. The loose ends of policy continue to infuriate, and thorny issues that tax even the experts are passed down the generations, with successive governments apparently incapable of resolving them. Yet progress is made. Not by decree, but by means of informed debate such as occurred on March 1st in Taunton at the *From Grassroots to Government* conference.

Most of those who attended the conference will, it is hoped, have come away invigorated by the mix of opinion, experience and expertise that informed discussion during the course of the day. This does not preclude some feeling that they did not get their message across, or that the Minister's departure came just when things were getting interesting. Whatever the case, the *From Grassroots to Government* conference brought together people who know that their voices, and the voices of those they represent, need to be heard by government, now more than ever.

The conference organisers thank all those who attended for making the event a success.

