

# **Devon LinkAge Plus Findings Paper Final Developing a Senior Council for Devon: Engagement and Inclusion**

## **1 Introduction**

The work to establish The Senior Council for Devon (SCfD) was carried out as part of the Devon Link Age Plus (LAP) programme. The SCfD aims to:

- Be a focus for the voice of older people in Devon in policy development and service planning
- Realise the potential of older people as a creative and active resource in the community.

The development work was jointly commissioned by Devon County Council and the then Older People's Advisory Group for Devon County Council (DCC), Action Group in Later Life (AGILE).

Following a competitive tender process conducted by the County Council and AGILE, Peter Fletcher Associates (PFA), an independent research and consultancy organisation, were appointed for a 21 month period from October 2006 to June 2008 to establish the SCfD. The work was funded by a £200,000 grant from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) for the main Senior Council development work, and a further £125,000 from the County Council for work with hard to reach older people.

## **2 Context**

The context for the development work is as follows:

- A large rural shire county made up of distinct local communities based around 28 main market and coastal towns and their rural hinterlands, and the city of Exeter
- An earlier engagement initiative as part of the Better Government for Older People (BGOP) programme (AGILE – Action Group in Later Life), which had achieved some consultation routes but a very limited spread and representation of older people both in terms of geography and range
- A largely traditional approach based around consultation or campaigning rather than a developmental partnership approach.

### **3 Objectives**

The objectives, which were agreed with AGILE, were to establish a new independent organisation which would become the main route for consultation and engagement with older people for the County Council and other public bodies.

The “vision” and specification for the work were negotiated by the County Council with AGILE, along with the developmental approach. It was agreed the new organisation would have the following features and functions:

- A bottom up approach built around a network of local Senior Council groups for each of the 29 community planning areas in the county
- A federal structure linking the local Senior Council groups together at district council and county council levels
- The fullest possible scope of membership:
  - Individuals aged 50+
  - Local groups of people wholly or predominantly aged 50+
  - Socially inclusive to reflect different groups of people aged 50+, including hard to reach groups
  - Community based provider organisations as non-voting associate members
- Additional routes for representation of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups and other minority groups of people aged 50+ including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans-gendered older people at district and county levels
- Operating through a set of underlying principles based on constructive partnership
- Having a formal structure and legal status that enables it to function and receive funding to carry out its role

### **4 The Activity**

#### **4.1 Building the local Senior Council bottom up**

The main activity involved in developing the Senior Council comprised:

- Carrying out development work in the 29 local areas which involved the following elements:
  - Compiling a database of local groups and organisations whose membership was wholly or mainly people aged 50+, voluntary and community organisations, and services such as sheltered housing and care homes where older people live
  - Undertaking groundwork by making contact with key organisations and groups, including Parish, Town and District Councils
  - Inviting all the organisations and groups contacted and other people aged 50+ to a publicly advertised meeting to explain

about the Senior Council and to invite people to form a local Senior Council Group for the area

- Undertaking county level development work with organisations that had branches or networks of members aged mainly 50+ in different parts of the county – for example Probus, Unison Retired Members, Exeter Diocese. The aim was to ask them to distribute information about the Senior Council
- Working with AGILE, as a Steering Group, to advise on the development process - for example information and publicity leaflets, and possible structures and constitutions
- Setting up a website in conjunction with the County Council as a way of publicising the Senior Council.

It will be recognised from the above that both AGILE, as the County Council's existing Older People's Advisory Group, and older people in local discussions, were able to input to the question of the final form, constitution etc of the Senior Council, at the outset and as the process developed.

#### **4.2 Building a social inclusion approach with hard to reach people and groups**

Alongside the development work for the Senior Council, PFA was also commissioned by the County Council to carry out consultation with a range of hard to reach groups about their aspirations for engagement. The principles underpinning this aspect of the work were to:

- Involve hard to reach groups and individuals and groups as part of the mainstream of the Senior Council. This is built into the Membership arrangements
- Recognise that building a diverse membership and culture is something that takes time and has to be done in a sensitive way that reasonably minded people find acceptable

This aspect of the work covered people in their 50s (who might not see the relevance of a Senior Council to them), Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Older People, Faith Groups, Gypsies and Travellers, Lesbian, Gay and Transgendered Older People, Frail Older People and Carers, People with Physical and Sensory Impairment, People with a Learning Disability, People with Mental Health Problems, Offenders and Older people in rural areas.

This work was undertaken both with older people themselves and with intermediary bodies who supported a particular hard to reach group, for example Hikmat in relation to BME older people and Living Options in relation to people with a physical disability.

### **4.3 Building the federal structure**

Following the initial phase of development work (October 2006 to June 2007) PFA began to build the federal arrangements for the overall Senior Council.

The original plan in the specification was for a 3 tier structure of local Senior Councils federating upwards at district and county council levels. However, from early on it became clear that this goal needed modifying for two main reasons. Firstly, there was a concern that potentially 3 levels of engagement might put some older people off becoming involved. Secondly, the work was being undertaken at a time of Local Government Re-organisation decisions, restructuring of Devon's six previous Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) into one, plus amalgamation discussions for Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in the county. Instead it was agreed that local Senior Council groups would work together in a flexible way in whatever groupings are most suitable.

To build the federal arrangements at a Devon wide level people from the embryo local Senior Council groups who were interested were invited to meet together in July 2007, and from that a Shadow Senior Council was established in September 2007. The Shadow Senior Council met four times and other smaller working groups undertook development work on areas such as the budget and the constitutional arrangements, bringing reports back to the Shadow Senior Council and to local Senior Council groups for consultation.

In January 2008 local Senior Councils each elected 2 representatives (four for Exeter because of its size) onto the county level body. At its final meeting in February 2008 these elected representatives came together for the final meeting of the Shadow Senior Council. They approved the constitutional arrangements for the Senior Council to be formed as a Company Limited by Guarantee with local groups/branches. They also approved the process for a Board of Directors and Officers to be elected from their number. The ballot was independently conducted by the Electoral Reform Society and the results announced at the first meeting of what has now been named the Senior Council Assembly in March 2008.

Since that time:

- Local Senior Council groups have met to approve their local constitution and to elect their local officers and Executive Committee members
- The Senior Council Board of Directors have met with the County Council and PCT to agree a budget and contract for an initial three year period
- An Administrator for the Senior Council has been appointed
- A range of other handover and development work has been undertaken including:

- Setting up financial and administrative systems for local Senior Council groups
- Identifying immediate training and support needs for local Senior Council groups in areas such as: charring meetings; IT; financial administration; publicity and public relations; and website management
- Developing Resource Packs for local Senior Council groups covering: governance; membership and administration; publicity and PR; local contacts and partners; policy issues and background demographic and other data about the Senior Council areas; guidance on areas such as running meetings and fund raising; and minutes of local meetings that have taken place in each Senior Council area
- The Senior Council has begun its work of taking up issues and responding to opportunities for consultation.
- Senior Council representatives are now being nominated onto different groups and partnership structures at both county and more local levels
- The Senior Council is conducting a series of local dialogues involving older people and senior health and social care managers on the County's first statement of strategy for older people "Ageing Well in Devon"
- The Senior Council is arranging a series of information fairs for local older people in accordance with its contract
- The County Council and the Devon PCT have agreed to make available to the Senior Council a single point of contact and support to aid their development.

## **5 The achievements**

There were a number of specific milestones in the contract for the development of the Senior Council, all of which have been achieved:

- A minimum of 800 older people involved in Link Age Plus and Senior Council consultation events
- A Shadow Senior Council established by September 2007
- The full Senior Council established, with constitution and legal structure by March 2008
- 800 members by end of June 2008

The Senior Council has now taken the place of AGILE (its predecessor) as the County's Older People's Advisory Group (OPAG).

Alongside the formal contract, the County Council and PFA signed a risk sharing agreement, in recognition that the development of the Senior Council

was a highly ambitious community development initiative, not only in terms of geographical spread, but also in terms of timescale and complexity.

The risk sharing agreement recognised that the County Council and PFA were mutually dependent on each other for the successful development of the SCfD, and that there were factors outside the control of both organisations, that might impact on the work (for example Local Government Re-organisation).

The risk sharing agreement agreed an additional target of setting up local Senior Council groups in 22 out of the 29 community planning areas in the county. By the end of the PFA contract (end of June 2008) Senior Council groups had been established in 25 out of the 29 areas.

Of these 29 areas local Senior Council groups are at different stages of evolution, with some 19 groups reasonably well established and 6 groups requiring further development work. All the groups are still relatively new and further capacity building work is planned.

The SCfD is now developing its role both at locality and county levels. This includes building partnership working and linking with key bodies. For example:

- At a county level the SCfD is now a member of the Devon Health and Well-being Partnership
- At a district level the two local SCfD groups for Okehampton and Tavistock are working with the West Devon Partnership
- At a local level the local Senior Council group in Barnstaple made contact with and has been invited to become a member of the Barnstaple Town Alliance

The SCfD is also now beginning to address a range of policy issues. For example:

- It responded at short notice for the call for evidence from the Parliamentary Inquiry into Services for Older People
- It is addressing county wide issues that affect people aged 50+ such as the published plans for post office closures
- Local Senior Council groups are picking up priority issues in their area. The Axminster group are working on getting a town bus in place by surveying local people and providing evidence for the County Council. The transport section have advised them on wording for the survey to get the information they need. The Axminster group also started a dialogue with Adult Education having invited a speaker to their group from DCC which is keen to work with them to identify gaps in adult education. The Holsworthy group are in correspondence with BT about concerns and implications of closure of payphones in rural communities

There have also been a number of broader achievements from the work. These include:

- The engagement of the Primary Care Trust (PCT) as partners. The PCT has publicly expressed its support for the Senior Council, is a co-signatory to the contract and is jointly funding the Senior Council with the County Council
- The development process of working with older people to identify issues which are central to the well-being and quality of life of older people in the county. of a Vision, Aims and Outcomes framework by older people themselves

Following the contract period, the Senior Council has taken responsibility for its own development (funded through its contract); it has added to its membership and is looking to strengthen the weaker areas.

## **6 The Learning**

There are a range of learning points from the development of the Senior Council. We have grouped these under themes.

### **6.1 Communicating the concept of a Senior Council**

A major challenge is how to communicate the concept of a Senior Council in a way that is meaningful to older people. In other areas where PFA has worked the development of an engagement model with older people is seen as part of a 3 pronged process, which aligns to the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) requirements for local government. The three aspects are:

- Building an overall quality of life and well-being strategy for older people
- Building an effective 'voice' for older people
- Building effective partnership structures to enable older people to engage as partners

The commitment to strategy development and partnership are key to giving a clear message to older people that it is worth investing their time on a voluntary basis in an initiative such as the Senior Council.

The experience in Devon highlighted the importance of linking these three elements together. Once the County Council and PCT made a public declaration of commitment to funding the SCfD and of working with it as partners to develop a strategy for an ageing population, at the 'Everyone's Tomorrow' conference in October 2007, it was much easier to get older people involved, and recruitment to the Senior Council accelerated.

In addition, the 'Everyone's Tomorrow' conference, had a further benefit in involving around 200 older people during the development phase of the Senior Council in defining the issues and priorities that were seen as important to people aged 50+ across the county. PFA had worked with a group of older people to pull together the issues from the consultation

meetings and Link Age Plus events into a Vision, Aims and Outcomes Framework which addressed different aspects of older people's quality of Life and Well-being. A draft was used at the conference as a starting point for discussion, and was refined afterwards to include the main comments at the conference. A copy is attached.

## **6.2 Membership: Who the Senior Council is for**

The Senior Council has tried to take an open approach to membership in order to get beyond the 'usual suspects'. The focus has been on encouraging anyone aged 50+ who is interested to be able to join as an individual member. They do not have to have had any other affiliation. Older people's groups can join as well but only have the same vote (one) as an individual, whether they have 10 members or 300. This has been important in attracting people aged 50+ who are not 'organisational' people but who would like to make a contribution as an individual.

A second way the Senior Council has tried to attract members is to make it clear that people can become involved and contribute in different ways, not just through coming to meetings, including:

- Receiving information about local services
- Taking part in consultation about local services
- Event/meeting attendance
- Helping support/run their local Senior Council
- Contributing your skills and time in other ways

## **6.3 Building a social inclusion approach**

A third focus in relation to membership and activity has been on promoting social inclusion and diversity. Part of the approach involved working with intermediary organisations who can support the engagement of hard to reach groups. This has been a very positive exercise, and we would recommend it as part of the approach for commissioning this type of engagement work. Below is a case study example looking at engaging Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) older people in the mainstream.



### Case Study – Engaging BME older people in the mainstream

PFA agreed a joint programme of activity and capacity building with people over 50 from the Muslim and Chinese communities using the Hikmat Centre to involve them in the Senior Council. The following milestones were achieved:

1. Participation by people over 50 from the BME communities in the Exeter LAP event. Hikmat staff provided individual translation when required.
2. Hikmat and PFA jointly ran a County wide training event to promote interest in the Senior Council from people over 50 from the BME communities. Over 25 people attended, talked about the issues that were important to them about growing older in Devon, and discussed the opportunity of taking part in the Senior Council.
3. Involvement of BME older people in the *Everyone's Tomorrow* conference. This achieved more integration of BME elders with more translators enabling Chinese older people, as well as Asian older people, to be in groups with other older people.
4. Subsequently some 30 people over 50 from the BME communities, mainly in Exeter have joined the Senior Council and become involved in the Exeter locality group. This reflects a higher proportion of BME membership than in the 50+ population as a whole in the county. This may become an exemplar to encourage BME older people, in other parts of Devon to access their local Senior Council Group.

Throughout this period the individual members from the Hikmat Centre becoming involved in the Senior Council have been supported by a network of members of their own ethnic group and specifically by support from the Hikmat Centre staff for translation and interpretation of papers, support to attend meetings and confidence and capacity building to participate in events. This work is part of a 10 week Hikmat development programme called Speaking Out. This involves learning English and a range of other things. The County Council funded Hikmat to support the involvement of people over 50 from BME communities in the Link Age Plus programme generally.

5. Discussion took place with Hikmat about how BME older people wanted to approach the issue of the elections for Elected Representative Members, and involvement in the county level structure (now called the Assembly) of the Senior Council for Devon. PFA were clearly told that BME older people want a mainstream approach to representation, rather than have specific places set aside for BME representatives. One BME SCfD member has been elected as one of the Assembly members for Exeter.

#### **6.4 Addressing the geographical challenge of a large rural shire county**

Earlier attempts to build an effective model of consultation and engagement with older people had only met with limited success mainly because it had been hard to get widespread geographical coverage. The Devon approach focused on building the Senior Council bottom up, based on natural communities - the 29 community planning areas covering the market and coastal towns and their rural hinterland, and the city of Exeter.

This has been by far the most ambitious attempt in England so far to build a consultation and engagement structure for older people in a rural shire county. Some other areas, such as Shropshire, have a structure based on district council areas which comes together at a county level. One or two shire counties such as East Sussex, have some areas where there are local groups at sub district level in parts of the county. However, Devon is the only county where a systematic attempt has been made to create a structure based around the market and coastal towns and their rural hinterland.

There are significant strengths to this approach:

- Older people in Devon identify with their local area and felt that a local structure for the Senior Council meant that they could address local issues
- There was more opportunity to reach out to people living in rural parts of the county. 51% of the Senior Council members live in rural areas as defined by DEFRA and nearly 22% of members live in villages and hamlets. Comparable data to compare this with the 50+ population as a whole is not available. However, using health data, approximately 57.8% of the general 50+ population in Devon as a whole live in rural areas. This is 6.8% higher than the rural membership of the Senior Council. So, although there is further work to do, the Senior Council has achieved considerable success in recruiting members in rural areas
- The network of local Senior Council groups has meant that when they come together at a county level in the Senior Council Assembly they can truly say they reflect all parts of the county. This has also proved true in the election of the Directors, who are spread across all 8 district council areas of Devon.

Although it is early days there are also some potential weaknesses in setting up such a geographically diverse structure:

- A large number of active volunteers are needed to lead and sustain 29 local Senior Council groups as well as an overall county structure. As at the end of June 2008 further development work is needed to ensure that all areas have an active and sustainable local group
- The communication and co-ordination role between 29 local groups and the overall Senior Council Assembly and Board of Directors is more complicated than if a smaller number of groups was involved

A further learning point during the development work had been to pull back from setting up a middle district council level of the Senior Council due to uncertainty about the implications of Local Government Re-organisation, and because of concern from older people about the time commitment of being involved in 3 levels of meetings (local, district and county). This highlights the importance of commissioners and contractors for this type of community development work being flexible as the work evolves and being able to adapt the original specification in the light of practical experience and learning on the ground.

### **6.5 Building partnerships and getting ownership**

The Senior Council was, at the beginning a Devon County Council initiative. A key aspect of the development work has been to build a wider set of partnerships as the work has evolved. This meant making contact with district, Town and Parish Councils, and with voluntary and third sector organisations. This work was led by PFA, with support from the County Council's Community Strategy Officers. Because of the short timescale involved in securing the funding from the DWP the county council had not been able to full engage potential partners before the development work started. It was sometimes difficult for PFA to play that representational role on the county council's behalf and a longer lead in time to enable the county council to have briefed partners would, in retrospect have been helpful. This work continues.

### **6.6 Timescale**

The development of the Senior Council was part of the Devon Link Age Plus (LAP) pilot programme. As such it had to be delivered within a specific time frame (21 months) related to the DWP funding for LAP. The main advantage of having a fixed timescale for the development work were that it gave a strong focus for delivering on the targets and outcomes within the defined period of the programme. It focused people's minds.

However, it was also a very short timescale against which to undertake a complex community development initiative. Considerable consultation did take place with the local groups during the development process (for example on what sort of legal status they wanted for the Senior Council, and on what core funding would be needed for it to succeed. Nevertheless, decisions were having to be reached at some points in the programme to hit the timetable targets when further debate (for example on the constitutional proposals) and consolidation might have been helpful. In addition, Members were having to vote for officers and directors/executive members at both county and local levels who they did not really know, and this caused some concern.

### **6.7 Practical learning points**

There have been a number of practical learning points coming out of the development process. These include:

- The potential of using the local media to publicise meetings
- Using bright symbols and posters to catch attention

- Keeping information clear and accessible and using minimum of 14pt typeface for ease of reading
- Using different coloured paper for different papers at meeting for ease of navigating through the agenda
- Making sure venues are accessible, that tables are shaped and spaced so that older people can see and hear each other, and that public address systems are used if numbers are large

## **7 Impact of the Senior Council**

It is too early to make any assessment of the long-term impact of the SCfD. This will need to come at a later stage after it has been in operation for the three years of the initial contract and funding.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that:

- People aged 50+ value the concepts of representation and partnership that the SCfD offers, though the test will be whether or not they see practical and tangible results from their involvement
- Staff from organisations such as the County Council and PCT value having a body of people aged 50+ to engage with through the SCfD, both to inform them about the quality and suitability of current services, and to bring fresh eyes and ideas to the table about priorities, service gaps and service models for the future

## **8 Commissioning similar development work**

The tender was won by a national independent research and consultancy organisation (Peter Fletcher Associates – PFA), against competition from local organisations. There was resentment from some voluntary organisations that the contract had not gone to a local organisation, though others were very welcoming and supportive the whole way through the development process.

The PFA team had some members based in Devon and others who lived elsewhere in England. Inevitably a totally Devon based development team would have had greater local knowledge and contacts to bring to bear to the commission. However, there was also a lot of older people who valued the neutrality and independence that PFA were able to bring to the work, that may have been more difficult for local contractors to demonstrate.

In addition, PFA were able to bring with them experience from working in other parts of the country, both of successful models of engaging older people, and of strategy development and partnership working that they were able to apply to the development work in Devon. There may be merits in the future of combining the different strengths and skills of national and local organisations in delivering such complex commissions in the future.

The existing Older People's Advisory Group in Devon (AGILE) was given the status of Co-Commissioners for the development of the Senior Council and the work was monitored through a Contract Monitoring Group. In practice it

was difficult for AGILE to play a dual role as both commissioners and development partners with PFA. There may be a case for splitting these roles in future commissions of this type.

## 9 Authorship and Acknowledgements

This report was authored by:

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We acknowledge the assistance and input of:

**The County Council Champion for Older People**  
**the AGILE Executive**  
**the founder members of the SCfD**  
**the PFA Associates who worked on the development programme<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Details of names are included in the overall programme report  
FINAL

## Devon Strategy for Older People and an Ageing Population

**Vision** To improve the Quality of Life for Older People and the wider population; and to promote sustainable communities which are healthy, active and which celebrate diversity

<b>Aim 1</b> Making a positive contribution	<b>Aim 2</b> Making the Third Age a Positive Opportunity	<b>Aim 3</b> Having financial stability and security	<b>Aim 4</b> Having an accessible environment and good accessibility to all aspects of community life	<b>Aim 5</b> Physical, mental and emotional health and well-being
<p><b>Outcome 1a</b> Older citizens are engaged in decision making as real partners</p> <p><b>Outcome 1b</b> Older people are valued, respected and free from discrimination</p> <p><b>Outcome 1c</b> Older people are engaged with younger people and promote understanding and communication between and quality of life for all generations</p> <p><b>Outcome 1d</b> Older people are sharing skills, having the opportunity to volunteer and contributing to community life</p>	<p><b>Outcome 2a</b> Older people have access to information and advice in different formats (including new technology) about opportunities and services in older age</p> <p><b>Outcome 2b</b> Older people will be able to access a range of affordable leisure, arts and learning opportunities</p> <p><b>Outcome 2c</b> Older people will have good social networks to combat social isolation</p>	<p><b>Outcome 3a</b> Older people have an adequate income</p> <p><b>Outcome 3b</b> Older people have the opportunity to work</p> <p><b>Outcome 3c</b> Older people have flexibility and support in preparing for retirement</p> <p><b>Outcome 3d</b> Older people will be able to positively manage their lives after retirement</p>	<p><b>Outcome 4a</b> Older people can get out and about easily and access affordable transport</p> <p><b>Outcome 4b</b> Older people will have affordable, decent, and appropriate accommodation and tenure choices and feel safe in their homes and communities</p> <p><b>Outcome 4c</b> Older people will have an accessible environment in older person friendly neighbourhoods</p> <p><b>Outcome 4d</b> Older people will be able to play a positive environmental protection role and have local access to recycling</p>	<p><b>Outcome 5a</b> Older people and family members and carers have access to honest and accurate advice and advocacy to provide information and support decision making</p> <p><b>Outcome 5b</b> Older people and carers can access a range of affordable, good quality health and care services</p> <p><b>Outcome 5c</b> Older people and carers can access a range of practical and preventative services that promote independence and physical, mental and emotional well-being</p>

### Principles to underpin delivery of the strategy

- Having a positive approach to life and older age, promoting the active involvement of older people as citizens in contributing to the life of their local community, and recognising and retaining the skills of older people
- Enabling older people to have control and make informed choices over the way they live their lives
- Ensuring mainstream services meet the needs and aspirations of older people
- Valuing the diversity of older people and addressing discrimination to ensure individual older people are treated with respect and have equality of opportunity
- Being concerned about quality of life across the board, not just about older people – seeking inter-generational understanding and mutual respect and not setting older people and other population groups such as young people apart
- Promoting ideas and solutions rather than just identifying problems
- Encouraging a voluntary ethos, but not as something that takes over statutory responsibilities
- Ensuring participation by older people in all that we do to deliver on the vision, aims and objectives
- Effective leadership to communicate, promote and deliver on the strategy