



Future of an Ageing Population: Meet the People Roundtable - Sunderland

16 September 2014

Context

As part of the evidence gathering for the Foresight Project on the Future of Ageing, Sir Mark Walport and the Lead Expert Group are undertaking a programme of visits around the UK. The first of these visits was to Sunderland on 16 September. This roundtable was organised in partnership with VOICENorth.

Meeting

The aim of the roundtable was for Sir Mark Walport and Professor Paul Boyle (a member of the Lead Expert Group) to discuss with older people in the North East the key challenges, opportunities and visions of their current and future life. The attendee list is at Annex A.

Discussion: Key themes

The issues discussed by attendees are summarised below.

Vital contributors:

- Many older people are keen to remain active and contribute positively to society. Harnessing their mental capital will be crucial in achieving this.
- There is a need to embed a more positive image of the older population. This should emphasise the contribution of older people to the family, society and younger workforce, and the value of their life experience and skills.
- Many older people volunteer their time to organisations and initiatives. This delivers benefits to both the community and to themselves.
- Older people greatly value access to affordable lifelong learning and education opportunities and feel that these should be supported wherever possible. It is important to recognise that older people have a range of learning style preferences. This includes learning in a group.

Being alone and being lonely:

- Being alone, as an individual or with your partner, is not necessarily problematic. It may on occasion be desirable. Being lonely is a different matter.
- There is a balance to be struck between maintaining independence (which might include living alone) and building social inclusion (to avoid people being lonely).
- Older people's access to carers, support services, or a network is essential. Many initiatives bring together like-minded older people. Some older people would value greater opportunities to connect with people of all ages.
- The "Five Ways to Wellbeing", developed as part of the GO Science Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing report, is a useful tool to help individuals improve their mental resilience.

Technology:

- Technology and infrastructure are crucial enablers of independent living. For example, ubiquitous passive sensors in the home and elsewhere can inform the delivery of care and provide support for people with declining mental and physical capacity.
- As the end-users of many technologies, it is important to involve older people in the design and development of new technologies and or their applications.

Housing:

- There is potential to better 'age-proof' housing by building in facilities that benefit families at all stages of the life-course. For example, a downstairs wet room may be useful for washing muddy children as well as older people who might find climbing stairs a challenge.
- Requiring new build properties to have supportive facilities designed-in would be a better long-term investment than continually having to adapt existing housing stock.

Life-course:

- Policies and initiatives to support people's transition into older age and their financial and health resilience should take a life-course approach. For example, on-going five-yearly health checks by the NHS was suggested as might usefully detect health problems early, and supporting school children to develop personal resilience and recognise the importance of social cohesion and caring for neighbours could pay dividends in their later life.

Transition into older age:

- To best plan for and make the most of their retirement, adults need access to information across a range of issues that relate to life in older age (for example, on financial and healthcare services and support). Some older people, in particular those with poor community links, can often struggle to access this information.
- Central government, local government, and employer organisations were identified as some of the sectors that could better coordinate the provision of information. For example, information and advice on healthcare, part time work and volunteering opportunities could usefully be circulated with correspondence to people approaching State Pension Age.

Central and local government:

- Central government was identified as having a responsibility to help change negative public perceptions of life as an older adult and prepare people for the different stages of older life.
- The growth of the "Dementia Friends" scheme by the Alzheimer's Society was highlighted as an example of a government-funded initiative that has delivered benefits nationally.
- Local authorities also have a responsibility to provide support to older adults within their area. There are many examples of local successful initiatives aimed at older people, however, these are often not sufficiently scaled to national level, or even shared within and between localities. Part of the challenge in this may include a difficulty in integrating services and in identifying organisations which would be best placed to facilitate the co-ordination of multiple services.

Annex A: Roundtable attendees

Name	Organisation
Mark Walport (chair)	Government Chief Scientific Adviser, Government Office for Science
Paul Boyle	Leicester University
Lynne Corner	Newcastle University
Jim Edwardson	VOICENorth
Don Pinchbeck	VOICENorth
Pamela Denham	VOICENorth
Ian Fairclough	VOICENorth
James Herbert	VOICENorth
Rima Karam	VOICENorth
Irene Soulsby	VOICENorth
June Elsom	VOICENorth
Sue Sinton	VOICENorth
Maureen Tinsley	VOICENorth
Jan Lawson	VOICENorth
Pat Johnson	VOICENorth
Irene Oxnard	VOICENorth
Alan Gowers	VOICENorth
Eric Landau	VOICENorth
Stephen Bennett	Government Office for Science
Jon Parke	Government Office for Science
Nitharna Sivarajah	Government Office for Science