

Consultation response

Ref 1112

Communities and Local Government Committee inquiry - Councillors and the community

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The Communities and Local Government Committee is conducting an inquiry into the role councillors play in their communities. The inquiry will cover a range of aspects of a councillor's role. Age UK has a particular interest in the aspect of this inquiry focusing on the role of councillors as leaders of communities and neighbourhoods.

Key points and recommendations

Age UK believes that understanding and acting on the views and needs of older people is central to any councillor's role. They are in a position to challenge the council's decision making and service planning and initiate change that meets the needs of older people in their ward. We believe they should:

- Make time to listen to older people
- Make change happen to improve older people's quality of life
- Make an ongoing commitment to keep people involved.

Role of councillors as leaders of communities and neighbourhoods

Meeting the needs and expectations of people in later life, within a climate of reduced public spending, presents a significant challenge for councils. Councillors should understand and act upon the views of older people in their community. However, an Age UK survey in 2011 found that only a third (35%) of respondents agreed that councillors are working to benefit older people. Councillors should do more to challenge the council's decision making and service planning and initiate change that meets the needs of older people in their ward.

Better council services

Older people expect better council services. Councillors will be aware that care and support services have faced unprecedented challenges as a result of budget pressures and continued increases in demand. Age UK analysis shows that in 2011-12 there was a reduction in spending on older people's social care of £341 million, or 4.5 percent since 2010-11. Taking into account growth in demand over the same period, this has led to a £500 million gap in fundingⁱ.

This has resulted in the reduction in the breadth of council care provision and increase in the charges that councils make for care services. DCLG and NHS Information Centre data show that, in real terms, charges were £360 more in 2010-11 than in 2008-09 for each older person using local authority care servicesⁱⁱ. These quotes show the significant impact this will have on the lives of older citizens:

"I found that [during] weekends [my father] would not be dressed and got out of bed, as that was when they have staff shortages [in the care home]"

"It became apparent that you needed to be on death's door before even being considered and we were even told that had Mum lived in a different borough, she would probably have received funding."

Older people's needs and views also need to be considered across the range of council decisions, whereas there may be a tendency for councillors and officials to consider their needs only in relation to services such as care. The majority of older people will not be receiving care services. They will however be using services across the range of council provision such as housing, leisure and adult education which keeps them active and independent.

Better neighbourhoods

At a neighbourhood level all ward councillors have the opportunity to improve places for older people. For many older people, lack of good quality support and infrastructure within the neighbourhoods acts as a barrier that prevents them from being active locally. In a survey 52 per cent of respondents agreed that the lack of public toilets in their area stopped them from going out as often as they would like.ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly poor pavements, a lack of places to sit down and poor access to local services act to isolate older people.

Age friendly neighbourhoods are communities that offer a good quality of life to all generations. That means accessible and inclusive design; environments which are aesthetically pleasing, safe and easy to inhabit; good local services, facilities and open spaces; a strong social and civic fabric, with opportunities to take part and have a voice; and a real sense of local identity and place.

As ward representatives, councillors have both the electoral mandate and the local knowledge to bring about positive change. This role can go much wider than any formal responsibilities or portfolio they may have within the council to cement the strong link between the councillor and their older electors.

What can councillors do?

Age UK believes councillors should:

- Make time to listen to older people
- Make change happen to improve older people's quality of life
- Make an ongoing commitment to keep people involved.

Time to listen

Councillors should make sure older people have their voices heard. As the first level of elected representation, councillors have a responsibility to their electors and are in a position to hear the views of a wide range of older people in their ward. While some councillors will meet with older people through groups or surgeries, this is not happening consistently and often focuses on a minority of active older people.

It is particularly concerning that people aged over 75 are less likely to feel they can influence decisions that affect them locally than any other age group^{iv}. In addition, an Age UK survey found that more than half of people aged over 60 (54%) say they have never had any contact with their local councillors. Although this is a better response than for other age groups (75% of those aged between 16-24 and 69% of those aged between 25-59 have never had any contact) this is not a good record for local representatives.

On the other hand, the same survey found that when older people do have contact with their councillors, they are generally satisfied with the outcome (65% satisfied) and they are significantly more satisfied than younger people (57% aged 16-59 are satisfied).

There is an opportunity here to make sure older people's views are taken into account. Councillors should consider and find ways to overcome the barriers to older people getting more involved. There is a variety of ways of meeting people who may not come to traditional meetings or surgeries, such as holding joint surgeries in GPs or a local Age UK or holding a ward walk (see case study 1) to make sure they hear the experience of a wide range of older people.

Case study 1:

Councillors Jim Beall and Barbara Inman of Stockton Borough Council do regular 'ward walkabouts' to share local intelligence and to identify problems. As much as possible, they aim to solve problems on the spot – making a note of broken pavements and kerbs that need repairing, for example. The walkabouts involve officers from the council's Care for your area, antisocial behaviour and enforcement services; the local neighbourhood police; the housing provider; and the residents' association.

Initiate change

Local ward councillors are ideally placed to play a leadership and co-ordinating role for their communities and neighbourhoods. They have both the knowledge of the local area and will have contact with some of the main players involved (inside and outside the council), plus the electoral mandate for action.

Take the example of older people's concern about the lack of public transport to the local hospital. To improve the situation this could involve a private bus company, the county and or a district council, the hospital, the PCT cluster, or a community transport provider. The solution will depend on local circumstances and negotiating the best response for local people.

Councillors should be able to work with residents to identify opportunities to influence decisions. They will also know potential resources that are available or be able to help find new local solutions (for example see case study 2).

Case study 2:

A ward councillor in a rural village in the north of England, recognised that the physical environment can play a major role in encouraging activity and well-being and that making an environment more sympathetic to the needs of older people can prevent injury and social exclusion. The area has the highest proportion of older people in the council area.

The councillor persuaded first the Town Council and latterly the unitary council to embark on a radical transformation of the village, which would benefit older people. He was responsible for raising the £3.8 million and leading the transformation programme.

The councillor ensured the formation of a Disability Advisory Group for the project. The group had direct involvement in the design features and changes. There was also a public exhibition, which sought feedback in order to listen to older residents and resolve their concerns and needs.

The transformation of the village centre has increased the footfall and includes features that are beneficial to older residents. For instance, in the street different levels and trip hazards have been removed; more seating has been provided; and road speed reductions have been achieved by design and engineering.

Ongoing commitment

A councillor's role in their community is not a one-off occurrence. There needs to be an ongoing commitment to keep people involved and support their needs. One frustration commonly voiced about engagement with councils is that things do not change or that people never hear what happened in response to their views.

Through our Pride of Place campaign Age UK has been working with local councillors to improve neighbourhoods for people in later life. Over 200 councillors have committed to be advocates for older people from their ward and have committed to an ongoing dialogue with people in later life.

Councillors that took part in Age UK's Pride of Place project identified a range of actions that they would do differently that relate to listening to older people, communicating with other councillors, improving links with other organisations and practical activities – see comments below^v.

Pride of Place: Councillors' response to what they will do differently as advocates for older people

Give more attention to identifying hard to reach older people's groups.

Be more aware of needs of older residents (& need to think specifically about them) in terms of my council work and services council provides

Communicate what I've learnt to other councillors.

I plan to publicise the Pride of Place scheme within my local council and hopefully encourage fellow elected members to join the scheme.

More local ward work & contacts with older people's organisations.

Go and learn/find out what is happening, what is needed and go out and work hard to make a difference.

Will carry on and be more on the look out to do some things that I have learnt about today.

Try to give more priority to involvement with issues for ageing people both as a resource and also in terms of improvement of the environment.

ⁱ Care in Crisis 2012, Age UK, January 2012

ⁱⁱ Care in Crisis 2012, Age UK, January 2012

ⁱⁱⁱ Public toilets study, Help the Aged, 2006

^{iv} Agenda for Later Life 2012. Age UK, 2012

^v Pride of Place Evaluation, Age UK, 2012