

Creating a stronger information, advice and advocacy system for older people

Solutions
Lessons for policy
and practice

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What's the issue?

Choice and control for older people is at the heart of current change to the adult social care system. Yet the information, advice and advocacy services older people need to remain independent are often limited, come without adequate support, and fail to take their experiences and ideas into account.

What are the problems?

- Getting this information, and then the advice and advocacy that might be necessary to support this, can be difficult. Information in itself is not enough. Older people clearly state that they often need more than 'signposting': they also need guidance and support.
- Older people need to be involved in the development of services to ensure their needs and aspirations are met.

Ways forward

- **Involve older people** in meaningful ways and ensure their views are fed into decisions on information, advice and advocacy.
- **Enable change** by building in dedicated officer time so that necessary development work in this area is not neglected.
- **Partner with 'not the usual suspects'** such as local transport providers to ensure that the whole system is looked at, not just one part in isolation. Continuous dialogue is key to the success of these partnerships.
- **Consider what is known already** about what older people and carers want and need.
- **Establish a common dataset** of up-to-date information that older people, carers and staff can access.
- **Provide opportunities for frontline staff to learn from each other** to support their critical role in giving information and advice to older people.
- **Learn from other areas.** Many local authority areas are facing similar issues connected with the ageing population.
- **Agree on issues to be addressed** by listening to older people and linking to opportunities provided by local and national policy.

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The case for change

Access to information and support is an important issue for older people. Too often, getting information, advice and advocacy can be difficult. More work is needed to give older people the personalised help they have asked for to remain independent.

Evidence shows that:

- Older people place a higher value on information than other groups. Getting hold of good, accurate information can help older people stay independent and in control of their lives. This is especially true if they need to navigate complicated systems to receive essential support and services.
- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) report Older People's Inquiry into 'That Bit of Help' (Raynes, et al., 2006), provides strong evidence of older people's needs and the solutions they value. Evidence collected in Newcastle highlights the need for information, advice and advocacy. This situation is likely to be similar in other areas.
- Government policy increasingly recognises the importance of information. By 2011 all councils in England will be expected to have made significant progress towards putting in place 'universal, joined-up information and advice for all individuals and carers, including those who self-assess and fund.' Putting People First, the Government's vision for transforming adult social care, places people at the heart of the services they want and need.
- An emphasis on universal access to services, together with the national programme to transform adult social care, is providing real opportunities to listen to the views of older people and incorporate them into the development of services.

Case study

Mr and Mrs A had problems with benefits, physical health and memory, with no family or carers to support them. Other issues became apparent once they had met with an information and advice worker. They weren't in receipt of their full benefit entitlement. They were living in a cold house, unsure how to work the central heating and had difficulties with meal preparation and housework.

The right information and advice improved their quality of life dramatically. They were warm and comfortable in their own home. They were able to make informed decisions about a move to sheltered accommodation of their own choice. They were reassured that support would be provided during the moving process. And they were able to cope financially and felt able to continue living independently for a while longer.

Possible ways forward

In response to a fragmented system for older people, JRF supported work by the Quality of Life Partnership in Newcastle to develop a more strategic approach to information, advice and advocacy. Older people have been instrumental in determining what is needed and how it can be achieved locally. Instead of creating projects and new services, the focus has been on ways of working and how existing systems can be made more 'older person friendly', efficient, and effective for all concerned. This emphasis on **system change** is especially pertinent in the **current pressurised economic situation**.

Evidence from the Newcastle programme has enabled JRF to identify key ways of working towards a better system of information, advice and advocacy for older people. Other local authority areas can learn from and replicate these ideas.

Involve older people

The involvement of older people is an implicit feature of the Quality of Life Partnership. Newcastle has a well-established older people's forum, the Elders Council, to help facilitate this. A variety of processes designed to suit different personalities are used to gather the views of other older people, including more isolated groups such as housebound older people and elders from Black and Minority Ethnic communities.

Examples include facilitated events (where older people are invited to discuss specific topics), informal drop-in sessions like the Elders Council's programme of 'Older and Wiser' information days, and general outreach work when staff and volunteers visit older people to talk about issues important to them.

The critical point is to ensure that engagement is meaningful, by feeding older people's views into necessary decision-making structures and checking responses as part of a two-way process.

Build in additional capacity to enable change

Support from JRF helped develop the capacity necessary to address issues relating to information, advice and advocacy for older people in Newcastle. It also helped provide a framework for responding to older people's views.

Even when there are constraints on resources there are funders in every area who have a vested interest in success, especially when work is part of the bigger picture. Newcastle's Adult and Culture Services Directorate also made a contribution from their Social Care Transformation Grant to enable other voluntary sector staff to use their experiences.

Without dedicated officer time to drive development work of this kind, it can be seen as an add-on. An overview of the whole local system is key to ensuring that solutions are coordinated and meaningful for both older people and the agencies involved.

Develop more effective partner engagement

'Partnership working' has been cited in policy documents for years. On a day-to-day basis, it can feel more complex and time-consuming than working in isolation. However, taking a coordinated approach does help. Thinking of older people's needs and aspirations, rather than just the constraints of each agency, is challenging but much more beneficial.

In line with *Everyone's Tomorrow: The Strategy for Older People and an Ageing Population in Newcastle Upon Tyne*, Newcastle's Older People's Strategic Board created a group to take forward work on information, advice and advocacy. Membership of the group mirrors that of the Older People's Strategic Board, with additional representation from the City Council Customer Service Centres and the Libraries' Service due to their roles in providing information and advice. This has facilitated the multi-agency cooperation essential for development work and created willingness from partners to contribute towards this work.

However, it is important to recognise that partnership working is more than just multi-agency meetings. It is about continuous dialogue and the process of understanding need, developing priorities, planning and delivering together. This process can also be used for the development of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) and influencing more effective joint commissioning.

Consider what is known already

The JRF report of the Older People's Inquiry into *That Bit of Help* (Raynes, et al., 2006) provides strong evidence about the needs of older people and the solutions they value. It showed how older people, planners and services could work together to identify practical solutions that older people valued.

Many local authority areas will have access to information about what *local* older people and carers want and need. This may be held centrally, for example from formal consultation processes, or by a number of organisations and networks.

In Newcastle, evidence from older people highlights the need for information, advice and advocacy. This situation is likely to be similar in other areas. Locally, this evidence and the consultation process to develop *Everyone's Tomorrow* led to 'Older people accessing information, advice and advocacy' becoming an aim of the strategy in its own right.

Establish a common dataset

A central database of information that older people, carers and staff can access is key to ensuring universal access to information and advice. Without it, the issue of needing up-to-date information will simply recur.

Information NOW (Newcastle Older People's Website) was developed by the Quality of Life Partnership in response to a recommendation in the Peter Fletcher Associates' report *That little bit of help*. Crucially, the website is written from the perspective of older people, rather than from a service perspective.

Another critical element of Information NOW is that it's up-to-date, which requires dedicated capacity. If the information is not accurate, it will quickly lose credibility. If capacity is limited, it is better to have a small, quality website that can be maintained. Recognising that not all older people have internet access, the process of reaching out to older people through networks of agency staff has been an important part of the promotion. The website is supported by links with key groups of frontline staff who can access the information on behalf of older people, or to support their own role. Briefings have been carried out with a range of staff including hospital matrons, district nurses, social workers, librarians, care home activity co-ordinators, customer service centre staff, sheltered housing officers, and Citizens Advice Bureau volunteers.

The Information NOW website is a well-used and reputable source of information. Data on its usage provides useful evidence about older people's information needs. It has received commendations in two national awards and positive feedback from users.

Provide opportunities for frontline staff to learn from each other

The role of frontline staff in giving information and advice to older people is critical, and there is a need for more opportunities to share their experiences and knowledge.

A network of staff (from voluntary and community sector organisations and statutory agencies) and older people in the city (including those who volunteer with relevant services) was developed in Newcastle to ensure that everyone can have a say and contribute towards effecting change.

The network meets twice a year. It's a chance to gather important feedback on real-life situations from frontline staff and older people. Organisations that don't normally meet can also make contact, contributing to improved coordination of services.

Learn from other areas

There is huge scope to learn from others about developing information, advice and advocacy for older people. Many areas are facing the same issues connected with the ageing population and are trying to address them in the best way possible. Evidence collected through initiatives such as LinkAge Plus and Partnerships for Older People Projects provide valuable learning.

Nottinghamshire County Council's experience with its 'First Contact' signposting scheme (see reference, Peter Fletcher report) and knowledge accrued by the national Older People's Advocacy Alliance have contributed towards sessions with staff in Newcastle which have particularly informed this work.

Develop agreement on the issues to be worked on

Using the mechanisms described above and focusing on the voice of older people helps to prioritise issues. National and local policy can also influence this, as it makes sense to work on areas where there is opportunity to make progress and effect real change.

Examples from practice

Putting these principles into practice, the Quality of Life Partnership in Newcastle focused on developing the following:

Frontline staff

Frontline staff are sometimes the only contact an older person has and an essential source of information and advice. But they may not realise the importance of their signposting role and the fact they can improve a person's quality of life by simply passing on the right information. Therefore, these workers need continuous professional development.

One tangible piece of work in this area is the development of a multi-agency signposting scheme, similar to 'First Contact' in Nottinghamshire, which enables older people to access preventive services through a single point of contact. When a staff member from any of the partner agencies visits someone at home, they complete a checklist to find out if the older person has any particular needs for services such as a fire safety check, advice on money entitlements, signposting to local groups or support to prevent falls. Responses to the checklist are fed back to one central point of contact, who coordinates referrals to partner organisations. A representative from those organisations then contacts the older person directly.

This way of working fits well with national policy changes and is cited as a project within the local Adult Services Transformation Programme.

A workshop was arranged for frontline staff and older people with officers from Nottinghamshire County Council to obtain views on whether a similar scheme would be successful in Newcastle. It was agreed that it could work locally and a pilot is being developed.

Advocacy

Advocacy is a term that is often referred to in conjunction with information and advice. However, advocacy can have different meanings for different people.

- Advocacy with a small 'a' is the support which it is hoped staff provide alongside information and advice: empowering older people and encouraging them to have their own voice. This is a skill which effective recruitment, training and support can encourage.
- Advocacy with a capital 'A' is considered to be the provision of a specific independent advocacy service. There are clear roles, responsibilities and partnerships that ensure that someone's voice is heard, either by speaking for them or supporting them so they can speak up for themselves. As this is about service provision, there are distinct areas to be worked on including the critical issue of funding, and the support that commissioners and providers need to enable effective commissioning.

This programme's development work on Advocacy involved tracking the learning of a provider organisation (Newcastle Advocacy Centre); working with other organisations that have some form of advocacy role; and using the mechanisms outlined above to identify local issues. A workshop was also organised with the Older People's Advocacy Alliance to support Newcastle's strategic direction and give a comprehensive overview of the rapidly changing national picture of advocacy for older people.

There is a real need for investment in the provision of Advocacy for older people in Newcastle. In fact, Advocacy provision needs to be addressed across all groups in the local area. This is partly due to unmet need and partly to the profile given to Advocacy by documents such as the Government concordat *Putting People First: A shared vision and commitment to the transformation of Adult Social Care*. Therefore, this work is now concentrating on contributing towards the development of Newcastle's Advocacy Commissioning Strategy, to ensure that services for older people are part of a coordinated city-wide approach.

Housing information and advice

Older people often need someone to help them through the complexities of moving house, regardless of tenure. This includes emotional support, as well as help with practicalities. There is a huge unmet need for this kind of service, and a gap that has been highlighted time and time again in Newcastle.

This evidence has informed the work of Newcastle's Strategic Housing Directorate, including their development of a local Older Person's Accommodation Strategy which will include a theme on housing information and advice. This work has also contributed to a successful bid from the local authority for national funding to pilot housing information and advice capacity within the local Home Improvement Agency, Anchor Staying Put. This will hopefully trial some of the ideas suggested by older people.

Support in a crisis (and complex needs)

In Newcastle, as in other areas, there is a high demand for intense and often complex casework with older people. In these circumstances, no single agency can deal with all the issues; yet someone needs to coordinate and work sensitively and appropriately with the older person. Often, services providing these roles are based within the voluntary and community sector. Whilst they are valued by statutory partners, they are not formally recognised or supported as mainstream provision and therefore have short-term funding and vulnerable infrastructures. Older people have reported the problems that this lack of sustainability can cause, with staff inconsistencies and the insecurity of available services. At the same time, demand for these valuable services is increasing. They must be developed and sustained.

Bearing in mind financial restrictions and the fact that capacity can't be increased indefinitely, multi-agency work is also identifying what support older people need in a crisis whilst exploring how crises can be prevented. Some services have reported that a significant percentage of the older people needing their support have somehow 'slipped through the net' and that their crisis could have been prevented by changes to the system, or if extra (often more informal) support was given at certain trigger stages.

Early indicators show there are also problems with access to services and the reluctance of some older people to accept help and engage with services. Much of this links with 'Joining the Dots' in Newcastle, an initiative developed by the Quality of Life Partnership to bring together services and support for older people in the community. 'Joining the Dots' involves providing better information and advice, and building links between GP practices, intermediate care and community-based activity with 'link-people' and volunteers.

Conclusion

The history of older people's involvement in decision-making and the position, role and credibility of the Quality of Life Partnership has meant that there is a strong foundation on which to build development work in Newcastle. This has been crucial to engage both statutory and voluntary sector agencies and develop solutions that they are able to support.

Delivering change is not just about developing new services. It is equally, if not more, important to change services where they are failing to meet people's needs. Listening to older people's experiences and ideas, and nurturing relationships with key agencies so that these can be incorporated into developments, are two strong components of an approach which is truly working towards better information, advice and advocacy for older people.

Before attempting to work in this way it is vital to:

- **Invest in processes so that older people have a variety of ways of sharing their views and experiences.** This takes time but pays dividends. Using older people's feedback to design ways of working and services around their needs helped to provide perspective and gave priority to issues that would have the greatest impact.
- **Persuade local partners that information and advice is not an add-on to the day job.** It is the day job. The emphasis on the importance of this in national policy certainly helps this process.
- **Understand that partnership working is much more difficult, complex and time-consuming than working in isolation.** It involves continuous dialogue and an iterative process of understanding need, developing priorities, and action planning/ delivering together.
- **Realise that some issues may need to be addressed across all age groups.** Work with older people may have to wait until the whole system has been put in order.

About the programme

Newcastle's Quality of Life Partnership was established in 2004, bringing together Age Concern Newcastle, the Elders Council, Newcastle Healthy City, and Newcastle City Council. In 2008, support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation helped the Quality of Life Partnership take on new partners and begin a programme of work to develop information, advice and advocacy for older people.

There are often concerns about sustaining this kind of work, but there are strong factors in favour of this programme. Firstly, it coincides with a significant shift in local authority thinking towards the importance of information, advice and advocacy in promoting older people's independence. Secondly, the work implements one of the five aims of Newcastle's strategy for older people and an ageing population, which contributes towards delivery of the Local Area Agreement between the City Council and Central Government.

As a direct result of the success of this programme, Claire Horton, previously Strategic Development Worker at the Quality of Life Partnership and author of this report, has a new role. She is now managing the Adult Transformation Programme project on Information and Advice on behalf of Newcastle Adult & Culture Services Directorate – building on her work with older people by widening the remit to include all vulnerable adults.

About this paper

This overview is based on the strategic information, advice and advocacy development programme of the Quality of Life Partnership in Newcastle upon Tyne from 2008 to 2009.

It also draws on the following evidence:

Dunning, A. (2005) *Information, advice and advocacy for older people: Defining and developing services*. York: JRF

Gilroy, R. (2005) 'Meeting the Information Needs of Older People: A Challenge for Local Governance', *Local Government Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 39-51

HM Government (2007) *Putting People First. A shared vision and commitment to the transformation of adult social care*. London: The Stationery Office

Peter Fletcher Associates (2004) *"that little bit of help" – building quality of life for older people in Newcastle*

Raynes, N., Clark, H. & Beecham, J (2006) *The report of the Older People's Inquiry into 'That Bit of Help'*. York: JRF

Strong and Prosperous Communities – Local Government White Paper, 2006

Everyone's Tomorrow – The Strategy for Older People and an Ageing Population in Newcastle upon Tyne, 2007

Putting People First: A shared vision and commitment to the transformation of Adult Social Care, 2007

For more information about this work, contact Claire Horton at claire.horton@qualityoflife.org.uk, or on 0191 255 1983.

Seeing it our way': taking an older people's approach to the strategic development of information, advice and advocacy in Newcastle upon Tyne by Peter Fletcher Associates is available on the JRF website at: www.jrf.org.uk

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