



Working in partnership with Age UKs in the South East



Our Ageing Society: Challenges or Opportunities for Business?

Challenging business to rise to the 'huge opportunities' presented by our ageing society: that was the subject of a Symposium held at the Palace of Westminster on Monday 20th March 2017. The event was organised by the South East England Forum on Ageing (SEEFA) as part of a wider project with South East Age UKs.

70 people attended the Symposium which was chaired by David Brindle, public services editor at The Guardian, and hosted by Lord Filkin, Chair of the Centre for Ageing Better. The debate was informed by representatives of the Institute of Customer Service, Mature Marketing Association, International Longevity Centre, National Innovation Centre for Ageing and from a range of other experts in design, marketing, customer service and later life.

Kicking off the debate, SEEFA Chair Peter Dale presented the views of older consumers as reported by the SEEFA Policy Panel - people who by virtue of their own life experiences are experts on later life - and in other feedback received as part of the wider project. Older people have a sense of being overlooked, with a particular bias towards the younger leisure market. Businesses may think they are catering for an older market but they tend to deal in stereotypes, with marketing depictions of older consumers as 'figures of fun' and technology driven by young designers rather than harnessed to older people's needs. The key underlying issue is society's negative attitudes to ageing which is why SEEFA and the new national EngAgeNet forum are promoting a new narrative on ageing.

Participants heard that 43 pence in every pound is spent by older people and this despite their propensity to be savers rather than spenders. Challenges to business in making the most of this market opportunity were seen to include:

- Overcoming an 'us and them, coolness of youth' business culture.
- Lack of impact at board level of longer term market analysis and the significance of good customer care.
- Workforce age imbalance and a failure to capitalise on intergenerational learning within companies.
- Not getting customers, including older customers, involved in the design of products and services ('co-production') to really understand individual needs.
- Not getting technology to work together ('interoperability'): as a simple example, having lots of different handsets for different devices.
- Failures of understanding and imagination e.g. utilitarian things being unattractive or communication aids being seen as 'you're spying on me'.
- Poor communication about available goods and services, including with carers who often get their loved ones things they never use.

In contrast, examples were identified where business is responding well: gyms around the country highly focused on the older user; Lakeland's 'brilliantly designed' products or easy to wire plugs from B & Q; Sun Life's £23 million 50 plus marketing campaign; 33 building societies which have moved from an age- to a risk-based approach to lending, embracing borrowers aged 80 plus; the Ford Focus which was not marketed particularly to older customers but was so well designed through responding to their requirements that it became a market leader.

Participants embraced the idea of 'age friendly businesses' having been inspired by the example of Monaghan Council in Ireland whose Age Friendly Business Programme had challenged local businesses to commit to practical improvements which could be as simple as a local café offering to butter scones for people with dexterity problems. There was also support for the view that what we are after is simply 'good design' rather than design just for older people: for example, Able Label clothes designed firstly to be stylish but also to suit anyone with dexterity problems.

Housing was seen as an area for particular focus, whether in terms of mixed age developments, design of lifelong housing or support for downsizing or housing co-operatives. Local planning requirements, national fiscal incentives and the relevant Institutes should have important roles to play here, with Lord Filkin (as an ex-town planner himself) committing to lead the charge on this.

More generally, opportunities should be seized to influence national and local strategies, whether through participating in the current Housing White Paper consultation or through local old people's networks influencing local authorities and health commissioners.

The Institute of Customer Service offered to broker board level dialogues with business on the themes from the Symposium and offers of collaboration were made by the National Innovation Centre for Ageing and the Mature Marketing Association.

Drawing together participants' ideas for action, Peter Dale thanked the speakers, panellists and all the participants and said that:

- The debate had reinforced the need for the new narrative on ageing to be promoted by SEEFA, EngAgeNet and partners such as South East Age UKs.
- SEEFA would promote and support the offers of both leadership and collaboration which had been made.
- SEEFA and EngAgeNet partners would promote local dialogues with business networks and government organisations through local older people's networks.
- A report on the wider project with South East UKs would be produced and disseminated.

SEEFA is the South East England Forum on Ageing. Our aim is to bring people together to influence later life strategies, policies and services to make life better for current and future generations of older people. SEEFA's Policy Panel aims to work with policy makers, service providers and planners to actively engage with them to make later life better now and in the future.

Age UK in the South East comprises a network of independent charities working locally in the community to provide services and activities to inspire, enable and support older people. Age UK's vision is for a world where everyone can love later life.