

Having Our Say on Information and Advice

Information & advice for an ageing society was the subject of a Symposium held at the Palace of Westminster on Thursday 1st November 2018. The event was organised by the South East England Forum on Ageing (SEEFA) as part of a wider project with South East Age UKs.

60 people attended the Symposium which was hosted by Lord Filkin and chaired by David Brindle, Public Services Editor at The Guardian. The debate was informed by representatives of South East England Councils, NHS England and Public Health England, Shared Lives Plus, Think Local Act Personal, Care & Repair England, Nextdoor UK and a range of other experts in information & advice and later life.

Opening the debate, Lord Filkin, Chair of the Centre for Ageing Better, said that good information & advice is important at all stages of life. SEEFA Executive member Nick Wilson presented views from the SEEFA Policy Panel - experts by virtue of their own life experiences. While a vast range of information & advice is available, finding what you need is challenging, and navigating service pathways is confusing. People want:

Information & advice which is timely, accessible, good quality, collaborative in delivery, independent, impartial and, above all, trustworthy.

Barriers to achieving this, identified during the Symposium, were seen as including:

- Information & advice being designed from the point of view of service providers rather than service users, so being narrowly defined and not always trustworthy.
- Resource restrictions leading to narrow interpretations of local authorities' information & advice duties under the Care Act.
- The difficulty for information sources in keeping up with the fast changing face of public services.
- Providers working in silos without sufficient knowledge of other sources, or of people's 'whole person' needs - for example, health without reference to housing.
- Negative assumptions about older people's needs as just a safety net for the weak and frail: ***'older people have a future'!***
- Lack of recognition of the **'huge cost benefits'** of good information and advice, for example in preventing hospital admissions, as evidenced by Care & Repair England.
- People's reluctance to plan ahead particularly in younger age groups, however desirable forward planning ('thinking older, earlier') may be.
- Difficulty in predicting future care costs and responsibilities: not just the practicalities but also the emotional challenges.
- The sheer diversity of the older population's needs and aspirations, requiring **'personalisation as well as universality'**.
- The 'digital divide' with as many as one fifth of 65 year olds not using the internet.

But, in a lively and very positive debate, Symposium participants identified an even longer list of

opportunities to work together towards ‘**a shared goal of achieving a good life**’ by:

- Seeing information & advice as **essential**, ‘**like clean water**’, to good health and wellbeing.
- Recognising older people as **assets to their communities**, in line with the EngAgeNet *New Narrative on Ageing*.
- Drawing on older people’s capacity to act as advocates, learning from examples like Care & Repair England’s Silverlinks project.
- Like the Japanese, seeing information & advice as a **two-way street**, drawing on people’s experience and insights (‘what it’s like to be growing older’) when redesigning services and local amenities.
- Learning from models such as Homeshare (where people provide accommodation in return for low level support).
- Nudging people towards **activism and self-help**, learning from Public Health England campaigns such as *One You* which encouraged mainly middle-aged people to make small changes for a healthier lifestyle.
- Joining up neighbourhood sources of information and advice (ranging from Nextdoor social networks to Village Agents) at the very local level, with facilitation by Parish Councils.
- Recognising the value of **peer group networks** like Ageless Thanet which has grown into a trusted brand – ‘*peer support has changed my life*’.
- Understanding that digital and face-to-face networking are not mutually exclusive e.g. Nextdoor networks leading to local friendship and mutual support groups.
- Seeing information & advice as a learning process, as in the **Mid-life MoT** pilot programme, leading to new directions and developing new skills, rather than ‘just another 20 years doing something you loathe’.
- Recognising the value of paramedics as great sources of advice and effective signposting and the success of GP referrals to the 3rd sector (‘social prescribing’).
- Adopting a **twin-track approach to the digital divide**: maximising what digital delivery has to offer (with great efficiency), while addressing the requirements of the digitally excluded.

The Symposium concluded with the following **calls for action**:

- **Everyone**: help the Centre for Ageing Better to persuade the Government to embrace the mid-life MoT as a universal offer.
- **Local government**: take a wider view of their Care Act information & advice duties to include facilitating and co-ordinating local sources of information & advice.
- **Central government**: reflect, in the forthcoming care Green Paper, the holistic Care Act definition of wellbeing and respond in it to the themes from the debate.
- **NHS**: recognise information & advice’s key prevention role in the NHS 10 year strategy, embracing all relevant resources rather than just Public Health England.
- **Centre for Ageing Better**: stimulate the charity and private sectors to pick up the opportunities identified during the debate.
- **SEEFA**: further develop the concept of older people as assets in their communities, building on the EngAgeNet *New Narrative on Ageing* and take forward the need for a New Narrative on Care and Support, in the spirit of the *Care Act*’s new focus on well-being rather eligibility for traditional services.

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.