

BIG LOTTERY PLEDGES MILLIONS TO OLDER PEOPLE

The Big Lottery Fund (BIG) has announced two new initiatives in England that will bring improvements to the lives of vulnerable older people by reducing isolation, helping to deal better with change, and building confidence for the future.

The announcement is part of BIG's older people investments which in total are pledging at least £160 million to support initiatives that respond to the needs of vulnerable older people in England and across the UK through to 2015.

This figure includes up to £50 million which will lead to the creation of an independent Centre for Ageing Better. The Centre, planned to be operational by early next year, will bring together and stimulate the growth of a wide range of evidence to share with older people and professionals.

By doing this, the centre will provide the best evidence of what works in community-based solutions to the

challenges and opportunities arising from our ageing population.

The investment will be complemented by Research for Impact, a £5 million UK initiative to undertake vital research work focused on better coping strategies for ageing and major life transitions such as retirement, becoming a carer, and dealing with poverty.

The announcement also heralds a £70 million funding package under BIG's Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better programme. Led by voluntary and community sector organisations, 100 identified Local Authority Areas will be targeted to apply for funding of between £2 million and £6 million for activities that will engage older people in key decision making and shaping priorities for local action.

From this, the initiative will make funding available in around 15 to 20 local areas, over a period of up to six years, to pilot area-wide approaches to tackling isolation of older people.

<http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/>

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WHY DO WE STILL RECEIVE UNSOLICITED SALES CALLS?

**By Shelagh Marshall,
Chair, Future Years, Yorkshire & Humber**

As one who registered some years ago with the Telephone Preference Service I have been quite frustrated with the number of unsolicited calls I am receiving these days and complaints brought to my attention by older people who quite frankly feel harassed when asked for their bank account details by professional fund raisers on behalf of national charities.

The Telephone Preference Service is the official opt-out register whereby individuals or companies can register their wish not to receive unsolicited sales and marketing telephone calls.

I have taken my problems to the TPS directly. In their response the TPS tells me: “Whilst the TPS has no powers over non compliant organisations, we do work closely with the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) who role it is to enforce the regulations.

Illegal unsolicited calls

“It is illegal for an organisation to make unsolicited live sales and marketing calls to a person registered on the TPS and anyone is welcome to submit a complaint either through our website www.Tponline.org.uk or by phoning 0845 070 0707.

“Recently we have witnessed a growing problem with unsolicited calls from companies that deliberately ignore the law and either hide or disguise their identity. They might withhold the number they call from or display a fake number.

“They sometimes use generic sounding names that cannot be used to accurately identify an organisation – Solar Panels UK, PPI Claims Ltd. or they may refuse to give any details at all. This makes contacting these companies or targeting them for

enforcement extremely difficult or even impossible.

“Companies like these are usually trying to benefit from short term financial opportunities based on

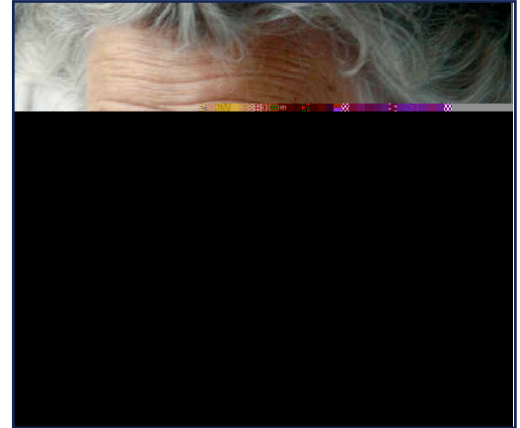
generating sales leads for things such as accident claims, PPI claims, solar energy installation and insulation grants etc.

“If a person receives an unwanted call, live or recorded, but cannot get the information required to make a TPS complaint, there is a form on the Information Commissioner’s Office website where you can give them details.”

www.ico.gov.uk/complaints/privacy_and_electronic_communications.aspx

The ICO has recently had their enforcement powers extended and are increasing the size of their investigation team.

Already the ICO has taken successful action through the courts against companies who sell information data onto marketing companies and who have made huge sums of money doing this. My immediate concern, however, is that companies selling ‘Green Deal’ home energy improvements will be allowed to cold call – my update on this is on page 6.



BIGGEST-EVER FIRE SAFETY DRIVE FOR OLDER PEOPLE'S DAY

October 1st could see the biggest co-ordinated home fire safety drive ever seen in the UK after the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) gave its backing to Older People's Day 2013.

The Association is encouraging all 46 local fire and rescue services to use the day as an opportunity to engage with older people at a time of year when the risk of fire in the home traditionally increases. It is already known that someone is twice as likely to die in a fire after the age of 50.

CFOA will be producing an event toolkit to help services mark the day in a way in which best suits their local communities. These might include targeted home fire safety checks, joint engagement with relevant partner agencies, visits to

community groups or roadshows.

In its role as the professional voice of the UK fire and rescue service, CFOA wants to reduce the number of deaths and injuries in people over the age of 50 through its six-point Ageing Safely plan published last year.

The organisation has already co-ordinated a similar and successful day of road safety awareness by local fire and rescue services over the last three years.

For more information about CFOA, visit www.cfoa.org.uk and the Older People's Day website is www.olderpeoplesday.co.uk

You might also like to follow @olderpeoplesday

Editorial board of AGenda

Tony Watts, Chairman, South West Forum on Ageing

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Simon Wilkinson, DWP Redefining Retirement Engagement Team

Send your news, views and helpful informations for the AGenda newsletter and website to: tony.watts@swfoa.org.uk

Let's have YOUR news for AGenda!

Thanks to our own Lois Lane (in the shape of Shelagh Marshall) we have several excellent pieces of investigative journalism this time around.

For anyone who wonders why they still get unwanted calls, even after registering, Shelagh continues to storm the stockade. Worryingly, she reports, Green Deal companies have been given carte blanche to cold call older people... can this really be right?

All the stories here have another life on www.agenda-efa.org.uk - with links and downloads of reports etc. Do bookmark it! And let us have your news, and please do follow our Twitter accounts - and we'll follow back.

You can also download all the back copies of AGenda.



To suggest a topic, respond to an article or add a name to our ever-growing circulation list, it's tony.watts@swfoa.org.uk

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Firms ignoring potential of older workers “will be left behind,” says Webb

Businesses which do not tap into Britain’s growing older population could suffer skills shortages and lose an important competitive edge, according to a new Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) guide.

“Employing older workers” warns employers that Britain is running out of workers. According to the DWP, there are 13.5 million job vacancies to be filled over the next ten years, but only seven million young people are projected to leave school and college over that period.

Pensions minister Steve Webb said: “Older people are the main untapped source of labour in this country. Britain is in a global economic race and we’re moving towards a landscape where there will be a set of jobs that employers cannot fill with anyone but experienced older workers. A firm that doesn’t make use of the talent pool on offer amongst the over fifties will be left behind.”

The default retirement age was abolished in October 2011 meaning that if an employee chooses to work longer they can no longer be discriminated against. Furthermore, CIPD figures showed that half of workers (50%) aged over 55 were



proposing to work beyond the state pension age.

However, barriers for older workers to get work still remained as research found that people aged over 50 were still the least likely to be recruited.

“We’re certainly not suggesting older workers take jobs away from younger people, nor that people should be continuing working into their 70s. Instead, we’re saying it’s time businesses

allow people to fulfil their professional potentials and that employers heed to the competitive edge older workers bring to their businesses,” Webb continued.

The DWP’s guide offers advice to employers on how to hire and retain older workers in order to build a multi-generational workforce. Suggestions include offering apprenticeships and work experience opportunities to people of all ages.

New malnutrition guide

A new guide called “Prevention and Early Intervention of Malnutrition in Later Life” has been launched, aimed at saving lives and millions of pounds a year. Currently an estimated one in ten older people in the UK are malnourished.

The guide, jointly produced by the British Dietetic Association and the Malnutrition Task Force, sets out and defines the principles of best practice, the moral, legal, quality and financial case for changes in tackling malnutrition in people in later life in the UK.

It also presents practical advice and support for health care, social care and care provided by voluntary organisations to deliver the changes needed to combat current levels of malnutrition in the UK.

The British Dietetic Association (BDA) is the professional association for registered dietitians in the UK. It is the nation's largest organisation of food and nutrition professionals with over 7,000 members.

The Malnutrition Task Force (MTF) is an independent group of experts across health, social care and local government who have joined forces to address the problem of preventable malnutrition and dehydration in older people.

Says Helen Davidson, Honorary Chairman of the BDA, said: “For far too long, malnutrition and dehydration has been thought of as a third world problem.

“The reality is, malnutrition and dehydration is a very big problem here in the UK. The BDA's recent ‘Mind the Hunger Gap’ campaign highlighted that on any given day malnutrition and dehydration blight the lives of around one million older people in their own homes in our communities in the UK. That figure doesn't take into account those in a hospital or care home settings, so you can begin to see the sheer scale of the problem.

“What is unique about this new guide is, it doesn't just present the problem, it also sets out some of the solutions needed to address it and make life so much better for so many people. It also identifies the tens of millions of pounds that tackling malnutrition could save.”

Dianne Jeffrey, Chairman of MTF, pictured, added: “One in ten older people are malnourished and 93% of them are in the community. This is where it starts for many people, so we must make every effort to improve prevention and early detection of malnutrition.

“Together we can combat preventable malnutrition effectively and thus improve the health of older people, maintain their independence and save money for the local health economy too.”

Some of the savings identified by tackling malnutrition include:

- Fully implementing NICE guidance will result in better nourished patients, fewer



hospital admissions, reduced length of stay for admitted patients and reduced demand for GPs.

- NICE identified malnutrition as the sixth largest source for NHS savings.
- Early identification and treatment of malnutrition in adults could save the NHS £45.5 million a year even after costs of training and screening.
- The overall resource impact of increased screening, early intervention and appropriate treatment could lead to a saving of £71,800 per 100,000 people for the average community.
- Tackling dehydration across the NHS could save £950 million in the UK.
- The use of oral nutritional supplements is associated with a reduction of overall hospital re-admissions by 30%.
- Regular screening and monitoring all people in care homes has been shown to cost half the amount of treating those who are malnourished.

For a copy of Preventing and Treating Malnutrition in Later Life, go to: <http://www.malnutritiontaskforce.org.uk/>

Government gives itself cold call exemption for “Green Deal”

At a time when many organisations are working to prevent older, vulnerable people receiving cold calls, that would appear to be the primary sales tool for businesses involved with “The Green Deal”. Shelagh Marshall takes up the story.

In Autumn 2012 I attended the Yorkshire and Humber National Energy Forum to learn about the Government’s new ‘Green Deal’ - a financial mechanism to enable homeowners and businesses to make improvements to the energy efficiency of their property with little or no upfront cost.

In the past, older people in particular have had problems with offers for energy saving measures in finding reputable firms and reliable estimates for the work to be done. I was therefore keen to ensure that older people would not be cold called on the telephone, that the processes involved would be sound and that the offer would be one in which anyone would have full confidence.

My first question was; “How would older people be informed about the new scheme”. The speaker from one of the six main utilities replied, “by telephone cold calling”. I responded to say that I had been campaigning for two years encouraging older people to register with the Telephone Preference Service to reduce the number of anonymous calls and not to reply to any questions by telephone and furthermore to be firm in telling the caller that their call was illegal.

I wrote immediately to the DWP and reported my concerns to my County Council’s Trading Standards department, who have successfully prosecuted many firms cold calling older people and fleecing them of their savings. The matter was quickly referred to the National Trading Standards Board (NTSB). I was told that: “The Consumer Protection Partnership has already identified that The Green Deal could be an

area that poses significant risks to consumers. The Trading Standards Institute has been commissioned by the NTSB to provide guidance on Green Deal enforcement issues, such as mis-selling, appropriate redress mechanisms and potential consumer detriment.”

The Department of Energy and Climate Change has said that cold calling will be allowed – to enable “people who might not otherwise be reached to be made aware of the opportunities to benefit”. However, the Green Deal Code of Practice states that the cold callers will not be allowed to carry out a Green Deal Assessment on the day they cold call, unless requested by the consumer, otherwise a cooling off period of at least one day applies. Also Green Deal participants must respect “no cold calling requests” whether face-to-face, by phone, electronic communication or if “no cold calling” stickers are displayed.

The report goes on to state that there is potential for consumer detriment as a result of complex and different redress processes, including billing disputes. As a general rule the first point of contact for a consumer, including complaints, is their Green Deal provider. The next will be one of three Ombudsmen: the Energy Ombudsman, Financial Ombudsman and the Ombudsman Services depending on whether they have used the Green Deal Finance or included a Green Deal Plan.

Consumers should contact the Energy Savings Advice Service, for further advice about the complaints procedure. The ESAS also provides general independent advice about the Green Deal. Consumers in England and Wales can contact the ESAS on 0300 123 1234, their website is www.energysavingtrust.org.uk Email: energy-advice@est.org.uk

I am indebted to the National Trading Standards Board’s report for much of the content of this article.

New help announced to transform support services for carers and people living with dementia

Practical tools to improve the quality of support services for carers and people living with dementia have been launched to mark the first anniversary of the Making it Real campaign.

Since going live in 2012, more than 400 organisations including 65 councils have signed up to the campaign, which aims to transform care and support based on what real people, carers and families say they need and want.

Making it Real organisations mark their progress and publicly share their priorities and plans for action on www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/mir.

Most importantly, these plans are developed with the full involvement of the people who use their services and carers so they can be held to account by local populations if they don't deliver on the priorities.



The three new tools - Making it Real for Carers, Making it Real for People with Dementia and Whose Shoes?® – Making it Real have been developed to further help with this process. They include practical examples of what organisations are doing to transform their services, in partnership with the people who use them and will help people to understand and engage in the personalisation of the care and support agenda.

new way of doing things.

Crucially, all the tools were co-produced with people who use services, carers, families and those who provide and commission care and support services.”

Making it Real for People with Dementia can be downloaded by clicking here: <http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/BCC/Latest/resourceOverview/?cid=9482>

Think Local Act Personal co-chair Clenton Farquharson and key contributor to Making it Real's development, says: “Making it Real builds links between professionals, service providers and the community to spread knowledge and encouragement, share problems and collectively develop new ways of working. It does this by helping people in coming together and co-operating to find a

Our ageing society: time for a grown-up conversation

The House of Lords select committee report on demographic change laid down a very large gauntlet. Big, bold decisions are needed, says Tony Watts (whose input went into the report) to meet the challenges presented by an ageing society – and take advantage of the potential opportunities. The starting point, he says, should be talking to older people themselves... and the Age Action Alliance is the perfect place to start.

Britain, we're told by Lord Filkin (pictured), is "woefully underprepared" for the "demographic agequake" about to hit our shores. Powerful language indeed. So the answer to the title of Lord Filkin's report, 'Ready for Ageing?' is obviously: "no".

We all know the stats. For decades, as each seven years has passed, average life expectancy has increased by a year: a sort of "live six years, get one free". Fantastic news for those who prefer living longer to the alternative, but it is commonly portrayed as a doomsday scenario. Just how will we afford to keep this nation of oldies?

However, turn this round 180 degrees and we could convert challenges into opportunities... making ageing a chance

to relook at the way we design and deliver a whole range of services, with benefits to all parts of society.

The Age Action Alliance, I believe, now fast approaching 400-strong, provides the perfect platform for this – because it brings together the organisations who will be providing the goods and services with the real experts on ageing: older people themselves. Already within the Alliance there are a host of projects underway at a working group level, seeking to find practical answers to the challenges faced by today's older generation. But perhaps now is also the time for a grown up conversation on the longer-term issues... and which will help get consensus and momentum behind the big societal shifts that we need to make if the "agequake" is to be headed off at the pass.

One of my key points retained in the final House of Lords report is that older people can be part of the solution. On issues such as tackling loneliness,



providing informal care, supporting digital inclusion programmes, developing community transport and meal schemes... the UK's well developed network of groups and forums is a vast, scarcely tapped resource, ready and willing to be involved.

All of the potential areas for action below (and there would be more if I had more space) can really progress if we can bring providers and older people's groups and representatives together in closer working relationships – to design and pilot projects, and demonstrate what does and doesn't work.

New homes for old...

We currently face a massive housing

'Grown up conversation' continued

crisis. But do we really need new family homes sprawling over our greenfield sites? There's huge scope for purpose-built retirement accommodation for seniors who would like the option to downsize into more manageable property.

Building density levels are higher, so more homes per precious acre, and the ideal locations are on central, brownfield sites close to amenities – not eating up our countryside. Because those needing support live closer together, the costs to them and our care services inevitably go down, while those selling their homes can release funds for their future care.

If just five per cent of pensioners made that move, 210,000 family homes would be released. To achieve that, we need a greater choice of more new, affordable retirement accommodation that really does meet older people's needs and tastes, allows them to integrate with their local community, close to friends and family support networks and not feel they are living in an "older people's ghetto".

Closer working between developers, architects, local authorities and older people themselves could help achieve that.

EXTENDING OUR WORKING LIFE

It's simply untrue that working past retirement age denies jobs to youngsters. Yet this myth pervades, and poses (on one hand) the very real risk of

intergenerational resentment, and (on the other) dissuading employers from retaining or hiring older staff.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies says there is: "no evidence of long-term crowding-out of younger individuals from the labour market by older workers".

What's more, insists the DWP, a one-year extension to everyone's working lives could increase real GDP by around one per cent – and add up to 10 per cent to our retirement income. That could play a huge role in reducing pensioner poverty – especially at a time of historically low savings returns.

If people want, need, and are able to work past State Retirement age, they should be enabled to do so by employers offering more flexible working and shorter hours – enabling them to phase gradually into retirement while mentoring younger staff coming up through. Alliance members could play a big part in showcasing the benefits of how this can work and educating other employers.

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE...

The advantages of integrating social and healthcare is one big message to come out of 'Ready for Ageing?' – because the current overlaps are costly, inefficient, confusing and potentially harmful to health. Prevention rather than cure is another positive proposal. Spending small amounts at one end of health and care services would save huge amounts at the other.

Shifts in both these directions could cut significant costs from hard-pressed budgets... if health and social services could be persuaded to work more closely together and focus on retaining wellness rather than treating illness. Older people are the biggest users of healthcare: get it right with this demographic, and others will benefit too.

The huge role that the voluntary sector already plays – on very little money – is now under threat because of cuts to funding. We need to demonstrate why this represents a false economy. The Alliance has members from all sides: at a local, regional and national level, we need to work together and show where best practice can deliver better health for less.

NEW TECHNOLOGY

There's an explosion waiting to happen in providing digital technology that older people feel comfortable with and that can also integrate telehealth and telecare. It would enable older people to join in the "digital revolution" – researching their interests, getting cheaper online deals and keeping in touch with their friends and family by Skype... and the costs of care could be radically reduced.

But the floodgates will only open with more practical, hands-on research with older people showing what works for them – and then all of the links in the chain put in place enabling and supporting it, financially and technically.

AGE-FRIENDLY DESIGN

A fantastic report produced in the latter days of the Labour Government under Baroness Andrews was subsequently buried. It highlighted the benefits of designing urban spaces that enabled and encouraged older people to get out more, stay fitter and engage more in society.

Moreover, “lifetime neighbourhoods” and “age-friendly” towns and cities also help younger people with health and mobility issues and could contribute towards reducing obesity. Carless, safer walkways are great for children too. It’s an investment for all our futures.

Again, many of the parties that could drive this debate and show what works are members the Alliance...

LET’S DO THIS TOGETHER

No one denies the challenges presented by an ageing population. But (with imagination and co-operative working) they are not intractable – and they could be turned to opportunity. In the immortal words of the Wilbert Harrison’s song, “Let’s work together...”

Tony Watts is a writer and Chairman of the South West Forum on Ageing and a member of the Partnership and Editorial Boards of the Age Action Alliance.

@tonywattswriter

UK’S 12 AGE-FRIENDLY CITIES GO GLOBAL

The 12-strong UK Network of Age-friendly Cities has received affiliation into the WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities (GNAFCC).

This development recognises the importance of such a network in the UK - and the commitment of its member cities to improve the quality of life for older people.

In addition to developing the collaborative work of cities through shared learning and peer support, the Network will contribute to the development of a growing global movement of cities and communities that are striving to meet the needs of older citizens.

Twelve major cities across the UK (including one London borough) have combined skills and expertise to collaborate in the development of the new Network.

The Network is supported by the UK Urban Ageing Consortium, a collaborative partnership of the Beth Johnson Foundation, Manchester City Council and Universities of Keele and Manchester set up to advance best practice and debate on urban ageing.



The cities participating in the UK Network are:

Belfast
Leeds
Sheffield
Manchester
Newcastle
Stoke-on-Trent
Brighton & Hove
Edinburgh
Cardiff
Nottingham
London Borough of Camden
Glasgow (pictured)

For further information about the UK Network and UK Urban Ageing Consortium visit: <http://www.bjf.org.uk/age-friendly/about-age-friendly>

ALLIANCE NOW A GROWING FORCE FOR GOOD AS IT REACHES 350

The Age Action Alliance (AAA), writes Simon Wilkinson (right), just keeps on growing... there are now almost 350 members, drawing support from national, regional and local organisations UK-wide.

The new website is also just about to go live too – the opportunity to keep tabs on all the activities of the various working groups, as well as read regular blogs and news updates.

The Twitter following is also expanding apace – close on 1,000 now follow us – so why don't you!

Alliance Partnership Board

The new Board held its third meeting on 6th March, the first of three meetings each year. The Board's purpose is to provide very light touch governance – the key work of the AAA will go through the various working groups.

The 14 members of the Board will comprise seven older people's representatives and seven from other bodies - currently the Centre for Social Justice, Alliance Boots, The Chief Fire Officers Association, The Big Lottery Fund, The Beth Johnson Foundation, Age UK and The Department for Work and

Pensions.

Date for Your Diary

On 23rd May, the Alliance working group on Healthy Workplaces will launch a new Employer Resource Guide. Hosted by the Association of British Insurers, this breakfast launch will bring together organisations who have partnered in its production and those it seeks to influence.

The Employer Resource brings together simple tools and practical solutions for employers to assist them in managing a healthy and productive workforce. It has been designed as an easy to use resource for employers of all sizes and business support organisations. For more information, contact a member of the Secretariat.

WORKING GROUP UPDATES

Loneliness & Isolation:

The group met on 30 April and discussed the work of the Second Half Centre with



its founder Jill Shaw Ruddock. There was also an update of progress by Vintage Communities with their demonstrator sites in London and on the Big Lottery's funding programme.

Money Matters

At a meeting on 22 April, Helen White from ABI (Association of British Insurers) reported they could no longer chair the group, although ABI will remain in contact with its work. Barry Wilford from the East Midlands Later Life Forum was appointed as the new chair. The group discussed mapping key organisations offering financial information, services provided & starting with gathering everyone's top five money advice enquiries.

Improving the Lives of Excluded Older People:

The group met on 26 April at the offices of Action on Hearing Loss. Attendees



AAA CONT...

included members from the NPC, NDTi, Beth Johnson Foundation, Elderly Accommodation Counsel, Association of Chief Police Officers, and Age UK.

Of particular interest was the draft document from the Elderly Accommodation Counsel, detailing First Contact Schemes across the country. The intention now will be to provide a “How to” guide to encourage organisations to set up such schemes where they do not currently exist.

New website coming!

The need for an effective online home for the Alliance to enable communication and sharing of resources is paramount, and we have been working hard on the design and development of the new site, which has been funded by some European legacy money. Some Working Groups and some members have been exposed to a live mock up of the site, and user testing is currently taking place.

We are particularly grateful to a group of older people from Age UK Camden who provided us with some valuable feedback in response to some questions designed to test the accessibility and navigability of the site.

The good news is that each Working Group will have its own dedicated page which will enable it put up its own content, host and signpost to relevant resources and websites. Members will be encouraged to submit blogs and start conversations with fellow members, with guidance on how to write a blog and tweet being provided on the website.

The editorial board will be: Alan Hatton-Yeo, Tony Watts, George Ames and Simon Wilkinson.

Queen's speech welcomed by charity

Age Action Alliance member, care advice charity Independent Age, has welcomed the social care provisions heralded in the recent Queen's Speech.

Chief Executive, Janet Morrison, said: “We welcome the announcement of a Care and Support Bill in the Queen's Speech (Wednesday 8 May) as recognition that the government is now to act with purpose to reform social care.

“The details of the bill's proposals to cap the amount that individuals pay towards their care will be keenly awaited as they will determine whether the bill does genuinely offer an end to the ‘catastrophic cost’ of social care that many ordinary families face.

“There is a real risk that the fine print of the bill may offer far less protection than it first appears. We also have concerns that the provisions of the bill may be too complex to be easily understood and we strongly support recent calls by the Joint Committee on the Draft Care

and Support Bill for a national awareness campaign on the care and support offer.

“We look to government to acknowledge the Committee's recommendations in legislation for independent financial advice for families of care home residents signing up to a third party top-up or deferred payment agreement. It is essential that the Bill recognises the fundamentally different nature of independent financial advice and how the lack of such advice prevents older people from being able to make informed decisions on how to pay for the care they need.”

“Finally, we call on the government to recognise and acknowledge that there remains an urgent need for adequate investment in social care.

“Without this, there is a danger that these welcome legislative changes will not produce the urgently-needed level of transformation on the ground for older people using services, their families and carers.”

“PERSONAL BUDGETS ARE NOT RIGHT FOR EVERYONE”

“Personal budgets are wonderful in principle, and the greater choices suits many recipients, but some older people can find them highly stressful,” writes Shelagh Marshall, Chair of Yorkshire & Humber Forum on Ageing.

For those older people assessed as needing or receiving Care Services at home, it has been the aim of all local authorities to encourage 100% take up of a personal budget - albeit the equivalent cost to the services they receive.

However, these direct payments - hailed as revolutionary because they allow those who need care to buy their own services from a provider of their choice - can become a nightmare for some. The idea sounds a really good one and was hugely successful when it was introduced for young disabled people. It gave them dignity and, most importantly, control over the services they needed.

In practice it has given many older people enormous stress and worry as they realised they must – for example - grapple with the full force of employment law as they can now be deemed ‘employers’ if they take someone on (even part time) to provide services.

Finding a reputable agency which offers reliable care services, arranging cover for holidays, maternity leave and sickness all add up to a great deal of worry - particularly for those in need of care themselves. Many local authorities arranged for older people to be helped by brokerage services... which of course comes with an eventual cost.

I have made representations to Government Ministers as a member of the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing and I was asked to write a report with evidence on what older people were telling me about how they felt.

Speaking at the last Pensioners Parliament, I was asked if there was anything I could do to change this situation for older people.

The Commission for Rural Communities agreed to undertake a project relating to social isolation experienced by older people living in rural communities. The project was intended to make firm recommendations to Government and other bodies about the services provided to those people at a time of economic and organisational change.

When the Rural Statement was published in August 2012, it stated that older people in rural areas had little if any choice when buying their own care, that costs were higher than in urban areas and that the personal budgets they received were less than those offered in urban areas.

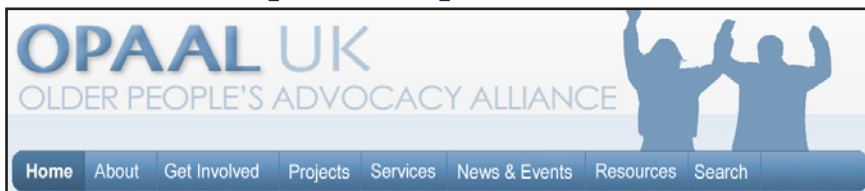
To my disappointment there were no recommendations in the Rural Statement that these payments should be discontinued - even in rural areas.

An article in the Guardian said that the then ‘new’ Minister for the Care Services, Norman Lamb MP had announced that he was reducing the target for local authorities to encourage all service recipients to take personal budgets from a 100% take up to 75%.

For me I know this news has delighted many older people. From my perspective it offers choice to older people without the feeling that they are being coerced into taking payments instead of services.

In the words of Norman Lamb MP, “This was a pragmatic judgement” for which I thanked him for listening to the voices of older people.

How independent advocacy can help older people



The new personalised approach to health and social care provision has many merits - but it can leave some individuals floundering and unsure. And this, say the Older People's Advocacy Alliance (OPAAL), is where independent advocacy can play a key role.

Some older people struggle to cope with decision making when there are often too many complicated decisions to be made - and traditional methods of providing support such as quickly sourcing day care and arranging home care now seem overly complicated by form filling and self assessment.

Many older people understate their ill health or incapacity to carry out basic tasks, and too often this can result in older people receiving far fewer services than they really need to live independently, leading to premature hospital and care home admissions and/or exhausted and stressed family

carers.

Independent advocacy, says OPAAL, can make a world of difference. "The support of someone who is there to listen and take the side of no-one but the older person ensures that the older person retains their dignity and control over their own lives; so often seemingly lost these days.

"We only need to read documents like the Frances report on Mid Staffs hospital or the Serious Case Review carried out after the shocking ill treatment at Winterbourne View to see that things need to change. Independent advocacy won't cure all ills in the care and support of vulnerable older people but it will help."

www.opaal.org.uk

£1 million arts funding for older people in care

A £1 million Arts and older people in care programme, jointly funded by the Arts Council and The Baring Foundation, has been launched.

The three-year programme aims to provide access to quality arts experiences for older people in residential care, as both participants and audiences. It will be implemented by partnerships or consortia led by residential care providers or arts organisations, and it is envisaged that around four proposals will be funded.

This programme aims to support the Arts Council in delivering our ambitions within goal two 'more people experience and are inspired by the arts' of the 10-year strategic framework "Achieving great art for everyone".

Research from the "Taking Part in the Arts" survey has shown that people aged 75 and over have significantly lower arts engagement rates than the other age groups. There are over 400,000 people currently in residential care homes in the UK, and this group is often excluded from the opportunities that arts engagement can bring, but the arts can make a real contribution to the lives of the elderly living in residential care.

For further information or to apply, go to <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-for-funding/arts-and-older-people-care-commissioned-grant/>

Top ten tips for warmer homes

Our thoughts may be on enjoying whatever little sunshine there is around rather than tucking up warm, but now is always a good time to be thinking about cutting back on energy costs. Age Action Alliance member National Energy Action has issued its top ten tips for warmer homes and lower fuel bills.

1. Insulate and draught-proof your home

Insulating your loft and walls will reduce your energy needs and save you money. Draught-proofing reduces unwanted ventilation. If your home has draughty windows, doors or a letterbox then seals can be easily fitted and can last for up to five years. However avoid blocking air vents in your home. Ask for energy advice if you need it.

2. Check eligibility for insulation and heating improvements

Some households may be eligible for assistance for heating and/or insulation improvements. Check your eligibility now. Also consider having a benefit entitlement check as it may help with eligibility for services.

3. Make simple changes

Seek energy and other advice on simple behavioural changes that will help you to save energy, save money and stay healthy

and warm such as:

- Preparing for and dealing with cold weather
- How to reduce your energy demand and keep the heat in your home
- How to reduce condensation and prevent damp.

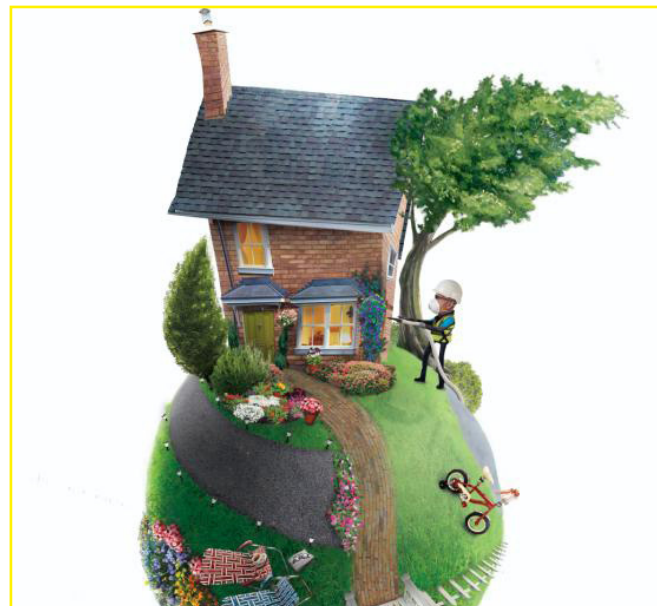
4. Seek fuel debt advice

If you're having difficulty paying your energy bills and/or are in debt to your fuel supplier then get advice. Electricity and mains gas suppliers should agree an affordable repayment plan with you. The "ability to pay" under this plan refers to what you can afford not what the supplier deems affordable.

If you are having difficulty paying for fuel supplies contact your supplier in the first instance. Alternatively contact Citizens Advice for impartial advice on fuel debt. Tel: 08444 111 444 or Text phone: 08444 111 445 or go online at www.citizensadvice.org.uk

The National Debtline (Tel: 0808 808 4000) and the Consumer Credit Counselling Service (0800 138 1111) also provide free services.

5. Register for Priority Services



Electricity and mains gas suppliers operate Priority Services Registers for householders with special needs who are of pensionable age, disabled or chronically sick or hearing and/or visually impaired. Services may include large print bills, talking fuel bills, gas safety checks, special controls and adaptors, no disconnection of fuel supplies over the winter period or help in emergencies.

6. Control your heating

If you have heating controls and timers then use them. Get energy advice if you need it. Consider turning down room thermostats by 1 deg C to reduce internal room temperatures and save up to 10% of your energy consumption. However remember that it is always important to

Top ten tips continued...

stay warm in your home. Ideally living areas should be at least 21deg C and bedrooms 18 deg C in colder weather.

7. Control your hot water

If you have hot water controls then use them. Avoid leaving electric immersion heaters on for a long time as they are expensive to use. If your hot water cylinder doesn't have a jacket buy one for around £10 and save up to £20 a year on your energy bills. Setting cylinder thermostats to 60 deg C will keep water warm and save energy.

8. Use appliances & lighting efficiently

Turn off lighting and appliances when not in use and avoid using stand-by facilities as this waste energy. Only boil what water is needed in your kettle. A microwave uses less energy than an electric oven on full

power. Defrost your freezer regularly to save energy. Fit low energy light bulbs as these can save you money.

9. Maximise your income

Ask for a benefit check from a local provider. You may be entitled to extra benefits and other services. Receipt of certain benefits may also help you access some energy efficiency schemes (e.g. ECO). Also ask your electricity supplier if you are eligible for their Warm Home Discount. Citizens Advice may provide this service locally. Other agencies such as the Department for Work and Pensions (see local phonebook) or voluntary sector agencies such as Age UK (Tel: 0800 169 6565) provide services.

10. Monitor your energy use and energy bills

Take advice on monitoring your energy needs, use and spend. Supply meter readings to your energy suppliers and read all your fuel bills to help you manage your energy use and how much you spend. Take advice on the best available fuel tariff(s) and consider fuel switching to get a better deal. Getting the right tariff is highly dependent upon your lifestyle, energy demand and preferred payment method.

Take advice on whether there is a cheaper supplier for solid fuel, bulk/bottled gas or oil supplies before you sign any contract. Solid fuel and oil co-operatives or clubs may operate locally and may have negotiated cheaper supply deals in your area. Also take advice on the best fuel payment options to meet your household needs (the best deals are usually for those who can pay for fuel by Direct Debit or on-line via the internet).

The Energy Saving Advice Service Provides impartial energy advice to all households.

Telephone: 0300 123 1234 (local rates apply)
www.gov.uk/energyhelp

The Home Heat Helpline provides energy advice, advice on benefits, information on home insulation and special payment options your electricity or mains gas supplier provides to help those struggling with their fuel bills.

Tel: 0800 33 66 99 or Text phone 0800 027 2122



Think tanks clash on housing

Two leading think tanks have clashed on the best way to house Britain's ageing population. The argument is whether more bungalows and custom built homes, or a tax on the elderly, would be the best way to bridge the housing divide.

The clash follows the publication of two papers marking the launch of The Hanover@50 Debate, part of the specialist housing provider's 50th anniversary. Policy Exchange and the Fabian Society agree that the concentration of home ownership amongst older people risks stoking inter-generational unfairness.

However, while the Fabians believe that the introduction of a property tax will lead to lower house prices, Policy Exchange says reform of the planning system to encourage developers to build more homes, including bungalows and self build homes attractive to older people looking to downsize, is the fairer way of reducing the generational divide.

The Fabian Society paper found that high property prices are in the interests of neither young nor old, because pensioners do not unlock their housing wealth during their own lifetime. It says the gap in 'middle' incomes between retired people and those of working age has narrowed dramatically over recent decades, calling into question the protection from the pain of deficit reduction enjoyed by many older people.

The paper argues that while many older people endure housing problems, ill health and isolation, their incomes are growing faster than those of people in working life. It therefore calls for a 'presumption of equality' across all age groups taking in eligibility for certain public services and a comprehensive review of taxation and social security spending.

Policy Exchange calls on policymakers to reform the planning system to encourage the construction of new good quality homes that will not antagonise local people. Current rules make it almost impossible for developers to build houses

with extra floors which has led to a situation where only 2% of UK housing stock consists of bungalows. In 2009, only 300 bungalows were built.

The paper says that building more bungalows will allow older people to downsize, freeing up family sized homes for younger families.

Andrew Harrop, General Secretary of the Fabian Society said: "Many of the measures put into place to reduce pensioner poverty and improve the incomes of pensioners have worked. In fact, they've worked so well that the earnings of pensioners 'in the middle' are fast approaching those of working people.

"At a time when almost every public spending decision is involving significant pain for a vulnerable group in society, the government must now consider whether they can really afford to keep protecting older people from the pain of deficit reduction."

Alex Morton, head of housing and planning at Policy Exchange, said: "What is needed is a grand bargain between the generations not a tax on the elderly. More homes, tailored to the needs of older homeowners, will help free up family sized properties for the younger generation.

"This has to include more bungalows which will allow older people to downsize to a property that suits their specific needs."

Hanover chief executive Bruce Moore added: "We want to promote a debate on the future of retirement housing and wider issues around care and support for older people in our ageing society.

"We need to look afresh at housing and support services for older people but, as these papers make clear, that discussion needs to take place in the context of the wider community and society."

SIX CHARITIES UNITE TO FORM THE 'READY FOR AGEING ALLIANCE'

Six major national charities - Age UK, Anchor, the Centre for Policy on Ageing, Independent Age, the International Longevity Centre-UK and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation - have formed the 'Ready for Ageing Alliance' to urge the Government and all political parties to face up to the major changes and challenges from our rapidly ageing society.

The recent 'Ready for Ageing' report by the Public Service and Demographic Change Committee argued that there has been a lack of vision and coherence in the ageing strategies of successive governments. The Committee accused the Government of "woeful unpreparedness" for our ageing society.

The Ready for Ageing Alliance believes that living longer is potentially a great gift but that politicians must do more to make the most of this huge societal change.

The Alliance believes that Government failure to respond to demographic change will have significant and major negative impacts on the future of the UK, not just in terms of health, care and pensions, but also in relation to the future success of the UK's economy.

"A failure to respond adequately now could also foster unhelpful intergeneration tensions and division into the long term.

The Ready for Ageing Alliance has come together to:

- Urge Government to respond positively to the House of Lords' 'Ready for Ageing' Report and set out a plan for addressing the policy challenges of demographic change.
- Urge political parties to ensure that the challenges of our ageing society are prominent within their election manifestos.
- Urge the political parties to work together to deliver cross sector/party agreement on Commissions on "income and pensions" and "health and social care" in an ageing society.
- Urge Government to contribute and support a broader societal debate, actively engaging all relevant stakeholders about the need to reform public policy in the light of demographic change.

Jane Ashcroft, Chief Executive, Anchor said: "The policy issues that affect older people are wide-ranging and complex; and being made more so by demographic change.

"Demographic change is an issue for us all - not just those interested in older people"

"They span almost all government departments and several Ministers' portfolios, yet individuals are being let down by a collective failure to address the needs of our growing older population.

"It is crucial that long-term solutions are developed and there is accountability within Government for action, to drive improvements for current and future generations of older people."

Baroness Sally Greengross, Chief Executive, ILC-UK said: Our society is in denial of the inevitability of ageing. Yet this issue is one of the biggest public policy challenges facing our society.

"We have put off the difficult decisions for far too long. Government must begin to take the ageing of our society seriously.

"Demographic change is an issue for all of us - not just those interested in older people."

Why don't our politicians understand the need for extra care housing?

Asks Peter Coleling,
Chair of Future East
Advisory Forum on
Ageing in the East of
England

Why is it that senior politicians have no real understanding of housing?

I put a question to the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg MP recently, on the LBC 97.3FM breakfast show, about the lack of real housing options for older people.



This, in my opinion and that of many others, would enable a better use of existing housing stock, and provide real choice to meet the needs of those people reaching the time when they want to change how and where they live.

The massive shortage of Extra Care housing means a lack of choice for people with a family member who needs additional support, while their own home is no longer suitable.

A care home then becomes the only option for them and – for many – this is not the best option and it costs more

than Extra Care.

The answer I received referred to the extra £10b investment by the coalition this year. Was there any new money? And what has the government done for first time buyers and the right to buy, the change of planning regulations and so on?

He was unable to answer the main point of the question (the need to build suitable new homes in real sustainable communities that enable movement and social mobility.) We need to see all parts of tenure covered together as one issue.

Early warning system against care home failure

New measures, including financial checks on care providers, will for the first time protect people receiving care if their provider fails.

The first ever system of national oversight and co-ordination will give early warnings if a company is in trouble. The Care Quality Commission (CQC) will take on the responsibility of a tough system of checks on the largest care companies.

It will mean that the CQC will have the power to:

- require regular financial and relevant performance information
- require the provider to develop and submit a 'sustainability plan' to manage any risk to the organisation's on-going sustainability
- commission an independent business review to help the provider to return to financial stability
- require information from the provider to enable the CQC to support local authorities to manage a provider failure.

Transport cuts “have devastating effect on older people”

Thousands of older people are being unnecessarily socially excluded, a WRVS report has warned as 342,000 over 75 year olds said they feel trapped in their own home through lack of suitable transport.

The situation for many has been exacerbated by recent cuts. 14% of older people have been hit by a reduction in public transport services and 10% say they now get out and about less because they have no way of getting out by themselves.

The report highlights the vital role transport plays in the lives of older people, keeping them connected not only to local communities and services but also to family and friends, and that cuts to these services have had a devastating impact on older people's sense of happiness and wellbeing.

Being unable to get out and about because there is no suitable transport means that 9% of older people feel they have lost their independence, leading to feelings of loneliness (6%) and isolation (5%).

Although free bus travel is available for those aged over 60 in Wales and Scotland and around 62 in England, the report found that 17% of those aged over 75 don't use public transport because it isn't suitable for their disabilities.

On the release of the report, WRVS is urging older people to contact the charity to find out how community transport services can help them see their family and friends, run errands and improve their wellbeing and quality of life.

WRVS is also calling on public transport providers to consider the needs of older people who use their service by providing training for drivers to allow them to help and support older people who need assistance. They should also consider the



placement of bus stops when planning routes to ensure older people don't have to walk long distances to reach local services, after the report found 18% are unable to manage the walk to or from their nearest method of public transport.

This new report emphasises the findings of previous WRVS research which highlighted the acute problem of loneliness and isolation among older people in this country, and how being unable to see family as often as they would like has an impact on an older person's wellbeing.

“Older people shouldn't be confined to their own homes simply because they can't access transport,” says David McCullough, WRVS chief executive. “Getting out and about is a basic necessity that many of us take for granted but this report shows it isn't so straightforward for older people who may have mobility issues and we know this can have a devastating impact on wellbeing.”

Read the report here: <http://www.wrvs.org.uk/our-impact/reports-and-reviews/going-nowhere-fast-impact-of-inaccessible-public-transport-on-wellbeing-gb>

How police are supporting the vulnerable elderly

A support service helping to prevent doorstep crime against senior citizens has been named as the latest Big Society Award winner by Prime Minister David Cameron.

The Bristol-based The Senior Citizen Liaison Team, staffed by police, police staff, and members of the community, who volunteer their time to help provide crime prevention guidance to thousands of senior citizens, as well as initiating a support group for those who have been the unfortunate victims of crime.

Older adults are prey to unscrupulous criminals who use deception and artifice to trick and steal money from their senior victims. The average victims are the most vulnerable people in society, typically female, aged 80 years and living alone. They suffer significant trauma to their lives following victimisation, which can often lead to social isolation, fear and loss of confidence.

But pioneering work in the West Country is showing a way forward that David Cameron recently praised – and which even New York cops are watching with interest.

The Senior Citizen Liaison Team (SCLT)

was established in 2009 by volunteer officers of the Avon and Somerset Police to specifically target doorstep crime, and to reduce the impact of such offending on the senior population.

All the services offered by the SCLT are complementary to normal policing services, and are carried out in the private time of the 10 or so volunteers.

The ethos of the SCLT is simple: if you have contact with the Senior Citizen Liaison Team, you are far less likely to become a victim of crime.

Over a typical year, crime-beating presentations will be made to thousands of seniors at various community gatherings. The Team additionally spread the message of their work through their award-winning Senior Siren magazine, which is published quarterly and accessible to thousands of people on the internet and in hardcopy format.

Far more than just a law-enforcement team, the SCLT evolved from a small initiative, to registration as a fully-fledged UK charity in July 2013. Since this time, the Team has strengthened its resolve to provide education and engagement to older adults who are at risk of doorstep



crime for the long-term future.

Ash Jones (pictured) is Chair of Trustees of the SCLT – and a very active member of the South West Forum on Ageing: “Over the last four years we have engaged with many thousands of older adults and enjoyed sharing our message of home and personal safety. We will never know how many crimes our advice has averted, but our work has become a passion and we hope to go from strength to strength, helping greater numbers of older adults in the future”

<http://www.sclt.moonfruit.com/>

Material deprivation: it's not just about the money for older people...

Work by older people's forums in the North East could help change the way we look at how we judge quality of life in our later years. By Tony Watts.

For two years now, the Government has published a 'Pensioner Material Deprivation Indicator', based on nearly eight thousand face to face interviews annually with people aged 65 and over.

The last one was published last June, and carried handy information on, for instance, pensioner poverty (going down apparently), and concluded that 14 per cent of pensioners (1.7 million) are getting by on a "low income" (defined as 60 per cent of median income after housing costs) with nine per cent of pensioners (800,000) defined as "materially deprived".

But what does this mean? Is 800,000 a high or a low number? And (presuming it's a "bad thing"), what can be done about it?

We naturally assume that deprivation means not having enough food or fuel; getting by on clothes we bought in charity shops; or struggling to pay basic bills – even when living a fairly austere lifestyle.

Yep, it's all of those. But, critically, the Government recognises that "Deprivation can be caused by financial or non-financial reasons" and that "Policies to improve incomes are important, but are only part of the solution."

So how do older people themselves feel about all this? When the Government presented the findings of the 2012 survey to older people's representatives – the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing - there was recognition that many areas had been well covered, but there were reservations. One regional forum in particular, 'Years Ahead' from the North East, felt there was more that the survey could do.

While having a regular survey allowed you to assess whether



material deprivation was going up or down, it was a fairly crude mechanism, with many of the factors that DO represent 'deprivation' not included.

Moreover, it was a broadbrush approach geographically. Were pensioners in the South West faring better than those in the North East and so on? The figures didn't drill down that deep, although regional data will almost certainly be available in the Households below average income report later this year.

When they voiced their concerns to the Government Minister concerned, Steve Webb, he put down a challenge to them: come back with ways in which you would change the survey. Just under a year on and the regional forum 'Years Ahead' have done just that. Around 150 representatives, working in focus groups throughout the North East, have made a list of suggestions – ranging from the way questions are asked to what additional areas should be deemed important.

Critically they questioned the use of 'pensioner' in the title: is this someone of state or private pensionable age, because they could still be working?

Material deprivation continued...

There were serious concerns that aspects such as loneliness and isolation were not covered adequately. Having enough money to go out, for instance, is not much use if the local community café is closed down, there are no buses to get out and about on, or people are afraid to go out of their front door because of poor urban design.

The fact that many older people would not, through pride, admit to problems was also voiced. Equally salient, putting surveys like this together is all very fine and dandy... but what use are they being put to?

The main recommendations that came through from the research by Years Ahead can probably best be summarised as:

- Include indicators important to older people's lives, such as insurance coverage, social and healthcare budgets, lifelong learning and access to IT.
- Drill down deeper to reveal differences between different age cohorts and geographical areas, and single / multiple occupancy households.
- Make the information available to key organisations – such as clinical commissioning groups, and police commissioners so more use can be made of it.
- Promote the results and demonstrate how they are being used to guide Government policy and development.
- Address and prioritise the policy areas coming out of the indicator – such as creating age friendly communities, involving older people in decision making, fuel poverty, concessionary travel and a fair state pension.

So what happens next? Steve Webb warmly welcomed the input, but made it clear that the tanker on the national index had already left port: you couldn't make wholesale changes because you could not then compare next year's findings to previous ones.

But he felt strongly that there was scope for revisiting the current index with the input of older people, and taking forward local research into the sort of issues covered by material deprivation. While a national indicator had merits, it could never hope to influence local decision making and priority setting... but work providing insights into local issues and good practice, could.

So, the next step is to try and find funding for several (or, ideally, more) localised pilot surveys to demonstrate their potential value. There are some major areas to consider: logistics, cost, the reassurance that many will need before divulging sensitive information... but the rewards could be considerable. There is no central 'pot' available to do this – but the advantages to local / regional players to be involved are obvious.

Neither should there be a fixed template on how this should happen: indeed, it would be preferable if local groups do have the flexibility to be innovative, as well as tailor their approach to ensure they achieve the maximum relevance in their own area. By equipping themselves with evidence gathered at the local level they will then be able to support / challenge the national or regional findings.

Being armed with detailed, objective data about the lives of older people, and the factors that impact most on their quality of life, could lead to a more holistic approach being taken on funding and delivering a whole series of support mechanisms and that existing support (such as free bus transport, community schemes to get people out of their homes and socialising, and digital inclusion programmes) might be seen in a broader context.

No, quality of life isn't necessarily about the money. But it can come down to how wisely the money available is actually being spent.

Tony Watts is Chairman of the South West Forum on Ageing
@tonywattswriter

In the Twittersphere, everyone can hear you scream



Today, (almost) everyone has the ability to be heard right around the world. The trouble is, not everyone has something

worthwhile to say, while others of us can soon regret clicking the ‘post’ button. Tony Watts has The Last Word.

I have to admit, I did feel a twinge of sympathy of the young girl who lost her post as ‘Youth Police Commissioner’ within a couple of media-hounded days of her appointment.

We all say stupid stuff sometimes. And daft things she put up on Twitter when she was just 14 were soon unearthed by a newspaper keen to discredit the seemingly revolutionary concept of a young person being able to bring something to the party in tackling youth crime.

Far better, they must have been harrumphing in the newsroom, to have some fusty old colonel “getting down” with today’s youth.

Be sure your sin will find you out. Years ago it took hard-nosed hacks days of doorstepping, slipping fivers into people’s top pockets whilst surreptitiously winking their eye, or reading back copies to pick up a whiff of scandal. These days it’s a matter of moments to track down a person’s entire Internet footprint.

The point now, though, it’s that it’s not just what we’ve done with our lives – but what we’ve said – that gets held up to excoriating scrutiny. No sooner has someone declared for a public office or upset one of the thought police running some

of our national papers, and the hounds of moral hell are let loose. (You know the ones: they live such blameless lives they feel they can moralise to the rest of us).

Of course if you’re big enough and brash enough to face down your critics, being “outspoken” can be deemed a virtue and virtually anything goes. Boris is perhaps our finest exemplar. But few of us have Boris’s chutzpah and daftass comments made in the heat of the moment or (worse) in a drunken haze on Facebook or Twitter can land you in a lot of trouble. Even years down the line.

The moral of this tale? Think before you commit to the ether.

But I have another overriding concern about the plethora of opinions and comment that now clog up the cloud. Very few people actually have anything meaningful or interesting to say. I’m a great advocate of blogs, but their great virtue is that they occupy a person’s own space. You go on there through choice. If you like what you read, you go back. That works.

However almost every news story now has comments posted on the end – and I’d say about ten per cent, tops, make a positive contribution to the debate. Most are badly expressed; many are deeply unpleasant; and if you make the mistake of putting up a post that someone disagrees with, the riposte isn’t a well-argued debunking of your theory but a stream of bile and invective.

The same rush to judge or spout out your own version of reality cuts in when a controversial story hits the headlines. Too many people dash lemming-like to pontificate on Twitter, usually without taking the time to get past the headline itself which (by its very nature) doesn’t tell the whole story.

Everyone, it seems, now has a voice, as well as an opinion. And I’m certainly not saying we should revert to the time when only the masters of the media controlled the expression of opinion in this country. I love the democratisation of the media. It can act as a bulwark defending essential freedoms. But when everyone is shouting at the top of their voice, the still, quiet voice of reason all too often gets drowned out.

