

Reference Group on Older People

Tuesday, 19th March, 2024

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE REFERENCE GROUP ON OLDER PEOPLE

Members present: Alderman Copeland; and
Councillors T. Brooks, Douglas and McCabe.

In attendance: Ms. J. Holland, Age Friendly Coordinator (temporary);
Ms. M. Higgins, Lead Officer - Community Provision; and
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Councillor Smyth.

Minutes

A Member referred to the previous minutes in which a query had been raised as to why political representation was no longer sought for Community Centre Committees.

The officer advised that she had sought advice from the Lead Officer, Community Provision, who had advised that the meetings had been poorly attended and there had been little demand locally. As a result, a new programme model had been developed which focused on external volunteers.

The Member stated that this was disappointing as she had welcomed the opportunity to engage with local users of the centres.

The minutes of the meeting of 12th December, 2023 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were recorded.

Update on Age-Friendly Belfast – Ms. J. Holland

The Age Friendly Coordinator reminded the Members that the action plan contained four separate themes, as follows, and she then provided an update on each:

1. Infrastructure/getting out and about.
2. Social connections
3. Health and wellbeing
4. Financial security/cost of living

Infrastructure

Age Friendly Design Principles

The Members were advised that the Age Friendly Coordinator, in partnership with the Age Friendly Coordinator in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council, had met again with Age Friendly Ireland to receive an update on the checklist for Age Friendly design for homes. Each of the Coordinators had also met with the planning and building control teams in their retrospective councils to assist in mapping some of the existing checklists and legislation in relation to Age Friendly Housing designs.

The Age Friendly Coordinators had reported back their finding to the meeting of the Age Friendly Network for NI meeting on 12th March and had sought clarity on the focus for the Age Friendly design principles in terms of whether it should be housing or more general infrastructure.

Social Connections

Connection Hub Update

The officer reported that, at the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership meeting in December 2023, a working group had been identified to develop the connection hub space for older people in 2 Royal Avenue.

She stated that it was hoped that through this space older people would have the opportunity to drop in and meet a friendly volunteer for a chat, which might help to combat feeling of loneliness or social isolation.

The Members were advised that there would be an information stand with information from different organisations and also the Belfast Trust health and wellbeing booklet- which people could be referred to if someone was in need of support from a particular organisation.

The officer advised that the working group, which was being led by the older people, had identified a space within 2 Royal Avenue and work was underway to furnish and brand the area. The Members were asked to note that there would be a soft launch on 20th March from 11.00 a.m. – 1.00 p.m. and that invitations had been issued to older people in the different Forums across Belfast to let them know about the space and to encourage others to drop in.

The first drop-in session had been scheduled for Tuesday 16th April 11.00 a.m. - 2.00 p.m. in 2 Royal Avenue and would take place every Tuesday thereafter.

She highlighted that as it progressed there would be further work involved in promoting the space and the option, with the additional funding of activities, to encourage use of the space.

The Members welcomed this initiative and stated that they looked forward to seeing it come to fruition and hoped that it would help ease the loneliness experienced by many in the city.

Health and well-being

The Members were advised that an additional £3000.00 slippage money from the Public Health Agency had been used to provide one session of dance and one session of yoga to 15 different groups across Belfast. Volunteer Now and Engage with Age had supported the project through identifying older people's groups who could benefit from these sessions in an attempt to increase physical activity during winter months when older people typically might not be out and about as much.

Financial security/Cost of Living

The Members were advised that through HASP meetings and seasonal planning meetings it had been identified that there was a shortage of winter warm packs for older people. As a result, slippage money within the Age Friendly budget had been used to purchase 155 packs and these had been delivered to Bryson for distribution whilst carrying out home safety checks.

The officer confirmed that there continued to be support for Cost of Living.

All Party Groups on Loneliness and Ageing and Older People

The Members of the Working Group were advised that, on Monday 26th February, a joint meeting of the All-Party Groups on Loneliness and Ageing and Older People had been held. Three speakers had attended. Mr. Sam Cunningham had provided a presentation regarding the work undertaken by Age NI's First Connect service to prevent and alleviate loneliness, Ms. Edel Quinn had addressed the attendees regarding her role in drafting the 2020 report on loneliness and Ms. Ciara McClements from Belfast Health and Social Care Trust had provided an overview of the Trust's Networks on a regional basis. There had been over 50 stakeholders in attendance to meet the MLAs, the majority of whom were older people. In addition, there had been calls for a motion of a loneliness strategy and investment in services that provide support to people who suffered from loneliness.

Internal Officer Working Group

The Members were advised that an internal BCC officer working group was being established to ensure that work which will benefit older people was undertaken through greater collaboration, sharing of information and resources to ensure that the needs of older people were being met.

The Working Group noted the update provided.

Volunteer Now Project Support – presentation by Lindsay Armstrong

The Chairperson welcome Ms. Lindsay Armstrong, Community Projects Manager, Volunteer Now, to the meeting.

She commenced by providing an overview of the role of Volunteer Now explaining that it was the lead organisation for promoting and supporting volunteering across Northern Ireland. Building recognition for volunteering and celebrating the contributions that volunteers make to society.

She advised that Volunteer Now provided training, information, guidance and support to volunteer-involving organisations on issues of good practice and policy regarding volunteering, volunteer management and governance.

The representative then provided the Members with an overview of the work undertaken by the organisation with vulnerable older people through the city which included detail in respect of its befriending, shopping and driving schemes. She explained that these schemes assisted older people by providing shopping support and driving people to hospital and medical appointments.

Other valuable programmes ran by Volunteer Now included monthly lunches, line dancing events, senior citizens forums located throughout the city, men's volunteering challenges and older men's health days and she provided details in respect of each of these initiatives explaining that they were often lifelines for vulnerable and lonely older people.

Several of the Members commended the work undertaken by the organisation and noted that loneliness was a serious problem to many throughout the city and stated that they hoped that 2 Royal Avenue could help assist with some of these initiatives. A Member also noted the need for volunteers to be trained in dementia symptoms and for volunteers to be supported in their role. The representative referred to the volunteers handbook and advised that volunteers were supported by other members of staff.

The Chairperson thanked the representative for the valuable work undertaken by Volunteer Now.

The Working Group noted the presentation.

Future Agenda Items

The Working Group agreed to invite representatives from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to a future meeting to provide an update in respect of its work around loneliness.

It was also agreed to organise a meeting of G6 in either September or December and to invite representatives of the Great Belfast Seniors Forum to a future meeting of the Working Group.

Chairperson