

Reference Group on Older People

Tuesday, 16th September, 2025

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE REFERENCE GROUP ON OLDER PEOPLE

Members present: Alderman Copeland (Chairperson);
And Councillors T. Brooks, Douglas,
McCabe and Smyth.

In attendance: Ms. J. Holland, Age Friendly Coordinator;
Ms. M. Higgins, Lead Officer - Community Provision; and
Mr. B. Flynn, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies were received.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 10th June, 2025, were adopted.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest reported.

Update on Age Friendly Belfast Plan and other activities

The Reference Group considered the undernoted report:

1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

- 1.1 To update members on the Age Friendly Belfast activities and priorities for the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership's (HASP) third year of the Age Friendly Plan.**

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to note the updates provided on the Age Friendly Belfast activities and priorities for the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership's (HASP) third year of the Age Friendly Plan.**

3.0 Main report

3.1 Key Issues

Age Friendly Belfast Plan 2023 – 2027

Members will recall that the plan focuses on the following key themes.

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

3.2 Infrastructure

Age Friendly Design Principles

The Age Friendly Coordinator as part of the Age Friendly Network NI housing subgroup issued a housing survey across Belfast to gauge older people's issues in terms of housing needs. The survey closed on 30th June 2025 and a total of 1232 surveys were completed from across Northern Ireland. Following a quotation process, Social Market Research were appointed to collate the findings from the surveys and include some recommendations. The findings from the report will help to advise and influence policy makes, housing providers, designers and developers on the housing issues and needs of older people. It is hoped that this report will be available to show at the Age Friendly Summit in November.

3.3 Social Connections /health and wellbeing

Positive Ageing Month

Back for its tenth year, positive ageing month will once again highlight the different activities and events on offer to older people across Belfast providing lots of opportunities to get involved.

Partners from different organisations have submitted events to be included in the Positive Ageing Month booklet. This year's booklet has taken on a slightly different design to highlight some of the main events, and there will be more information on the Belfast City Council website to ensure that ongoing programmes are available to view all year round. This is based on some feedback received about the availability of events/programmes for older people outside of Positive Ageing Month.

Booklets will be available across Belfast in Community Centres, Leisure Centres, Libraries and the City Hall. They will also be distributed to the Greater Belfast Seniors Forum to pass onto their members and networks. A link to the webpage will be circulated to the Age Friendly distribution list- which has over 300 contacts.

The Age Friendly Belfast events include:

- 7th October - Tea dance in 2 Royal Avenue

- 9th October - Walking tour of Friars Bush Graveyard
- 15th October - Movie in the City Hall (singing in the rain)
- 20th October - Walking tour of Shankill Graveyard
- 22nd October - Tour of library at the University of Ulster, Belfast
- 28th October- Talk on the Life and Times of Mary McCracken

Grapevine Connection Hub update

Based on feedback from the participants, some taster activity sessions have been organised and they include boccia, armchair aerobics and Chi Me. These are being funded by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Loneliness Network. Part of the funding is also being used to produce a handbook with details to guide other organisations wanting to replicate similar programmes. The Grapevine steering group, which is made up of the Age Friendly volunteers and partner organisations have met to agree the content for the guide and have also decided to produce a short video to accompany the guide. The filming for the video took place on 2nd September in 2 Royal Avenue and included recordings from the volunteers and participants.

The monthly Fix IT session with Ignite IT organised by the Super connected Communities Project Officer continue to offer people the opportunity to bring along smartphones/ laptops/ tablets for basic repairs& maintenance or IT advice.

It is available the first Tuesday of the month in 2 Royal Avenue and during October will be available every Tuesday, to coincide with the Grapevine session.

Age Friendly Tea Dances

At the September Tea Dance ahead of Falls Prevention week, The Falls Prevention Team from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust provided an information stand and were able to advise on some tips for preventing falls and also provide information on how to join their strength and balance programme.

There are further tea dances planned for October and December, however no tea dances can be planned beyond this period as the future of the building at 2 Royal Avenue remains unknown. The Tea dances and the Grapevine connection hub are both based in 2 Royal Avenue and without this space it would greatly impact the running of both programmes. 2 Royal Avenue was chosen due to its ease of accessibility and as

result the numbers attending the tea dances frequently are 100 people and sometimes more. Recent evaluations from both of these programmes have shown how attending these increases people's wellbeing by connecting in with others.

Volunteer Celebration Event

Plans are underway with the Community Development Officer taking the lead in organising a volunteer celebration event in the City Hall on Wednesday 10th December 12-2pm. The event will be an opportunity to celebrate and thank older volunteers for the amazing work they carry out across Belfast. This year the event will link in with the Take 5 steps to wellbeing approach in relation to the volunteers and those they work with. All volunteers will be treated to some Take 5 activities, lunch and music with Rosey Hunter.

Financial Security/ cost of living

Some Winter warm packs are still available and there have been further deliveries throughout the summer months.

Age Friendly Summit

The Public Health Agency in partnership with the Age Friendly Network NI are organising an Age Friendly Summit to showcase examples of Age Friendly work happening across Northern Ireland in line with the World Health Organisation eight Age Friendly domains. The aim of the summit is to raise awareness of Age Friendly initiatives and their impact on older people, but also to identify the priorities for the future. The event is taking place on Tuesday 4th November in the Titanic Hotel, Belfast. The Age Friendly Coordinator sits on the working group for this and has provided a poster presentation using the Grapevine connection hub as a case study. As part of the housing subgroup the work carried out on the survey has also been submitted as a case study example.

Age Friendly Evaluation

The Public Health Agency currently funds the Age Friendly Coordinator posts across the 11 council areas, including Belfast. The funding for these posts is due to end next year and specifically for Belfast the funding will end on 31st March 2026.

The Public Health Agency have appointed an external consultant to carry out an evaluation of the impact of Age Friendly work, so that a business case can be presented for more funding to enable the Age Friendly officer posts and coordination of the Age Friendly Plans to continue. The consultant will be talking to the Age Friendly Officers, partner organisations and others to help with the collation of the report. The Public Health Agency are hoping to present the findings from this at the Age Friendly Summit in November.

Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership (HASP)

At the HASP meeting on 18th June the priorities for the third year of the plan were agreed:

Infrastructure

- Develop a joined-up approach to engagement and co-design with older people on local and city centre developments
- Work to review and improve access to seating and toilets
- Review provision of seating and toilets in parks and open spaces in Belfast and identify gaps (including provision of radar keys)
- Carry out an audit of current public toilet usage and identify any barriers to use
- Explore 'take a seat' pilots in several areas
- Provide age friendly input into the development of parklets
- Public toilets in Belfast

Social inclusion

- Annual programme of activities (including PAM events)
- Connection Hub - Grapevine
- Seasonal planning/ citywide subgroups
- Dementia Carers Cafes- (Establishing a citywide group to report into HASP to ensure consistency across the city).
- Volunteer celebration event (Dec '25)

3.4 Health and wellbeing

- Ensure voice of older people is heard in discussions on access to services and influence new developments
- Support 600-800 older people most in need to improve mobility levels, feel more connected and less lonely.
- Involve older people in expansion of the 'Take 5 steps to wellbeing' approach (delivery to Grapevine volunteers).

3.5 Financial security

- Work to normalise and reduce the stigma of older people accessing financial entitlements and addressing debt
- Promote debt advice services to older people
- Review and support the wider policy level work on food and fuel poverty for example: increase uptake of reducing food waste cookery sessions and promotion of fuel stamps, promote links to foodbanks and social supermarkets
- Promote and support the Age at Work approach to recruit, retain and retrain workers aged 50 plus.

. Financial and Resource Implications

All work outlined in this report will be carried out within existing budgets and staff resources of Age Friendly Belfast and the partners involved.

**5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications/
Rural Needs Assessment**

This work is part of The Age Friendly Belfast Plan which has been equality and rural needs screened in line with the Council's agreed processes.

The Reference Group noted the information provided.

Warm and Well Project, National Energy Action

The Chairperson welcomed Mr. H. McVeigh, Project Coordinator for the Warm and Well Project, which was managed by the National Energy Action in Northern Ireland. Mr. McVeigh indicated that the project provided support to persons aged 65 years or older; those living with a disability or a long-term physical or mental health condition. In addition, the projects provided also support to households with young children (from new-born to school age); and people on a low income. He proceeded to outline the types of adaptations and support which was provided to enable households and properties to become more energy efficient.

The Working Group was then provided with an overview of the work, which was undertaken in consultation with the Council, which in 2024, had included the provision of 630 gas/electric vouchers to the value of £49, with households able to receive a maximum of two vouchers. In addition, NEA had enlisted 22 trusted stakeholders to support referrals and signposting services, particularly for vulnerable people who were finding it difficult to keep their homes warm.

Noted.

Engage with Age

The Reference Group welcomed Ms. M. Bolton, Chief Executive Officer with the above-mentioned group in Northern Ireland, who was in attendance to provide an overview on the work of the organisation. She explained that the organisation's mission was to empower older people to live happy, healthy, independent and more connected lives. The charity provided a range of services for individuals and older people's groups and forums, mostly in south and east Belfast.

She added that Engage with Age was in the process of delivering a three-year Strategic Plan and its main aims were:

1. to empower older people to reduce the impact of loneliness and isolation on peer individuals within their communities and neighbourhoods;
2. to empower older people to improve their own health and wellbeing;
3. to strengthen communities and neighbourhoods by supporting and empowering older people's groups and forums; and
4. to empower older people so they can shape matters that affect their lives.

The Reference Group was apprised also PAL (People Addressing Loneliness) Project, which was aimed at older people, but did not have a strict age limit, which focused on addressing loneliness and isolation. The project offered a range of group activities and telephone befriending to help people connect and stay active.

Ms. Bolton referred also to the Dementia Friendly campaign which operates in both east and south Belfast. The campaign delivered a range of Initiatives including a 'What's On Guide', dementia friendly coffee mornings; and dementia friendly telephone befriending for carers of people living with dementia.

Noted.

Positive Ageing Month

The Reference Group noted the range of events which would take place in October as part of Positive Ageing Month in October, which was a comprehensive programme of free events and activities for older persons. The Members thanked officers for the work which had been taken in collating the programme.

Any Other Business

The Reference Group was updated on the plans for the hosting by the Council of the Christmas annual tea dances and considered a range of options for alternative venues.

Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting was scheduled to take place on Monday 23rd February at 12:30pm in the Conor Room.

Chairperson