

Just Equal Treatment

On 16 October 2009, Age Concern Liverpool held its first Timelines Listening Event. The purpose of these events is to examine issues of importance to older people in detail and to provide older people with a platform to err their views and to make those views known to the people who have the power to change practice and policy to better meet their expressed needs.

The event was introduced by an expert in the field of the legal aspects of age discrimination, Mr Peter McKenna, who is a qualified solicitor with years of experience in this discipline. Mr Hugh Mouser, Campaigns Manager at Age Concern England and Help the Aged, also provided his insights gleaned over many years of campaigning against age discrimination.

Older people then had the opportunity to work in small facilitated groups to discuss the subjects of discrimination and ageism across all ages of life to highlight their frustrations and fears and to spotlight their aspirations for the future. In the afternoon we were joined by Brian Simpson MEP and Louise Ellman MP, who took questions arising from the earlier round table discussions and provided their informed view as leading policy makers into the matters that arose. The presence of MPs and MEPs ensured that the event was not just a talking shop, but was also able to influence people who were at the heart of policy and decision making in this country and beyond. This is of particular significance as European law now has such a profound affect on the way in which policy is enacted in Britain.

The key issues arising on the day are documented below and we are grateful to the MPs, MEPs, Peter McKenna, Hugh Mouser and the older people of Liverpool who participated so actively and expressed their views in such a constructive and forthright manner. Sadly as you will read below age discrimination is alive and well and is faced everyday by older people who do not get "equal treatment".

Housing

Supported Housing

A number of people expressed their dissatisfaction that older people moving into supported accommodation eg. sheltered accommodation are often forced into one bedroom properties even if their former home was a property with two or more bedrooms. Not only was this downsizing a source of anxiety, it also precluded the older person from having ready access to extra accommodation or family and friends to stay over when visiting.

The current trend of withdrawing onsite resident wardens to be replaced by peripatetic wardens was a source of concern. It was acknowledged that sheltered accommodation is usually fitted with a security/emergency response button, however, older people still felt that the delay in response caused by not having an onsite warden, could be a source of risk. Many older people

felt betrayed by the withdrawal of the wardens since they had entered sheltered housing because of the presence of an onsite warden and they would not have committed to living in supported housing without the availability of this support mechanism.

General Purpose Housing

There was considerable support for the concept that all new homes should be designed to lifetime home standards with inbuilt flexibility to accommodate all of a person's life stages within the dwelling. It was also noted that the older generation is often smaller in height than subsequent generations and this should be taken into account, but often isn't when homes are modified.

It was acknowledged that there is a high demand for bungalows within the social housing sector and as a result older people felt that no person should be able to retain the tenancy of a bungalow if they did not require it by reason of disability.

The qualitative differences between registered social landlords were highlighted by the older people's focus groups and it was felt that there should be a greater standardisation and higher quality of treatment for older people across the board from all registered social landlords.

It was acknowledged that Age Concern Liverpool provide considerable assistance to enable people to stay in their own home, but it was felt that this was not promoted enough within the city and particularly by the hospitals when older people were coming home after hospitalisation.

Some of the older people had registered with the Council's "assisted list" for refuse services. There were complaints that despite this, often their bins were not collected or returned and that disabled older people were required to struggle outside and try to manoeuvre a large heavy bin at considerable risk to their person.

Moving into residential and nursing homes

There were a number of very strong views expressed in relation to the financial aspects of moving into residential and nursing homes. Older people were outraged that they were expected to sell their home in order to fund this form of accommodation and care. Comments included "why should we have to sell our house when we have worked all our life to earn it"? "We wanted to give an inheritance to our children", "it is wrong that those who save to buy their own house are deprived of the asset when those who have squandered their money have it all paid for them".

Communities and Neighbourhoods

The main theme to emerge was the gap between the younger and older generations and the fear which many older people have of either violence or nuisance caused by gangs of young people.

The subject of an older people's village was discussed, but there was no consensus view. Some people thought that these villages represented a haven where older people could flourish, others that they were more of a prison introducing generational segregation which some believed would lead to increased intergenerational friction.

Several participants noted the difference in the level of respect that elders are held in within the British culture and as compared to older people from other cultural groups many of the BME communities still retain a culture of respect for their elders which is sadly missing in British society.

Participants discussed the way that older people with disabilities are treated by the statutory services. Generally it was felt that the services projected a friendly face, but were hard to access and not responsive. The biggest negative issue with statutory services was the lack of personalisation and the use of rules, restrictions and health and safety regulations as excuses to limit provision.

Employment/Retirement

The group agreed that there should not be a mandatory retirement age, but that older people should be allowed to retire at a time when they think it is appropriate. On this basis some would have stayed on at work post 65 but many were happy to retire at an earlier age.

The older people interviewed were sensitive to the needs to younger job hunters and suggested that older workers could have a phased retirement incorporating part-time working where they could mentor younger entrants into the job market so that younger people would do better within their chosen employment field.

Some older people felt that they have been forced out of employment because of the ageist attitudes within their workplace. Stories were told of discrimination in respect of training against older people and hostility manifested by some younger employees. The group also felt that often it was cheaper to hire a younger person because they would start off on a lower salary scale and this gave employers an incentive to force retirement.

Pensions

Members of the group were angry that those people who had been hardworking and frugal throughout their lives and had savings or private pension, were taxed on these sums and were not eligible for benefits while those who had not worked or saved had access to a much broader range of state support.

There was consternation that the pension age for women had changed so that women who are now in their 40s will now not be able to get their state pension

until they are 65. A further issue specific to women was the confusion and misleading advice that many women felt they had received over the married woman's stamp. It was not until they retired that they found out that their pension was very low. It was noted that the Government proposals to do away with cheques would curtail the ability of volunteers to collect older people's pension for them. Older people were worried that this vital service maybe curtailed as a result of this blanket ruling on cheques.

The consensus was that the pension should be linked to earnings and it was reinforced that the state pension is not charity, older people have paid tax all their lives and have a right to state pension. Considerable dismay was expressed over the derisory 25p increase to the state pension given to those 80 and over.

Benefits

Several key themes emerged from this focus group: firstly older people felt here was a lack of awareness and information in respect of availability and eligibility for benefits. It was suggested that rather than having to apply for everything or find out by accident if it exists for your entitlement, that all pensioners at the point of retirement, should be made aware of their entitlements. The second common theme was the difficulties experienced in completing application forms for welfare benefits. The participants noted that the forms were often lengthy, bureaucratic, confusing and complicated. Those relating to disability benefits were also felt to be intrusive.

There was anger expressed at the current policy which ends entitlement to mobility allowance for people over the age of 65, as participants pointed out this is usually precisely when you need it the most.

There were mixed feelings about the discounts and allowances given by many private sector businesses eg. 10% off at B&Q, discounts at the hairdressers etc. Some of the participants thought that these discounts were helpful and took advantage of them, others found them patronising and ageist and felt that a decent pension should be provided so that discounts were not needed. Reassuringly for Age Concern Liverpool and Sefton, several participants commented on the quality of the charity's advice provision and how it helped people through the maze of the benefits system.

Insurance

The subject of travel insurance produced the most heated debate and the greatest consensus of the day. All of the participants agreed that travel insurance discriminates against older people and there was considerable anger that this limited the ability of the retired to travel abroad and to visit family etc.

Some participants also pointed out that car insurance seems to go up with age and yet all of the research seems to demonstrate that older people have less accidents than their younger counterparts.

Services

Hospitals

Most of the participants felt that older people get a poor deal from hospitals. There were complaints that older people are seen by the junior staff, the older people are patronised by the clinical staff, frequently being called “dear” and that older people’s appointments are more frequently cancelled than those of the young. The general conclusion was that older people are at the bottom of the pecking order.

There was concern expressed about the quality of support within the hospital environment, particularly for those who required assistance with meals. There were a number of stories of older people who could not feed themselves, who despite the new red tray initiative, were still left to fend for themselves. Often with the consequence that they became weaker and more ill.

Several participants said that older people should be more assertive but that in reality they are frightened to complain or challenge the hospital staff, in case this affects their treatment.

Care

Many of the participants were dissatisfied with the social care regime. Older people felt that the services available were very limited and did not include practical support or assistance with maintaining personal hygiene. It was also felt that the visits made by professional carers were far too short; one person told of visits in 15 minute blocks. Additionally a number of older people complained about the variation in the standard of care depending upon which part of the city you live in, with the only consistency being that the care provided is very expensive.

A few of the participants complained that they had an unreasonable wait in order to access the Direct Payments Service.

GPs

Generally most of the participants were satisfied with their GP, however, this didn’t stop a number of complaints from arising. Some participants expressed their misfortune in that they had an ageist GP and a number of participants said that doctors tend to see the age of the person and not their individual medical complaint. The delay in being able to access GP appointments was also a frustration for many participants and several mentioned the difficulty in accessing flu jabs because of the location they were dispensed from.

End of Life Pathways

A great deal of concern and anger was expressed at the thought that resuscitation decisions were made extremely quickly and that decision to withhold treatment on the grounds of age was sometimes made without due consultation with the relatives of the ill person or without consideration of the individual's wishes expressed before their illness. Participants were concerned as being seen as living too long and concerned that this could be euthanasia by the back door.

It is worth noting that the vehemence of these views and the concern expressed partially resulted from a very high profile non resuscitation case, which had occurred only two days before the event was held.

Shops

The overwhelming message from older people was that they felt younger shop assistants didn't understand them and couldn't be bothered to help them.

Education

Many of the participants were extremely disappointed that these days only accredited examined courses are offered not those courses put on simply for the job of learning or experiencing new things. The participants felt that this was a grave mistake as they felt that keeping the mind and body active through adult education actually constituted a saving in the long term to the statutory providers, as mentally and physically active people had less need of expensive care services.

Modern Technology

The strong view held by the participants was that older people who were generally less computer literate or don't own a computer are discriminated against in all walks of life because of the predominance of the internet as a source of information and low cost goods.

Several participants said that all pensioners should have broadband provided free to encourage digital inclusion.

Transport and Travel

The key issue was the value older people placed on the free bus pass. The participants greatly valued the freedom the bus pass provided and would bitterly oppose any attempts to remove this age related concession.

Many of the participants felt that with increasing age and more limited mobility public transport became more difficult to use, in particular because the bus stops were located too far from the amenities they were meant to serve.

Many participants also noted there is a distinct lack of seating and a lack of public toilets, both of which discriminated against older people who tend to suffer more frequently from mobility difficulties and incontinent issues.

Finally, participants were dismayed about the lack of information and signage to assist public travellers on transport and whilst it was acknowledged that railway stations provide additional help especially for disabled people, some participants felt that because these arrangements need to be booked in advance, this was discriminatory and some of the station's staff made the older people feel like a nuisance if they required assistance to travel because of their disability.

**Report by Dil Daly
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