

Involving older people in improving their well-being

Shaping our Age

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Introduction

Shaping Our Age is a unique collaboration which aims to provide answers fit for our time in response to the new and emerging issues around ageing which now face us all. It has two key concerns: older people's wellbeing and their involvement. What is special about this national project is the way that it seeks to connect and interweave the two. This is especially important because of the frequent failure to involve older people in issues affecting their lives. Shaping Our Age is essentially about involving older people in improving their wellbeing. It is a collaboration between a major older people's charity, two university centres with special expertise in this area and most important older people themselves.

Background

Recent political and public interest in the idea of 'wellbeing' signals a shift away from policy approaches based on putting things right that have already gone wrong, to an holistic approach which emphasises prevention and seeks to see people in the round. So instead of a 'sickness' approach which focuses on illness, or a 'welfare' one preoccupied with 'special interventions', breakdown and disadvantage, the emphasis is placed on healthy living and fostering strong communities.

Three key points need to be made about the wellbeing debate. First, so far it has still mainly been medically and health based, rather than paying equal attention to social and other issues that impact on people's lives. Second, it has tended still to rest on 'expert' and professional judgements of what constitutes wellbeing and third it has paid little attention to older people's voices, focusing on other groups and their valuable take on wellbeing has largely been overlooked.

Shaping Our Age challenges this. It takes as its starting point working out with older people what wellbeing means to them and then working with them to find ways to support, enhance and maximise their self-defined wellbeing. The WRVS has committed itself to incorporating the lessons learned from this initiative in its own future operation. It thus provides both a test ground and a jumping off point for a new participatory approach to older people's wellbeing that has potential wider relevance nationally and internationally.

Big changes framed in negatives

Two sets of fundamental changes in relation to ageing are currently taking place which have both so far tended to be framed in negative terms. Yet both provide major opportunities for improving the life chances of older people. These changes provide the context for Shaping Our Age and are the rationale for its development. The first of these changes is a demographic one. The numbers and proportion of older and very old people in our society have and will continue to grow significantly. This has tended to be presented as a burden and problem, with older people framed as passive and with greatly increasing needs expected to come the way of public services because of a rapidly rising incidence of physical and mental frailty.

At the same time our capacity to pay for such needs is seen to diminish as a smaller proportion of people of working age are predicted to have to meet the greatly increased 'cost burden'. Current economic difficulties, of course, are seen to add to this problem.

The setting of such a scenario, however, misrepresents the reality and oversimplifies the economics. It ignores the gains of living longer, the many ways that older people contribute, the bonds and inter-actions between generations and makes unevidenced assumptions about the health risks of extended age. It is stuck in traditional service-based models of support which ignore the key part that policies and practice based on seeing and valuing the whole person can play in maintaining capacity, confidence and contribution.

Shaping Our Age: A new start

The project

The project works to support older people to define well-being and measures of their well-being; identify innovative ways for older people individually and collectively to improve their own well-being; provide the evidence base and tools needed for WRVS and other providers to transform the support they offer to improve older people's well-being; and for all providers, commissioners and policy makers to put well-being, as defined by older people, at the centre of their work.

By developing creative, proactive and mutually supportive approaches we aim to help older people remain active members of strong communities and reduce their need for high intensity services. This is vital given the increasing needs of an ageing society, ever tighter resources for state support and the demands of equalities legislation.

A defining feature of Shaping Our Age is that right from the start, older people themselves have been and will continue to be involved in every aspect and every stage of the project. They make up the majority of the project's reference group which is chaired by an older person. A partners' group of senior representatives from other organisations across the older people's sector will also support and bring their valuable experience to the project. Shaping Our Age is a three-year action research project which will work within five existing WRVS projects to

develop pioneering approaches based on user involvement paying particular attention to groups facing especial barriers to participation. The learning gained will be used to transform all WRVS services, and disseminated across national/local government, NHS, third sector and other providers. Findings will help promote a culture shift towards a user-centred and human rights based approach to understanding well-being and tools to deliver it, offering benefits to the wider UK older population.

An ageing society, increasing support needs, limited funding and age equality/human rights issues underline the need to find innovative ways of enabling older people to improve their well-being. This research is a creative response to this, moving beyond the current focus on 'informal carers', towards enabling proper resources for mutual support.

The method

The project will help widen existing narrow definitions of well-being and include the importance of partnerships, social roles and networks to do so. It will support and enable older people to define a meaningful range of well-being indicators; and identify innovative participative activities promoting older people's well-being at individual and collective levels, in relation to these indicators. Both in its process and outcomes, Shaping Our Age will include the wide diversity of older people. This means ensuring that the voices and needs of all older people are heard, including very old and 'younger old people', black and minority ethnic older people, older people living in residential and supported settings, in the country and lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgendered older people. It also means addressing older people's individual and collective voices and the political, policy and other differences that there are within the four member countries of the UK, Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

A way ahead

By starting with what is important to older people in their lives, Shaping Our Age will engage with some of the key debates of our time:

- How can we link the voices of older people with current debates around the future of social care?
- Making links with the development of the Outcomes Framework for social care and contributing to the emerging joint working arrangements between health and social care at a local level.
- What part can older people play in Big Society?
- How can we make the most of the finite resources we have to support and look after each other?

Shaping Our Age provides an opportunity to harness the positive potential of older people, while ensuring them the kind of support they want to meet the challenges they see as important. At the same time it will provide tools, models and new approaches to build structures for support that match our daily lives rather than restricting us to an old style service system.

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