Older people: Knowsley Council’s community engagement project

writes Rob Bullard

Like other community engagement initiatives before it, people were sceptical of the chances of the Knowsley Older People’s Voice (KOPV) when it launched. They had seen community engagement projects come and go, and statutory organisations pay lip-service to consultation. But this hasn’t been the case with KOPV in Merseyside, and the partnership that gave birth to it.

“We wanted to move away from services that reacted to a crisis to ones that promoted independence and well-being,” says Amanda Risino, director of service provision and lead officer for older people at Knowsley Council, when explaining the aims of the joint working that has taken place between the council and primary care trust.

Central to this has been the two organisations’ commitment to taking on board the needs and wishes of older people. “We view them as active and valuable citizens in the community - experts in their own right,” says Risino.

In 2002, about 40 people turned up to hear Risino and her colleagues talk about their plans for consulting older people. This group is now formalised as KOPV, and has grown to more than 300 members. “We saw them as a group to bounce ideas off, but they have become highly skilled and knowledgeable individuals,” says Risino. “They are setting the agenda and driving change. It’s true community leadership.”

Josie Melia is the assistant involvement officer, whose job is to support and facilitate KOPV. She has lived or worked in three local authorities, but has never seen anything like what goes on in Knowsley. “It is quite a shock to see how much integration there is between health and social care. The willingness of organisations to really work with the public is amazing.”

As an example of the council and PCT’s work, Melia cites their recently produced information pack for older people. It covers five sections, including health and safety and home life, and gives advice on resolving more than 50 typical problems. For example, “I can’t bend down to reach electric plugs and sockets. What can I do?” Answer: “Accident prevention can do a home safety assessment and install items to make your home safe. Contact”

“Older people told us what they wanted, and we listened,” says Melia. “We formed a working group to design it with them and found the money to produce it. There was even a six-month trial, as a result of which the pack’s format was changed.”

KOPV chair Sheila Bursin says: “We may not move fast, but our brains are still active and we have a wealth of experience.”

There are three areas where she thinks the group has been most influential: service delivery, representation on local organisations and changing policy.

“We made a DVD of a typical journey by someone in a wheelchair,” says Bursin. “Council officers who watched it hadn’t a clue how difficult it can be when there are no dropped curves on the pavements.”

KOPV also feeds into the design of local housing for people needing extra care because, as Bursin puts it: “How do others know what older people want and require?”
And they sit on numerous committees: older people have a place on the local hospital board where Bursin’s husband was one of several who helped them improve their signage. And they helped to recruit a nurse consultant to work with older people.

She says the differences they have made have been "wonderful". For example, benefit assessments no longer have to be done by completing a form, now older people can choose whether they are assessed face-to-face or over the phone and a chiropody scheme has been made more user-friendly.

There are plans for the future as well: KOPV has bid for a webcam to be installed in a nursing home, so that those who cannot make it to meetings can still be consulted.

"People were sceptical when the Voice was set up," admits Bursin, "but now they recognise it has made a difference."

The members are also happy. In a recent survey, 95% felt their views were taken into account and 75% said their quality of life had improved since joining.

So what is the secret behind their achievements? Bursin believes she knows: "You have to have the right people - at the PCT and council - in the right job to motivate staff and among older people as well to encourage others."

KOPV is "one of the most significant achievements" of the partnership between the council and PCT, agrees Risino. "It's what we envisaged from the start, but has become a bigger beast than we expected. At times it has been scary - and they have challenged us - but it has been a very productive relationship."

Tips for projects

- Older people are experts at being old - not directors or middle managers of any organisation - so learn from them and use them.
- Real results can happen from working in partnership. But, like a long-lasting marriage, it requires being willing to listen to each other.
- Be prepared to invest money, time and effort into developing your partnership. Spending time together is not a waste of time.

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