

## Item 5

### **Improved working for Brighton & Hove's Older People's Council A report by Laura Murphy, CfPS Expert Advisor**

*The Older People's Council (OPC) exists to serve older people in Brighton & Hove. The OPC works to ensure that all older people in Brighton & Hove are treated with respect and dignity and have access to services, support and opportunity to lead a fulfilling life.*

*Members of the Older People's Council work to help create a city where:*

- The contribution of all older people is acknowledged and valued*
- The needs of older people are recognised and met*
- Older people are involved in the making of decisions that affect their daily lives and the communities in which they live*

## Background

The OPC was set up in November 2001 by Brighton and Hove City Council following a European model of Older People's Councils. It is a body supported by, but independent of, the Council. It has four-yearly elections and the most recent was in May 2011.

There has been an increasing emphasis by central government on involving older people in commenting and shaping future services. Locally the OPC is seen as fundamental to achieving those policy objectives. There is a commitment to the OPC from the current administration. External funding was secured to investigate how the OPC can contribute more effectively to the Council's scrutiny process following the principles of the Ageing Well Programme.

## Methodology

After reading background information and having observed an OPC meeting, I interviewed all OPC members for 30 minutes either face to face or over the phone during a 10 day period. I asked each member two questions:

1. What was it about OPC that attracted them?
2. If they had a blank sheet of paper what would OPC look like, do, for them to be able to call it a success at the end of their term?

Follow-on questions were asked and the resulting conversations form the basis of this report. There were no conversations with BHCC members or partners to ascertain their perspectives on the OPC or how it operates. Any comments relating to BHCC and partners therefore, are based upon the OPC members' perceptions.

This report should be read in conjunction with the December 2011 presentation "Developing Capacity within the OPC".

## Executive Summary

With a new intake of members, the OPC continues to attract individuals who “want to make a difference” to their local community. However, even after 10 years, it has a very limited profile so there were insufficient candidates for the number of places in the most recent elections.

The OPC operates within a crowded arena but it has the clear advantage of being the only organisation that can truthfully say it represents older people within the city. Its democratic credentials is a two edged sword however as, whilst it gives OPC a position, it also implies a responsibility to prove its worth. It confers a level of respect but its authority has yet to be fully explored. It is operating as a loose collection of individuals with little sense of it being a cohesive body with a strategic approach to its work. In addition it is difficult to identify where it has made a significant difference in relation to challenging partner organisations in improving service delivery.

There is an expressed desire for the OPC to be “taken seriously”, for it to have a strong identity, to “have a strong voice” at “Board level” and to “get things done”. It is strictly non-political but there is still a wish to be involved in campaigning by the majority of members, “We should be older peoples’ guardians”, “We’re too nice”, “We should lobby”, “We should get angry” reflects that drive to make the significant difference. Any proposal to improve OPC’s effectiveness has to take into account the capacity of the OPC members and the limited resources available to them.

Collectively insufficient names were put forward for the last election resulting in elections in some areas, uncontested seats in others and none in others. The end result is that the OPC membership is depleted so any work has to be shared across fewer numbers until co-optees are identified.

## Key Recommendations

- The OPC should be more structured in its approach and utilise a scrutiny methodology for the work it undertakes and agree an annual work programme that prioritises 3-4 key pieces of investigation
- Become more of the critical friend to the Council and partners rather than monitor.
- Increase contact with the local community and raise its public profile
- Identify additional sources of funding to support its activities
- Reconsider how nominations are sought and elections held in 2015

## Findings

For ease of reference, findings as to whether the OPC is fit for purpose, fulfilling its objectives and can improve its effectiveness are listed in relation to the declared OPC commitments. In addition, with every commitment, the “so what” question should be considered. Asking, by doing this, what difference will the OPC make to its declared aim of ensuring that, “*Older people are involved in the making of decisions that affect their daily lives and the communities in which they live.*”

### **1. We will *listen to older people in the City and work closely with other local older people’s groups and organisations***

When asked how OPC members listen to older people the majority felt this occurred because they attended numerous meetings where other older people were either

represented or attended. When pressed as to how they garnered the concerns of individual older people in their areas, some were approached directly as they were known but in general there was no overall strategy for doing this. (See commitment 2.)

There is clear evidence that that OPC are working alongside other older people's groups but whether it could be said that they are working closely **with** them is open to question. OPC are operating in a crowded market and it is only recently that they have begun to work collaboratively with Age UK and PAG so any joint working is in early stages of development, if at all.

## **2. We will *publicise* our work through meetings and the local press and media**

All OPC members complained about the difficulties of getting their message out into the media generally and publicising their existence. This is not unique to the OPC however. The lack of an identity, or brand awareness, significantly hinders both the work of the OPC and its long-term sustainability. As one OPC member said, older people don't go to meetings, so it is important that OPC make an impact through other means.

There was a large amount of ire expressed at the higher profile of Age UK and PAG and consequent funding. Undoubtedly the direct funding received by the OPC is extremely small and does not allow for major pieces of work such as the PAG community worker. Having a limited budget means that it is even more important to have a marketing strategy. The OPC's work to date is largely "back office" and although important has not resulted in many column inches and its profile remains poor. Imaginative and effective publicity can be generated on a shoestring provided there is a clear focus on the market, the purpose and intended outcomes. And provided the work that it is doing has some impact. The OPC would benefit from additional support both financially and in relation to publicity.

## **3. We will *monitor* the City Council, local health trusts and other providers of goods and services by making sure that we are represented on the appropriate committees and forums.**

The OPC has good representation and is consulted widely on policy development and research. They have been involved in some valuable joint work on developing housing policy for example. However, there is still a feeling within the OPC members that the OPC is not sufficiently respected by Brighton & Hove Council.

It would appear that some City councillors do not believe in the OPC and there were examples where the OPC was not promoted by the Council, such as their contact details not being provided in the "Elder Abuse" paper. The question is – why?

The fact that it is the only democratically elected older people's body is its USP and holds sway with many, particularly for those outside of the Council. Respect comes not only from position but also from actions so does the actions of the OPC generate sufficient respect within the Council officer group and members?

## **3. We will *challenge disadvantage* experienced by older people by being watchful to ensure that all older people regardless of race, creed, sexuality or**

**ability, are given the same access to opportunity as every other member of society and are not discriminated against.**

This is the opportunity to demonstrate action at both a local and strategic level and must be supported by the activity under Commitment 1.

Most of the OPC members are, by nature or inclination, campaigners either covertly or overtly. Yet the protocol is that OPC do not get involved in case work, that this should be passed to the local councillor (some OPC members do however deal with case work). This lingering passivity may well be a result of previous difficult relationships with city councillors although the OPC has campaigned on individual issues, such as moving a bus stop. It is important that the OPC demonstrates that it does challenge and unless and until it demonstrates its independence as a body in its own right, its voice will be stifled.

There is an acknowledgement that by being involved in more strategic issues that affect the whole city, as well as locally, OPC will be better placed to challenge disadvantage. Certainly for anything to be allocated resources, it is imperative that the issue is highlighted as part of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. OPC has worked well on strategic issues such as medical cards, and such an approach would satisfy the members' desire to campaign. It would be important then for the OPC to be recognised at the wider level so that it can be involved with any JSNA work.

With the growing requirement to demonstrate accountability across all the public sector bodies, a strategic approach would not only enhance OPC's reputation, it could also generate improvements throughout the whole city. By raising its profile as an organisation that gets things done, the OPC can then put forward a compelling case to BHCC to increase their funding, and to partner organisations to also provide a continuing funding stream.

It is important to remember that challenge does not mean confrontation. Bearing in mind the CfPS principles, challenge is seen as being a critical friend: able to highlight where things are going well, but equally able to offer constructive criticism where the Council and partners are falling short of their duties and obligations. It allows for a different viewpoint to be heard and by doing so has the potential to reveal better ways of working.

Not having observed OPC members "in action" at a partner's meeting, I can make no judgement as to whether they actively challenge. The assessment of activities in relation to this report indicates that the OPC members sees OPC being used mainly as consultees and in a smaller proportion as co-workers on developing particular Council policies. There is some evidence of OPC seeking out issues upon which to campaign and therefore challenge but not yet at a level which matches the expressed desire.

The OPC would benefit greatly from having a more structured approach to its operations such as fast-track induction programmes, identifying how they can measure and publish their successes to residents and partners, how they can work together as a team, play to their strengths, how they work in collaboration with City councillors and others.

**4. We will *highlight goods, services and opportunities* that promote dignity and support older people to live independent lives where they want to.**

OPC produce their annual report, a leaflet, are developing their website and are involved with the local radio station “Grey Matters” but there was little evidence that this commitment to highlight goods, services and opportunities is being fulfilled. Indeed, there was a complaint that the OPC were not given city-wide information that they could pass on despite their requests.

They do gather a lot of information on general topics of interest but there does not seem to be a strategic approach to how or why this information is gathered and then passed to the residents in a timely manner.

**5. We will *promote the Human and Civil rights of older people by encouraging the provision and maintenance of a physical and social environment that enables older people to live productive and fulfilling lives.***

The OPC members may rightly say that they do this through their attendance at various meetings and as consultees. Certainly the desire to promote is strong. Whether the OPC make a difference in the provision and maintenance of an enabling environment is difficult to judge. If they are credited by other organisations for the work that they do and the difference they have made, that would go a long way to raising their profile and building respect.

## Recommendations

1. The OPC should be more structured in its approach and operations with agreed strategies for addressing key issues such as:
  - Agreeing specific aims and objectives for the forthcoming term of office and how to measure their success in achieving these
  - The role of joint working with the Council and partners in helping the OPC achieve their objectives
  - Increasing marketing and publicity to support their objectives
  - Co-opting members and generating interest for future elections
2. Review the effectiveness of governance arrangements
3. Agree a structured work plan for the year following the scrutiny principles
4. Enhance OPC’s relationship with the Council and its members
5. Agree a system of accreditation for OPC activity in partner’s reports
6. Actively engage as a critical friend to the Council and partners
7. Increase contact with the local community on a city-wide, planned basis
8. Identify additional sources of funding to enable OPC to expand its operations
9. Review electoral arrangements for 2015 with an option for city-wide multiple choice ballot
10. Agree an action plan and monitor improvements