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Collaborating Towards an Age-Friendly Northern Ireland

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This policy brief is based on a workshop 'Collaborating Towards an Age-Friendly Northern Ireland' which was held in Belfast City Hall on 7 October 2014. Jointly organised by the ARK Ageing Programme and Linking Generations NI, the event brought together practitioners, policy makers and researchers to explore how we can work together to create an age-friendly Northern Ireland. The aim of the event was to assess the usefulness of different approaches to age-friendly work, and of intergenerational practice in particular.

Context

The global population is ageing and this is a cause for celebration. At the same time, this brings challenges in terms of the need to ensure that societies respond appropriately. One way in which the World Health Organization has recognised the need to address this population change has been to create a Global Network of Age Friendly Cities and Communities[1]. Emerging from this are eight indicators which can be used to develop and measure age friendliness:

- Outdoor spaces and building
- Transportation
- Housing
- Social participation
- Respect and social inclusion
- Civic participation and employment
- Community and information
- Community support and health services

The World Health Organization and the International Federation on Ageing[2] describes an age-friendly world as a place which:

- Enables people of all ages to actively participate in community activities
- Treats everyone with respect regardless of age
- Makes it easy to stay connected to those around you and those you love
- Help people stay healthy and active even at the oldest ages
- Helps those who can no longer look after themselves to live with dignity and enjoyment

The European Union has set a goal for Europe to be Age Friendly by 2020, and the Dublin Declaration on Age-Friendly Cities and Communities in Europe 2013 was signed by elected representatives from over 60 municipalities. In the United Kingdom (UK), an Age Friendly Cities Network consisting of twelve cities, including Belfast, has been established. Belfast is the first place in Northern Ireland to produce an Age Friendly Action Plan – 'A City where Older People Live Life to the Full (2014-2017)'.

Workshop presentations

In the course of the morning, participants heard from speakers from a number of organisations: Age Action Ireland, Age Friendly Ireland and Age and Opportunity Ireland (Ireland); Generations Working Together (Scotland); Age-friendly Communities (Wales); Magic Me (England); and Linking Generations Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland). The ARK Ageing Programme Visiting Fellow[3], Nancy Henkin (The Intergenerational Center, Temple University, Philadelphia), provided an American perspective. Presentations can be accessed online at http://www.ark.ac.uk/ap/collab/

Summary of themes and issues emerging from speaker presentations

Speakers identified the way in which the age structure of the population in developed countries is changing, leading to an urgency to address the issues arising from changing population distributions.

Definition and vision
A number of speakers talked about the challenge in defining what is 'age-friendly' work, and that there are different understandings of the term. Some may interpret it as being about older people, whilst others take an intergenerational approach which is about young and older people, whilst others view 'age-friendly' work as spanning all ages.

The definition of 'intergenerational' is also open to interpretation. It has historically been understood as referring to relationships between young and old at the 'bookends' of the age spectrum. However, in the last few years, practitioners have increasingly come to regard *intergenerational* practice as synonymous with *all-age* practice. Therefore, the term 'all-age' work is now more commonly advocated, despite the fact that this practice is often still referred to as intergenerational. Other terms that could be used include 'ageing friendly' (which looks at the process of ageing from birth to death) and 'communities for all ages'.

The term 'all-age' approach was used in a number of presentations with the suggestion that this would be an easier term for people to understand. By using this terminology, it may make it easier to sell the value of the work and communicate the vision of an age-inclusive society. It was also suggested that an 'all-age' framework might be more effective in engaging younger generations in this type of work. In her presentation, Nancy Henkin proposed the use of 'Ageing Friendly' as an alternative term, suggesting that this may help younger people to understand the process of ageing.

An overarching point was the importance of vision. We should not be constrained by thinking about what might be possible in the short term, but instead, the focus should be on what is desirable and what is needed for a sustainable future. One example of this kind of forward-looking thinking was the vision of Ireland as 'the best country in which to grow older' (expressed by Age Friendly Ireland).

Value of the arts
Presenters gave examples of how work with schools and arts-based activities can be used as a way of connecting generations. Susan Langford from Magic Me talked about the organisation's philosophy of helping individuals to see where they fit into local communities. Underpinning this are five senses: a sense of purpose, a sense of place, a sense of adventure, a sense of occasion, and a sense of achievement.

Collaboration, partnership and 'buy in'
Collaboration emerged as a strong theme and was addressed in all the presentations. Participants were reminded that we need also to look beyond historic partnerships and develop 'unlikely alliances'. There were several examples of this including collaborations with youth groups, partnerships with universities in the south of Ireland, and examples of innovative collaborations with the private sector. It was also stressed that

effective collaboration is about building a *series* of relationships – with local and national government and the statutory sectors, between voluntary and community groups, and with businesses. Sometimes this is easy; sometimes it is more challenging and is about winning hearts and minds.

The importance of political 'buy in' by central government was stressed. A key point was that political endorsement of the vision of an age-inclusive society needs to manifest itself in policy and in strategy, but also in resources. Presenters spoke of how the opportunity to develop the positive engagement at local government level in the south of Ireland, Wales and Scotland may not have been realised had there not been political support at central government level. This discussion on the role of local government is particularly timely in Northern Ireland, given that new local authority structures have now been set up and community planning introduced. There was valuable insight into the experience of community planning in Scotland and how it has been an effective mechanism in getting intergenerational practice embedded across policy areas.

Developing the capacity for participating, influencing and challenging was a strong theme. This included the need for programmes to build confidence

for participation, to develop measures to support collective action, and to encourage people to take on leadership roles. Here again, it was argued, new local government structures may bring opportunities by accommodating more localism. The importance of bringing these issues to the forefront was highlighted. There was a strong call for re-igniting the social compact and building mutual respect and empathy to achieve a collective responsibility to build healthy, resilient, ageing communities.

Sustainability
The need to work towards sustainability was highlighted. This means that thought needs to be given about how to mainstream and move intergenerational work to centre stage. Fundamental to this is creating awareness of intergenerational and all-age work, stressing how these outcomes are of benefit to all of society, and how linkages within government departments can sustain funding support. Of particular importance is the applicability of intergenerational and all-age approaches to addressing a range of societal issues, as well as the contribution the work makes to key government policies and strategies, such as community safety, good relations, education, and health. Examples cited by a number of participants illustrated how the work is more likely to be

sustainable if the outcome of an age-friendly society is embraced by policy makers, with objectives to secure the outcomes embedded in structural change and policy.

Challenges and enablers
There was useful reference to 'challenges' and 'enablers' for organisations involved in intergenerational work. Challenges included enforced targeting, silo funding, gaining recognition of ownership of work and credit for work, challenging past ways of working, and adapting to changing policy and political contexts. Enablers included the positive outcomes to be gained by organisations sharing learning and workload, being clear about the benefits of the work and the beneficial impact on communities, maximising opportunities for influencing policy, and strong political leadership.

Roundtable and open discussions

The morning sessions were followed by small group, roundtable discussions and an open forum discussion. The key aims of this session were to give participants the opportunity to reflect and share views on what was said in the morning presentations; to discuss how an age-friendly Northern Ireland can be achieved; and to identify possible next steps – including collaborations,

partnerships, resourcing issues and opportunities for action.

To get the roundtable discussion going, five questions were posed, although groups were free to discuss any relevant issues:

1. What is/are the one/two things that struck people from the morning session? (This could be example of innovation, barriers, how a challenge was overcome, or a lesson learned)
2. What is the relevance of intergenerational relationships in creating an age-friendly Northern Ireland?
3. What do we need to do to incorporate and resource age-friendly approaches (including intergenerational work) at the local level?
4. What about the role of the Northern Ireland Government, in terms of policy and resourcing?
5. What collaborations/ partnerships are important?

Participants were then invited to provide feedback on one of the issues discussed at their table This was followed by an open discussion about these and other issues. To encourage open and frank debate, the discussion was conducted under the Chatham House Rule (meaning that the identity of the speaker is not revealed when reporting on the discussion). The following section summarises the issues discussed in this afternoon session.

Work to date
There was a consensus that there has been progress in relation to intergenerational work, both in terms of the profile of the work and its positive outcomes, and that support for the work is growing. A number of participants pointed to geographical disparities, with the North East and North West being areas where there had been fewer initiatives and where less had been done to raise awareness and provide opportunities for intergenerational work.

An observation made by many participants related to the appreciation of the range of projects and initiatives and the importance of fun. There were many references to the example of the 'cocktails in care homes' scheme presented by Magic Me and how it had effectively communicated the message that that an age-friendly approach to care is not just about 'service' provision. Putting more emphasis on fun would result in relationships developing more naturally.

Definitions
Throughout the discussion a number of different terms were used to describe the work, as is indeed the case in the academic literature. The point was made that definitional issues are important

if the message about the value of the work and its objectives are to be effectively communicated. Therefore, the key message needs to clearly understood from the outset. Comments on this topic included a discussion on how well understood some of the concepts were. For example, people often do not perceive themselves as doing intergenerational work even though they may be doing it. Furthermore, is the term 'intergenerational' a fully-inclusive term? Responses to this included the view that this type of practice clearly had to be labelled as 'intergenerational', otherwise it would otherwise not be funded and that the outcomes would be hard to measure. Age-friendly work should not be confined to what is normally considered 'older people', but should also relate to middle age. A subsequent point was that it should encompass *all* ages, as it would otherwise be hard to engage younger people.

Working together
Collaboration at different levels was identified as important for furthering progress in Northern Ireland. This includes collaboration between organisations working on older people's issues (such as Age NI, Age Sector Platform, and Pensioners' Parliament), as well as collaborations that are cross-sectoral, cross-UK, cross-border, and cross-generational. At the same time, local partnerships at the ground level are essential,

especially to avoid a 'one size fits all' approach. For example, the needs of rural areas may be different from those in urban areas. The identification of 'champions' at local and top levels was seen as a useful way of enhancing partnerships. It was also evident that some of the examples presented in the morning session around collaboration with the private sector had stimulated debate. Many participants agreed that it would be useful to explore links with businesses, as well as to identify the variety of forms this support could take.

There was much agreement on the need for political 'buy in', a concept highlighted in the morning presentations. There was quite a strong focus on the potential of the new 'super' councils in Northern Ireland to ensure that creating an age-friendly, or an all-age, society was a priority at local government level and to resource some of this work. Nevertheless, there was also a view that this potential would be inhibited if there was a lack of leadership from central government in Northern Ireland on age-friendly policies. At the heart of this was the embedding of an age-age lens in all government policies. Structures in Northern Ireland do perhaps present particular challenges given the large number of government departments; the role of non-governmental public bodies in the administration

and delivery of public services such as housing and social care; and the limited responsibilities of local government. Whilst inter-departmental strategies have been developed, the real challenge relates to the implementation of these and whether departments are willing to take on the ownership and resource allocation responsibilities required for effective implementation. This point was illustrated with examples of a number of inter-departmental strategies which cover all ages, including the anti-poverty strategy and the public health strategy. Reference was also made to a lack of clarity about how the Active Ageing[4] strategy will be rolled out across Northern Ireland.

Linked to the role of government were a number of themes around participation and influence. How well were people of all ages represented in decision making? Is there a need to make sure all ages are represented in decision-making forums, including those of funding organisations? It was argued that there are examples of funders having young people on their advisory panels, such as the Big Lottery. The question was posed about the extent to which it was considered as important to have older people represented on such panels. Northern Ireland does have a Commissioner for Older People and a Commissioner for Children and Young People

whose roles include advocacy and representation. There was some debate about the extent to which they should be working collaboratively and whether they should be looking at developing an intergenerational strategy for Northern Ireland.

Attitudes and stereotypes
A number of interrelated points were made about attitudes, the role of education and the need to tackle stereotypes. We do have some understanding of attitudes to ageing (see for example Northern Ireland Life and Times survey[5], and the ARK Policy Unit[6] roundtable on perceptions of stereotyping of young people). However, has there been sufficient focus on addressing these? Would more intergenerational practice help break down some of the stereotypes – for example around older people's fear of crime fear of crime or the view that young people are a threat to older people? For example, Linking Generations Northern Ireland has received funding from the Department of Justice to work with the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) to tackle fear of crime amongst older people through the promotion of all-age approaches. Should intergenerational practice start to tackle other challenging questions, such as dealing with the past in Northern Ireland, economic issues (for example, the debate about older people being a 'drain'

on resources, the legacy left by the baby boomer generation, or pensions), hate crimes, or whether 16 and 17 year olds should have the right to vote? Is intergenerational learning embedded in the educational system, including the curriculum? Do we need to look more imaginatively at the use of schools – including seeing schools as centres of community for all ages?

Funding and moving forward
Reference was made to the economy being the elephant in the room, and to the fact that for the foreseeable future the context would be one of austerity and public expenditure cuts. This gave rise to a number of questions including to what extent can a successful age-friendly society be achieved without funding? What can be done with limited resources? What is clear, it was argued, is that tighter funding creates a need for more collaboration. At the same time, the point was also made that there were things that could be achieved without additional funding, and that these required changing attitudes and mindsets, organisational cultures and more creative use of existing resources.

A theme running throughout the discussion was that there was a need to open up the debate and raise awareness about what an all-age friendly society would be like and what the benefits would

be for everyone. Participants returned to an initial point that progress was being made and that there was increasing focus on the issues. Whilst there were problems and challenges because of the structure of the devolved administration in Northern Ireland, nevertheless, if people in all departments worked through an all-age lens, the potential for further progress would be opened up.

Future action

Some further discussion of discussion and terminology may be useful with a view to ensuring that this is a concept which people of all ages can relate to, and that a clear message is being communicated about the value of the work and the objectives sought.

There was a strong feeling that this was an opportune time to ensure that an all-age approach was embedded in policy at all levels and that it would be worth investing time looking at policies and strategies being developed for the future. The draft Active Ageing Strategy for Northern Ireland recognised the global age friendly movement stating that '*Our vision is that Northern Ireland is an age friendly region in which people, as they get older, are valued and supported to live actively to their fullest potential with their rights and dignity protected*'. A number of other cross-departmental strategies are currently under

review or in development, including the Gender Equality Strategy, the Racial Equality Strategy and a strategy for Building a United Community. A Delivering Social Change consultation document[7] set out proposals to provide an integrated policy framework encompassing policy on children and young people, including child poverty and children's rights, and so there could be potential to build principles and measures into this which would support progress towards an all-age society. Fundamental changes to health and social care policy and provision will be introduced in the coming years with a strong focus on a shift from acute and institutional care to care in the community[8] and improving the health of the population[9]. The future funding of social care for older people and future models of entitlement and service delivery are issues which need to be approached from an all-age perspective. In addition, these go beyond health policy to include housing policy, urban planning and rural strategies.

Many people attending the event were optimistic about the potential of community planning. This was linked to views that community planning could facilitate more localism, a greater appreciation of local needs, and more opportunity for public and user engagement with policy and service planning. Therefore, it is worth investing time

to look at key policy documents in the future. Given that the new 'super' councils will not begin to operate until 2015 and that the development of community planning is at an early stage, now is a good time to begin to influence that process.

While it was accepted that there were other factors which were fundamental to achieving an all-age society, there was a robust argument made about the need for government and other funders to back up their commitment with financial and other support. This, it was pointed out, was not just about funding for projects, but about resources for services. It was clearly important to many participants that there should not be contradictory messages from government – for example by outwardly supporting 'age-friendly' work, whilst at the same time, implementing cuts to services which jeopardised this.

There would be value in exploring possibilities for new partnerships including with the universities and private sector organisations.

Collaboration with the private sector in this area of work in Northern Ireland is certainly very under developed and it would be worth looking in more depth at examples of partnerships which have worked well in other parts of the UK and Ireland, and internationally.

Endnotes

1   http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities_network/en/

2   http://www.ifa-fiv.org/who-age-friendly-world/

3   http://www.ark.ac.uk/ageing

4   Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (2014) *Active Ageing Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014-2020* http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/active-ageing-strategy-2014-2020-consultation.pdf

5   http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt

6   http://www.ark.ac.uk/policyunit/

7   Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (2014) *Delivering Social Change for children and Young People Consultation Document* http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/dsc-children-young-people-consultation-2014.pdf

8   DHSSPS (2011) *Transforming Your Care: A review of health and social care in Northern Ireland* http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/transforming-your-care-review-of-hsc-ni-final-report.pdf
and DHSSPS (2012) *Who Cares? – the future of adult care and support in Northern Ireland* http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/who-cares-future-adult-care-support-ni-discussion.pdf

9   DHSSPS (2012) *Fit and Well – changing lives 2012-2020* http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/fit-and-well-consultation-document.pdf

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Useful links

ARK Ageing Programme http://www.ark.ac.uk/ageing
Linking Generations Northern Ireland http://www.centreforip.org.uk/northern-ireland
Intergenerational Center, Temple University http://templeigc.org/
Age Action Ireland http://www.ageaction.ie/
Age Friendly Ireland http://agefriendly.ie/agefriendly/
Age and Opportunity http://www.ageandopportunity.ie/
Generations Working Together http://generationsworkingtogether.org/
Magic Me http://www.magicme.co.uk/

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