

# THE BENEFITS OF INDEPENDENT OLDER PEOPLES REPRESENTATION AND WHY ITS DEVELOPMENT SHOULD BE SUPPORTED

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## **Abstract**

### Purpose

This article sets out the advantages to local communities of independent representation of older people by older people through active and vibrant older peoples forums and groups and the rationale for Councils in Wales to support their revitalisation and development.

### Approach

The article describes how semi structured action research and follow up discussion and analysis over a 2-year period was undertaken by older people with representatives of Older Peoples Forums and groups to identify a strategy to restart and revitalise independent forums post pandemic to represent the voice of older people to government at all levels.

### Findings

Facilitation of the independent and self-determined voice of older people through genuine co-production with Forums can help Councils meet statutory duties and ensure their policies and services for older people are developed and informed from the direct experience of those receiving them. This will also help address the impacts of an ageing population and meet the national aim to create age-friendly communities across Wales

### Originality

In an ageing society older people should be empowered and enabled to make their own decisions. The principle of self-determination by older people for older people directly and through co-productive engagement with them by local authorities has meaning and purpose that should be promoted and implemented. If age-friendly communities are to be developed across Wales then collaboration on this basis is required including through independent 50+ forums in localities.

Key words ageing, older people, self-determination, engagement, co-production.

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## Summary

1. Findings from research undertaken by older people with older people's forums in Wales and follow up debate with their representatives revealed real benefits can be accrued by Councils from supporting engagement of these independent groups of older people:
  - The role of Local Authorities in Wales is crucial in both the strategic and operational implementation of plans to address the implications of an ageing population. The role and value of engagement with older people in their responses to this, through a "redistribution of power from policy makers to older people" is an important principle that will achieve more meaningful engagement.
  - In complying with their overarching duties under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 in respect of the United Nations Principles for Older Persons and co-production, there is a basis for Councils to support independent Forums as one response to these statutory duties and commit some limited capacity and resources to them.
  - The main principle of the need for an independent 50+ forum /group is that the independent voice of older people can be heard and acted upon in each Council area, contributing on the basis of self-determination and without "fear or favour".
  - Recognition and development of age-friendly communities in Wales must be based on co-productive engagement of older people if the World Health Organisation requirements are to be met.
  - Forums can provide direct experience of the impact of both increasing living costs and the Covid pandemic and represent the voice of older people locally in development of policy responses by Councils.
  - Working with Forums/Groups on projects can have mutual benefit and promote the work of the Council in a practical way that can far outweigh the minimal costs to Councils and provide for good value for money.
  - Further action is needed nationally and locally to identify, exemplify, promote, and embed good practice in engagement of older people in Wales. Publication of a framework of criteria for engagement with older people would help to promote greater consistency, sound principles and fair expectations about how older people are engaged in Age Friendly Community recognition and development.
  - Forums are variable across the country and the need for them to be strengthened and regenerated has been identified including new

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recruitment. If the independent voice for older people provided through local 50+ Forums is to be maintained in future a concerted programme of action is needed.

## Methodology

2. A methodology was established in summer 2020 to undertake a review of engagement with 50+ Forums in Wales that sought to establish a dialogue with each Forum Chair/Vice Chair individually. To ensure genuine and effective engagement a named “partner trustee” was identified who undertook interviews. Whilst these could be described as semi-structured, the main questions posed can be summarised as: i. What are local circumstances of your Forum? ii. what are the barriers and solutions to your Forum making progress? iii. How best can the two-way flow of views and information between your Forum and COPA be improved? iv. What support do you think would be helpful? This initial dialogue with Chairs/Vice Chair of the 17-member county-based forums sought to find out some key facts rather than being any comprehensive evaluation at that stage. The outcomes of these discussions were published in a Report “The Future of 50+ Forums in Wales – Delivering Age friendly Communities” (COPA 2021) – summary at (Appendix 1).
3. During 2021 and 2022 and within the constraints of the circumstances of the pandemic, an iterative collective dialogue to follow up the Report findings was maintained with Forum Representatives – Voting Members - at the COPA monthly meeting held virtually. Updates and regular discussions were held and information issued for consultation about how in the light of the consequences of the impact of the Covid pandemic, Forums could be re-started and a programme of reform and revitalisation could be shaped and implemented. A Forum development plan was utilised to focus the dialogue This article presents a summary of the findings from the report and analysis of discussions about its implementation to date.

## Introduction

### Ageing Populations

4. Following the 2021 Census the Office of National Statistics (2022) has said that there were more people than ever before in the older age groups in Wales; the proportion of the population who were aged 65 years and over was 21.3% (up from 18.4% in 2011). The size of the population aged 90 years and over (29,700, 1.0%) has increased since 2011, when 25,200, 0.8%, were aged 90 years and over. Welsh Government (2021) have stated that in Wales, the central demographic projects that in 20 years (by 2038) 1 in 4 of the population will be over 65. The population aged over 75 in Wales is also projected to increase from 9.3% of the population in 2018 to 13.7% in 2038 (Office for National Statistics 2019). There are many implications and opportunities that result from the continued ageing of our population and the Welsh Government have published a Strategy for an Ageing Society (2021)

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[Our Strategy for an Ageing Society - Age Friendly Wales \(gov.wales\)](#) and related Delivery Plan (2022) [Strategy for an ageing society: delivery plan | GOV.WALES](#) to address these fundamental changes. The role of Local Authorities – Councils – is crucial in both the strategic and operational implementation of these plans.

### Engagement of Older People

*“The main success that the Strategy [for Older people in Wales] could claim is the mechanisms and structures that have been established at local and national level that allow public services to find and hear the voice of older people, and allow older people to be involved in the decisions that affect their daily lives” (Welsh Government 2013)*

*Self-determination is reaffirmation of the principle enunciated in the Charter of the United Nations. ‘All peoples shall have the right of self-determination. [UNPO: Self-determination](#) i.e., a right not just a principle.*

5. The role and value of engagement with older people has long been researched and debated and has evolved substantially in recent times. However, it is a far from straightforward concept which, at its best, should include effective design and delivery, a clear process that is well communicated, views respected and valued, jargon free and appropriate information, barriers identified and addressed, help and guidance for participants and timely feedback on the results of engagement (Commissioner for Older People in Wales 2014). Alternatively, the engagement process can become (Dizon et al 2020) “uncritical and passive”, “utilising the usual suspects” and excluding the voices of more diverse older people. Older People can have concerns that their involvement proves not to be meaningful and they question whether their voice is really being heard.
6. Swann (2008) argued that it is essential to ensure that older people have a voice in the development of policies that affect them in their day-to-day lives, and that policymakers and service providers listen to them. However just utilising consultation is a narrow definition of engagement which could be seen as “a degree of tokenism because older people are heard, but have no power over whether they are listened to. As there is no redistribution of power, consultations do not provide meaningful participation from this point of view alone” (Arnstien 1969). Subsequent studies have identified the need to delegate power to older people as “a redistribution of power from policy makers to older people” to achieve more meaningful engagement. The concept of co-production provides a basis for this to become a reality in that it requires an asset-based approach to public services that enables people providing and people receiving services to share power and responsibility, and to work together [Planning and Commissioning Resource Guide - January 17.pdf \(socialcare.wales\)](#).
7. Research studies (cited by Dizon et al 2020) identify that creative engagement of older people, avoiding ageism, myths and stereo-types of older people, transparency about how older people will be engaged and remain involved in the decision process and working collaboratively with local

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groups are all important qualitative factors in successful engagement. Both independent self-determined engagement by older people for older people and facilitated engagement by professionals and representative organisations are required. In summary, the research tells us that engagement of older people should take a variety of formats and be tailored to the specific circumstances as well as reaching the diverse situations in communities. However active rather than passive participation of older people is needed to influence better outcomes. The message from the research is that good intentions and “warm words” about engaging older people need to be turned into effective and sustainable practice that is embedded in policies and processes.

8. Independent self-determined representation by older people for older people on a rights basis has for many years been an important principle to uphold in Wales. Welsh Government, the Commissioner for Older People and Age Cymru have for many years worked with members from the wide range of older people’s organisations at the all-Wales and local levels. Each of these have their separate histories and identities but collaborate around a common goal to improve the lot of older people in Wales. Cymru Older Peoples Alliance became a registered charity in 2017 and its development has been supported by small-scale grants from Welsh Government since 2014. It is the only recognised organisation in Wales – a national charity - for the county-based Older Peoples Forums and groups and therefore has an important role in promoting the independent self-determined voice of local older people, and in particular those who do not have any affiliation to retired trade union member groups.

## Findings

### The Case for Commitment to Forums

9. The main principle of the need for an independent 50+ forum /group is that the independent voice of older people can be heard and acted upon in each Council area, contributing on the basis of self-determination and without “fear or favour”. A collaborative partnership between Councils and a local 50+ forum can have real benefits for both parties as well as other local partners.
10. When Council budgets are under pressure, there is an inevitable focus on priorities and ensuring that statutory duties are met before any other activity is funded. Whilst in the past this has meant Older Peoples Forums/Groups have had diminished support from their Councils, recent legislation could lead to better outcomes.
11. Under The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, Section 7 of the Act places overarching duties on Councils under the Act to have due regard to the United Nations Principles for Older Persons. A local authority must demonstrate that it has complied with the overarching duties in a meaningful way and must determine how compliance could be achieved. Principle 7 states that “Older persons should remain integrated in society, participate

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actively in the formulation and implementation of policies that directly affect their well-being and share their knowledge and skills with younger generations". Importantly, Principle 9 of the UN Principles states that "Older persons should be able to form movements or associations of older persons". Whilst this provision in the 2014 Act, is a general rather than a specific duty, a reasonable interpretation of the legislation and statutory Code of Practice would allow Councils to regard their support for independent Forums as one response to a statutory duty and commit some limited capacity and resources to them.

12. Under the 2014 Act, Councils also have duties of co-production and are required to "Put in place transparent arrangements where people are equal partners in designing and operating services." These duties as described in the statutory Code of Practice clearly go beyond just consultation with older people and their representatives. Together, these duties to have regard to the UN principles and to co-produce policies and services provide a basis for Councils to meaningfully support Older People's Forums again, in the way that this happened in previous times. In addition, in Wales, the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) (deriving from the Equalities Act 2010) goes further and contains express provisions about engagement (Regulation 5) which are not present in the English PSED (Public Health Wales) [The Equality Act - Welsh Specific Duties - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](#) .

### The Benefits of a Forum for Older People

13. Older People's Forums were first established across Wales in 2004 following the publication by the Welsh Government of the Strategy for Older People in Wales (2003). An evaluation of achievement of Councils by the Welsh Local Government Association (2011) said "The local implementation of the Strategy has seen the genuine involvement of older people in strategy and policy development and practice".
14. The COPA research found that the impact of both recent austerity on Council budgets and the current pandemic on the operation of Forums have been substantial. However, it is argued they have potential to provide one means of engaging and involving older people as society recovers from Covid and act on learning from experiences. One Forum Vice Chair stated that Forums can campaign, influence agendas, and create movements for change, and share their experiences of issues that are important to them where they live. "They create the space to enable older people to express their needs, identify solutions, and form a collective, legitimate, and representative voice locally".

15. Other views included:

"We get excellent support from our Local Authority Older People Strategy Co-ordinator. He attends every Forum, each Older People's Council and since March we have held Virtual meetings of the Older People's Council sub group" [Forum Chair].

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“The Forum whilst having a strong history has not been proactive over the last year or so. It is just “ticking along”. [Forum Vice Chair]

“Older People’s voice is not being heard. The right to challenge and express opinions has been neutralised. Older people are not being treated with any dignity, respect or priority” [Forum Chair].

16. Whilst Forums are designed to respond to local needs and circumstances and therefore vary in nature, a common definition (COPA 2021) is “to promote the interests, participation and engagement of people aged fifty and over in and provide them with an opportunity to express, publicise and present their views, opinions or concerns”. The Forums aim to contribute to an improvement in the quality of the lives of local residents and, particularly, help to address the effects of isolation, loneliness and poverty. Improving inter-generational solidarity through joint projects with children and young people has been a particular focus of some forums. Providing information relevant to residents over 50 and their friends and carers and to other local groups is a core role. Beyond this broad description, there are a number of structural and operational commonalities and consistencies that should exist between Forums but it must also be recognised there is a need for flexible local approaches to ensure that all older people, from all parts of Wales, are able to contribute to policy that affects them.

17. Older People in Wales have as a population group been most adversely impacted by Covid-19 (Age Cymru 2022) and it is essential that a recovery plan, that “builds back better” gives a priority to their needs. The disproportionate effect on older people has highlighted and compounded the inequalities and discrimination already facing older people and a targeted and funded action plan for recovery must ensure they are not left behind in the post Covid-19 period. A range of relevant issues can be addressed and calls for action made through local forums including NHS Waiting Lists, access to GPs and dental services, impact on mental and physical health, isolation and loneliness, digital exclusion, community facilities etc.

“Rights and voice are inextricably linked. Forums strengthen the voices of older people and strengthen older people’s rights at the same time. Forums create the spaces where older women and men can meet, share and discuss their experiences and bring their voices together, as well as creating an interface where older people can engage directly with decision-makers. Such spaces also enable older people to learn how to communicate and amplify their voices; access information and guidance related to their rights and entitlements” (Forum Vice Chair)

18. Increasing pressures on daily living costs for older people as a result of higher living costs, particularly energy bills and food costs etc are especially difficult for those on fixed incomes. The Forums could provide direct experience of

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these issues and their implications and represent the voice of older people locally. Indeed, more generally, local forums can bring together the views, opinions and concerns of local people to the national all-Wales level. Effective communication between the local and national levels is essential if the interests of older people are to be properly represented and national decisions influenced

### The Benefits of a Forum for Councils

19. A number of Councils in Wales are responding to the challenge to create Age Friendly Communities (AFC) in their areas and are preparing applications to the World Health Organisation (WHO) to be recognised. Working with Forums/groups and involving them on a basis of co-production, including within AFC Steering Groups, can provide a catalyst for the creation of Age Friendly Communities at a county as well as a more localised level. They can also provide a valuable response to the WHO requirement for engagement and participation of older people in AFC development.
20. Welsh Government have issued revised guidance to Councils (May 2022) to appoint Age Friendly Champions (previously Older Peoples Champions) at the political level. New appointments are being made but the individuals will need officer support and a partnership with local 50+ forums and groups and age friendly networks to support a joined-up approach to creating an age friendly Wales. The Champion should be seen as a “leadership and strategic role ... and ‘voice of older people’ in the Council chamber”. Champions membership of, and attendance at 50+ Forums can therefore be an effective means of hearing about local issues and concerns directly to help achieve these objectives.
21. Support for vulnerable older people is a key Council role. Engagement with older people through 50+ Forums could be usefully positioned as part of the well-being agenda and to support the early intervention and prevention duties placed on Councils under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. In particular, it is asserted that forums have in the past and could again contribute in tackling isolation and loneliness, digital exclusion, health, and well-being of older people.
22. In developing policies and services, engagement of older people is now an accepted practice by Councils. Whilst a variety of forms of engagement are required, involvement of forums/groups and their networks can have a particular benefit for Councils. Forums can provide, through their membership a strong collective independent viewpoint on proposals before they are considered by the Council e.g., recovery of society from Covid, transport, housing etc. Involving Forums from the earliest stage has shown to have the most benefits. Respondents contended that Forums can also make a contribution in responding to national and local consultations from an informed local perspective.
23. Facilitating contributions from across relevant Council departments to Forum meetings and networks has been variable but can ensure the interests of

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older people are recognised and reflected in a range of relevant policy and service developments. Participants suggested it can provide an opportunity for discussion and feedback about the direct experience of residents and the impact of Council services.

24. Working with Forums/Groups on projects can have mutual benefit and promote the work of the Council in a practical way. Examples from around Wales cited include inter-generational solidarity, engagement with Care Homes and Sheltered Accommodation, Safeguarding, tackling ageism, loneliness and isolation, well-being, active ageing, benefit take up, Blue Badges. It has been suggested that benefits from working with Forums can far outweigh the minimal costs to Councils and provide for good value for money.

## Conclusion

25. With the recent statistics about the continuing ageing of our population in the UK, greater priority needs to be devoted to the implementation of the Strategy for an Ageing Society in Wales and its published Delivery Plan, nationally and particularly at a local level. Implementation has to continue to be through collaboration and co-production with older people and their representatives. A key requirement identified is that representatives are engaged productively from the outset, not by a process that sees older people as passive recipients or involves them when convenient or after key decisions have already been made.
26. Further action is needed nationally and locally to identify, exemplify, promote and embed models of good practice in engagement of older people in Wales. This should also include self-determined representation by older people themselves. In particular, awareness, understanding and implementation of the concept of co-production and the related duties that Councils in Wales have in this regard, should be promoted, and made a reality.
27. Whilst the need for local decisions and flexibility to meet diverging circumstances is acknowledged, the wide range of Council approaches and different levels of commitment to forums across Wales produces unacceptable inequalities in engagement of older people. A Programme of regeneration of Forums across Wales following the impact of the pandemic, led by Cymru Older Peoples Alliance but in partnership with Councils is required if the independent, co-ordinated and self-determined voice of older people is still to be heard on a rights basis through Forums/Groups in future across Wales.
28. Development of age friendly communities in Wales is now a key national priority established by the Welsh Government. Co-productive engagement of older people in both recognition and development of AFCs is a WHO overarching principle and requirement. Publication of a framework of criteria for engagement in Wales would help to promote greater consistency, sound principles and fair expectations about how older people are engaged in AFC

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recognition and development. It would also provide a broad basis for Councils and older people to collaborate on AFCs. This could also support age friendly culture and behaviours within organisations engaging with older people.

29. The Steering Groups (or Older People's Councils) are pivotal in a successful Forum and there is a clear need to strengthen their capacity – and membership of Forums more generally. Inevitably with the age profile of forums/groups, some have been weakened by people leaving due to ill-health or caring responsibilities, and particularly as a result of Covid. This could be addressed through more recruitment effort, both directly and as result of retirement programmes, through local media, Community Voluntary Councils (CVCs) etc. Identifying leaders and succession planning are particular challenges that need to be addressed. Through their communications services Councils could work with Forums to provide support for recruitment which is central to their future viability. Volunteers cannot be expected to have all the skills and knowledge needed to represent older people effectively, so facilitation and provision of some training and development to fulfil the role should also be considered. COPA should continue its programme of development to support forums including improved and more regular engagement, sharing of practice, providing support mechanisms, and helping make grant applications.
  
30. This article has summarised research and follow up analysis, all completed by older people themselves, about the situation across Wales in respect of Older Peoples Forums. Due to both the impact of austerity and the pandemic, Forums are patchy and variable across the country and the need for them to be strengthened and revitalised has been identified. If the independent voice for older people provided through local Forums is to be maintained in future, then a co-productive programme of action is required now.

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## Appendix A

### **Summary of Research by Cymru Older People’s Alliance.**

A programme of engagement with Chairs and Vice Chairs of 50+ Forums in Wales was undertaken by the Board of Trustees from June to October 2020. Virtual and telephone discussions were held. The Report (2021) “The Future of 50+ Forums in Wales – Delivering Age friendly Communities” presents the evidence and findings including detailed actions to support the main recommendation that revitalisation and reform of forums is needed.

The impact of austerity on Council budgets and the consequences of the Pandemic, means Older People’s Forums were found to be very variable and patchy across Wales and needing strengthening to support meaningful engagement with older people.

The key findings from the engagement with Forum Chairs and Vice Chairs included:

- At least 5 different “models” adopted by Councils in Wales in respect of their local 50+ Forums were found
- We estimate that a small majority (around 60%) of Councils are either very supportive or supportive of their forum.
- We identified a clear need to strengthen Forum leadership and membership through more recruitment
- Despite the divergent levels of support for Forums across Wales, there were examples where the local Forum has led innovative developments to benefit their locality
- Since March 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic, Forums have not been able to meet on a face-to-face basis and support is needed for consistent re-start in due course
- The role of COPA in supporting and informing Forums was seen as important and improving. Further development of this support was called for including the sharing of practice between Forums.
- A Programme of Forum Development outlined in the Report should be implemented

[Report-on-Engagement-with-50-Forums-Chairs-final-version1.pdf \(copacharity.com\)](#)

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