

## The Elbourne Review

It may seem timely that when Government is looking at building on the capacity of local authorities and local older people's organisations and forums to interpret Opportunity Age and other Government policies, which impact on older people, that it chooses to review how Government engages with older people. The sad irony is that the recommendations of John Elbourne seem to leave out the strengths of BGOP and replace them with processes and structures, which to this observer are not sustainable.

In his summary John found that:

- older people's engagement with government is often very impressive, but is patchy;
- older people's input is often very influential, but could be more so with regular, structured contact direct with government;
- the environment in which engagement take place has changed very significantly in recent years, but some of the opportunities presented have not been taken;
- there is much effective practice to build on; and
- there is strong support for change to take a range of opportunities.

In his final report he further commented that he found "hat the linkages required for handling views and issues resulting from engagement with central, regional and local government are under-developed and mechanisms are needed to ensure that individual and collective views can be better captured."

As a consequence he makes seven recommendations: -

1. **Establish a UK Advisory Forum for Older People** chaired or co-chaired by the lead government Minister for Older People supported by regional advisory groups
2. **Secretariat services for the UK Advisory Forum** be provided by government officials
3. **Enhance the role of Government Offices** in supporting and developing engagement with older people, supported by the UK Advisory Forum secretariat.
4. **To address relevant findings** from the Audit Commission's report "**Don't Stop Me Now**", by Regional Forums supporting their respective local authorities to develop effective strategies, to ensure a true diversity of older people's voices are heard.
5. **Older people's forums** around the UK, including OPAGs (Older People's Advisory Groups), should be supported and built upon.
6. **BGOP** is funded by DWP at current levels until the end of March 2009.
7. **The main funding** for the proposals should come from DWP's current funding for older people's engagement.

The recommendations, one hopes, are not set in stone. Comments on the review should be submitted to DWP by

**9 January 2009** to [andrew.jennings@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.jennings@dwp.gsi.gov.uk) .or by post to: Andrew Jennings  
Department for Work and Pensions  
1-11 John Adam Street,  
London WC2N 6HT.

## **A personal opinion by Jim Soulsby**

Richard Worsley in the early days of BGOP described BGOP as like the letter “H” turned on its side. One of the sides worked across local government and decision making processes. The opposite side operated similarly across national government. Obviously the key element, the thread throughout, is the quality of life of older people and their ability and opportunity to influence decisions that impact on their lives now and in the future. John Elbourne’s recommendations restate this concept although I have yet to see the influence of Government Offices on older people’s policies and consultations. At a time when regionalism is on the political back burner, I doubt if they have the reputation, experience or the “clout” to effectively support local/regional OPAGS, as they endeavour to (rightly in my opinion) seek to build bridges across the plethora of older people’s forums, not to deny their autonomy or voice but to help channel their thoughts and feeling more effectively into local/regional decision making processes.

What is missing from the recommendations is the linking element between the two horizontal processes. How would these elements come together and provide mutual support and information? The central office of BGOP does this currently (although the report suggests it does not do it as well as it could) but it seems it has no place in the future. Yet to my mind it is both crucial and the key element to ensure it all works. Where will the information, education and training come from to help build the capacity of those older people seeking to engage in consultative processes? If the base of older people so engaged is to be broadened, then this has to happen systematically and not be reliant on ad hoc regional awareness or otherwise.

In the setting up of a UK advisory forum John suggests in his interim report that: - ‘secretariat services could be provided by government officials supporting the Minister. These could also support UK OPAG and broker older people’s engagement with central government policy development and projects’. This does not give the linking process sufficient independence. If government is to trust the processes it wishes to set up it has to fund this element and give it a greater degree of independence than now and not less. The process must provide friendly criticism of government. This may at times engender in Government a feeling of the hand doing the feeding being bitten, but this is the price that must be paid. Being reliant on a Government officer places that person at the whim of so many other potentially conflicting agendas – particularly if resources are an issue. There needs to be that key officer commissioned to work across government departments and bureaucratic obstacles. They need to work closely with whatever structure is created, but the key strand between the regional/local developments and national government - in all its complexity - has to sit outside Government.

Please think again John

*The report is available to view on DWP's website –*

[http://www.dwp.gov.uk/resourcecentre/ind\\_review\\_older\\_peoples\\_eng\\_with\\_govt.asp](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/resourcecentre/ind_review_older_peoples_eng_with_govt.asp)