

Rural Wisdom response to Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

1. This response comes from the Rural Wisdom project, which is developing ways for rural communities to support and work well for older people. It brings together work in local communities in Scotland and Wales as well as links with people in other parts of the UK. These notes draw on what we are hearing from older people, especially those who live in rural communities.
2. The overall message is that older people care about citizenship and about civic engagement, and want to be part of promoting them. This includes a lot of practical supports that they give to people of all ages, and they would like to be more involved.

Question 1

3. For many people, being a citizen and engaging in their community means identifying with a local community or geographic place as much as identifying with a country. There are people who have lived in their area for many years and want this to be a good place for the people coming after them – but they feel this longer-term view is generally not respected or understood, including by politicians and staff of public bodies who are often taking a short-term view.

Question 2

4. There needs to be many, frequent ways for people to strengthen their sense of belonging to the UK and to their own local area. People want more activities and events that bring together people across ages, recent arrivals and people who have lived here a long time, people who use different languages and have different cultures. Their experience is that people have a sense of belonging to a place when they work together to create something and are all welcome to be part of it. Community connectedness then gets reinforced when people see and talk to each other day-to-day. The most effective shared events are usually those organised by community groups for a practical purpose with community links as the welcome side-effect.
5. People are telling us of the many ways these opportunities are being undermined. There are closures of community facilities such as town or village halls, libraries and shared open spaces, and losing local shops, where people used to meet and have the conversations that create social connectedness.

Question 4

6. Older people care a lot about politician and electoral engagement, partly because they remember the advances in society and people's circumstances that have been achieved. But there is a risk that older people are overlooked in discussions about electoral and political engagement.

- There are real problems in older people who have dementia and other health problems not being able to vote because care providers and others do not understand the rules on incapacity and voting, and/or are not willing to give people the practical support they need to vote.
- Campaigns that focus on younger people can give out a message that older people's views do not matter so much.
- Older people could help encourage people who have less confidence around electoral and political participation, but they are rarely given opportunities to do this.

Question 7

7. The main way to support civic engagement is for public bodies to show that they really do want to hear what people have to say. This means getting right the consultations and other engagement with people who live in that area or are interested in that topic.

- Ask people what is important to them, rather than only have a pre-determined plan or set of priorities.
- Allow long enough to have a real dialogue and bring the conversation to where people already are.
- Act on what people contribute and report back on what has been achieved before starting on the next consultation.
- Remember that civic engagement has to be made to work for everyone - thinking about the language that is used, communication routes and all the good practice on equality and diversity.

8. Civic engagement relies on opportunities for people to talk over issues and ideas with other people to help them work out what they want to say. It is also important for people to hear a range of views and experiences. This is another way in which losing community groups and opportunities to meet a wider range of people within communities damages our society.

Question 9

9. The main factors that we are hearing from older people who live in rural areas are people not being visible and people not being respected – and we expect this applies to many other people who feel 'left behind'.

10. In practice, most decisions are made by people who talk mostly to other people who are like themselves and who communicate in the ways that they use. Older people and people living in rural areas often feel they are not

visible to decision-makers or to the people who are influencing decisions. Aspects of this include:

- Not knowing about opportunities to participate, because the flow of information does not reach many older people when it is circulated through routes they are not part of.
- Not being able to get to the places where discussions happen, or events not getting out to rural areas and lack of transport and high costs for people getting in to towns.
- Poor internet access in many rural areas - when information for consultations and responses can only happen on-line people are denied a voice.
- The pace and style of much civic engagement effectively excludes a lot of people.
- When people feel that no-one is going to listen to what they have to say, they stop making the effort to contribute. The main factor people mention here is whether they have been given any evidence of previous consultations or other engagement leading to positive changes.

11. Another problem is when voluntary organisations are said to be 'representing' people who live in that area or share circumstances. For example, it is now common for Third Sector Interfaces – the old Councils of Voluntary Service – to have a place on public bodies in Scotland that is counted as the voice of all people using public services and their families, as well as the voice of all voluntary organisations and community groups. Some of the people taking on these roles try to check out with people in the area, but there is not the time or resources to do it properly. Inevitably, a small number of groups have more influence than others, reinforcing the sense of other people being 'left behind'.

12. Practical steps that can help overcome the barriers include all the good practice around supporting real equality and diversity. But what will underpin it is a change of approach: having more time for open conversations from the outset, going to where people are, and showing people that their contribution is welcomed and respected.

Question 10

13. The experience of many older people is that social integration, citizenship and civic engagement are closely interlinked, and that good social connections and inclusion is at the heart of making things work better for everyone.

14. Many older people feel they are not included when people talk of social cohesion. They are concerned about the ways older people are presented as dependent and having little to contribute.

15. These are a few of the examples we know of older people taking action that enhances social connections in their community:

- Organising most of the community activities in rural areas, including groups for children and young people and events that bring the community together
- Looking after buildings that are shared by the community
- Encouraging and supporting people who are new to the area until they find their own friendships and get settled in
- People living in a care home meeting people using an ESOL class, to let them practice ordinary conversations
- Inviting young people, including those who find school a challenge, to do activities like gardening and mending things that benefit other people as well as build skills and confidence, and encouraging them around employment options.

Next steps

16. The people we have met look forward to the next stage of the Select Committee process and want to be part of the conversations that follow.

Contact for this response

The response was brought together by Anne Connor of Outside the Box, which hosts the Rural Wisdom project.

There is more information about Rural Wisdom at www.ruralwisdom.org.

Outside the Box supports a range of community projects and enables people who feel excluded to have a voice and make changes in their communities. There is more information about what we do at www.otbds.org

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