

CONNECTING THROUGH CAMPAIGNING

Gary Kitchen is director of charity consultancy Get Heard. He describes his work with the Age Concern Campaigns Partnership in Lancashire, which was established in March 2005 to raise awareness of issues affecting older people.

It is well-known that charities and voluntary organisations provide a range of valuable services. Indeed, they are being encouraged by government to undertake an even greater role. But service-provision is not the only way in which charities can achieve their charitable objectives.

It is, perhaps, less well-known that charities can legitimately pursue their charitable goals through a range of other methods, such as awareness-raising, campaigning, and press and publicity work. Guidance from the Charity Commission clearly states that: “engaging in campaigning and political activities are key ways of enabling many charities to meet their aims and objectives, to secure public benefit, and to flourish as successful organisations”.¹

The Campaigns Partnership of six Age Concern organisations in Lancashire – Age Concern Blackburn with Darwen, Age Concern Blackpool, Age Concern Fylde, Age Concern Hyndburn, Age Concern Lancashire, and Age Concern Preston & South Ribble – was established in March 2005 to pursue a joint campaigning strategy across Lancashire, Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool and raise awareness of the issues that affect older people.

Members of the Partnership work to support older people in their areas with practical help to promote independence and quality of life – for example, through advice and information, or help with social care. But in addition, members of the Partnership realise that campaigning work can be a useful complement to service provision.

This article reports on the progress of the Partnership to date and describes the impact of this work so far in furthering older people’s concerns. We have found that campaigning work can enable charities to influence public policy and public opinion so that *all* older people may benefit – even those who have had no direct contact with the partner organisations.

¹ “Campaigning and Political Activities by Charities”, Charity Commission, September 2004, paragraph 25.

Right from the start the Partnership aimed to seek high-profile support and backing from opinion-formers and decision-makers. The Anglican Bishop of Lancaster, the Right Reverend Stephen Pedley, who is also President of Age Concern Lancashire, was an early supporter. He said, "I welcome the work of the Campaigns Partnership in Lancashire because I think it will help to put the concerns of older people firmly on the agenda. Older people make a huge contribution to our communities, but unfortunately they do not always get the support and acknowledgement they deserve."

The first big challenge to the Campaigns Partnership came with the General Election of May 2005. The work benefited greatly from access to the resources available from Age Concern England, which published its own programme for the Election focusing on three key challenges: ensuring that pensioners have an adequate income; tackling age discrimination; and helping to build effective public services.²

These messages were adapted to the local scene and formed the basis of our campaigning work. The area holds no fewer than fifteen parliamentary constituencies. The Campaigns Partnership wrote to all parliamentary candidates to ensure they were aware of some of the main issues that concern local older people and also to actively challenge them to state their own views. We pointed out that older people are much more likely to vote than younger people and would be an important factor in determining the outcome of the election. We issued press releases and produced a number of short letters on each of the key adopted themes, which members of the Partnership sent to local newspapers to help keep up the pressure.

This approach proved fruitful. For example, Age Concern Fylde was able to organise a meeting in St Annes which attracted all four local parliamentary candidates together with more than fifty older people. As well as allowing older people to "grill" the candidates, the meeting also provided the local press with an excellent full-page story. Similar work by Age Concern Hyndburn led to reports in the Accrington Observer.

Facilitation of face-to-face contact in this way served an important function by helping older people to make a direct connection with politicians and opinion-formers. In many ways older people are no different to anyone else: they want to live their lives in their own way; they want to exercise choice and control over decisions affecting them; and they want genuine

² "Isn't It Time Politicians Stopped Just Kissing Babies?" Age Concern England, 2005.

“involvement” rather than simply being given information with no power to shape what happens.³

Too often older people seem to be viewed as passive recipients of services rather than active shapers of their own destiny. Even when consultation does take place, this does not necessarily indicate that older people’s voices are genuinely being heeded. Research indicates that social care providers typically place emphasis on *processes* of involvement rather than *outcomes*: “the true effectiveness of these processes to promote user-led change and impact on service improvement remains largely untested”.⁴

The essence of campaigning work lies in communication. Influencing matters “behind the scenes” may have some benefit, but getting the message across in the local press or radio will reach far more people and could also serve to empower them to take action on their own behalf. The fourth estate is hugely powerful in helping define the terms of debate and putting pressure on politicians and opinion-formers to respond to its concerns.

Following the General Election, the Campaigns Partnership immediately followed up earlier work with candidates by writing to newly-elected MPs to express strong support for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR), which for the first time will put into place a national body to help to tackle ageism.

All MPs were invited to a meeting with members of the Campaigns Partnership in Portcullis House, Westminster in June. Chorley MP Lindsay Hoyle, who arranged the venue on behalf of the Partnership, commented: “The meeting provided an insight into older people’s views on a range of topics. It was very useful and I hope we can meet regularly.” It is now planned that a similar meeting will take place every six months. The Campaigns Partnership also intends to invite members of the House of Lords who have a link with the Lancashire area.

There is a huge amount to be done, and the Campaigns Partnership in Lancashire is aware that it has barely scratched the surface. Recent interventions include writing to the local Learning & Skills Council to

³ “Discussion Paper – Older People and Involvement”, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, May 2002.

⁴ “Has Service User Participation Made a Difference to Social Care Services?” Social Care Institute for Excellence, March 2004, p.8.

express concern about what appears to be the erosion of adult learning courses across the county. We have also written to MPs to ask them to take action to ensure that drugs for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease do not cease to become available on the NHS (as has been recommended on the grounds of cost by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence). Age Concerns are also working together to establish or support the development of Older People's Forums so that older people themselves have an opportunity to shape existing and future services.

The Campaigns Partnership will run until the end of March 2006 and then assess the effectiveness of its activities in the course of the pilot period. One priority will be to seek opportunities for older people themselves to take part in campaigning, to whatever extent they feel able to do this. We have at least demonstrated that campaigning activity forms an invaluable complement to vital services. Indeed, it has the potential to reconnect older people's concerns with the broader policy picture.

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