



ENFIELD BOROUGH OVER 50s FORUM

CHAIR'S REPORT

AGM 27 April 2004, Enfield Civic Centre

It is only right that I should begin this report on the year's work of the Forum by thanking all my fellow committee members for the time and effort they have freely given for what has been a momentous year. The attendance record of all of them has been first rate. I particularly want to pay tribute to Tony Watts, our Secretary, for putting the Forum on the map in more ways than one. I said last year that Tony had brought a level of professionalism to the Forum that will enable us to be even more effective in the years to come.

I think the truth of that statement has been borne out by my mentioning just two of the many innovations that Tony has brought to the Forum namely, having our own website that has brought with it numerous contacts and then there was his master-minding of the successful bid for a Community Fund grant of nearly £54,000 for the employment of a part-time coordinator / development worker for the next three years.

I want to thank too our vice-chair Audrey Hardwick and committee members, Chris Mitchell, John Hennell, our Treasurer, Doreen Hogg, Peter Shuklar, Joe Dawson, Demos Demitriou and Michael Christou, Don Smith who has been a great colleague in monitoring the Council's scrutiny panel and other activities, Anne Wood, whom we co-opted to try and give us a better focus on health matters, and Chrysanthi Kouzoupis who has been seconded by the Council to help us and has been most diligent in getting our material out to members and friends on time. And I want to give a special vote of thanks to Derek Friggens who compiled and masterminded our unique Home Safety Audit to help reduce falls and accidents in the home and to Stan Anderson, who has done a great job on taking up the Pension Credit and has now been elected chairman of the Enfield Pensioners Action Group.

There are, of course, people outside the Committee who are very often beevering away, unsung, out of sight, people like Jean Calvert who attend meetings on our behalf because they feel, like we do, that our Forum ought to be first and foremost an organisation which aims to improve the quality of life of older people. That means there is a time and place to agitate and complain, but there is a lot that together we can do by working in partnership with others to make a difference, to make life better.

So we are working with many different people in the Enfield Primary Care Trust, with Enfield Councillors and their Officers, the Pension Service, Enfield Strategic Partnership, Enfield Community Empowerment Network and its many offshoots, with Age Concern which is now represented on our Committee by Jennifer McIntyre following the departure of Shirley Scott.

When I became Forum chairman three years ago I said then - and I repeat it now - that the Forum is only of value if it is listened to as the representative voice of older people in the Borough. If it provides a platform where matters of concern to older people can be raised. If it tries to help older people become better informed of their rights and opportunities to secure a better quality of life.

That is how we should be judged and so measured against that aim, how have we performed in representing the views and interests of older people in Enfield?

We have fought a two-pronged campaign on the Council Tax issue to convince our

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3 MPs that the system itself is fundamentally flawed and that tampering with ideas of keeping increases down to the level of inflation is not good enough because it will not prevent pensioners and others on fixed incomes from having either an annual cut in their living standards or a cut in council services.

At the same time, while recognising the difficulties faced by every local council in the country, we sought to defend older people in the Borough from some of the increases being imposed for example on home meals and home care charges without success - and neither are we happy about the increases on community alarm charges.

On the other hand our campaign to keep down the reduction in grants to the leisure centres had some success, following the launch of our petition which was presented to the council at a special meeting we held on the future of the centres.

Although we failed to stop another cut this year in the council's grant we did manage to stop an attempt to increase this year's cut from £33,000 to £49,000 which was not pursued, says Councillor Burrowes, the Cabinet member for Leisure, in a letter to the Forum "because we are taking into account points that you and your members have raised".

Cllr Burrowes added that he was determined that the Council should not impose further burdens than the previously agreed £33,000 reduction. This battle over the future of our leisure centres is far from over. A lot is at stake in the current negotiations between the Council and Enfield Leisure Centres Trust over the terms of new leases and it is worth recalling that one of the points in our petition was that the centres should be given long leases and this has been accepted by the council.

Personally, I still find it hard to reconcile the Public Health Report recently issued by the Primary Care Trust with its emphasis on encouraging more physical activity by more older people as a means of helping them to keep healthy for longer, with the Council's stated objective of ending the grants to leisure centres over ten years.

Two of those ten years have already gone and the cuts in grants have already equalled about £140,000. So we would like to see a firm statement of financial commitment to maintain the leisure centres as a community asset as well as the other sporting facilities in the Borough.

Nobody can be in any doubt that without the vigilance of the Forum, people over 60 in Enfield would not now be having a reduced rate annual discount card. They would not be having the monthly swimming pass which can be used any time any day for £17. They would not be enjoying the all-day Wednesday swim and sports facilities at Southbury Leisure Centre including lunch for £3.95. I know the charges are not as favourable as in some London Boroughs but it is better than it might have been because of our work.

Council tax, leisure centre grants, charges for home meals and home care are one side of the same coin. It is a package largely dependent on grants from central government and monies raised by local government. The other side of the coin is government financing of pensions, schools, hospitals, transport and so on.

And just because we are not likely ever to get everything we want it does not mean that we do not campaign to do the best we can. That is why we do not think it is inconsistent to campaign against means-testing on pensions while at the same time encouraging as many people as possible to apply for the pension and savings credit. It is why we oppose the council tax system and yet urge people to apply for the rebates that are available.

Our Forum, you may remember sponsored a briefing on the Pension Credit last October. We leafleted the Post Office to inform people about it and the event was attended by representatives of 60 different organisations of older people and 110 members of the public. This in turn paved the way for some 10,000 homes in the Borough to be now getting extra money. That means some 13,000 people are getting money every week in the form of pension and savings credit. We think that is part of our positive work towards getting a better deal for older people and it is work the Forum should be proud of achieving. But we still need to reach more people

Similarly, the positive response we have had from the MPs who recognise just as we do that the council tax is unfair suggests that changes will be made hopefully before next year. Whatever the basis of the council tax there will still be a job to do ensuring that those eligible for reductions get them - and so we will take up the offer from Council leader Michael Rye that the Forum should help to make it easier for people to understand who can claim and how to claim the rebates. That again is positive work - making a difference to the lives of older people.

Our Forum had a hand in getting the digital hearing aids into Enfield - a service which is just starting. We were on the ball in getting the Council to put the issue of access to public toilets on the agenda and also the question of age discrimination in employment with the aim of giving older people who want to work the opportunity to do so.

We still have much to do in getting the NHS to reinstate the toenail cutting and other chiropody services taken away in the year 2000 and we will continue to work with the PCT in trying to reduce the number of falls and accidents in the home.

Indeed, later in 2004 we plan to have an information day at the Edmonton Leisure Centre covering not only falls and accidents, but also healthy living and eating and other matters and I hope that Derek Friggens and a small team working with Olivia, our new development officer will make this another fun day.

I hope that we can make it as successful as the first free fitness and healthy living day we organised last September with the Leisure Centres Trust, attended by over 350 people and opened by the Mayor which among other things has brought monthly tea dancing to the Southbury centre and a regular fun and fitness day every Wednesday attended by some 60 over 50s.

Now that we have achieved the major aim of our first development plan which was to get part-time help for the Forum, an early task of the newly elected committee needs to be one of updating that development plan so that we have agreed objectives and a strategy that we are all working together to achieve.

In the last year we have had some good meetings, good attendances and good speakers and I would single out among the most successful and informative were those with Mark McLaughlin, the LBE director of corporate and financial resources, with Rod Robb from the Disability Rights Commission, the seminar / meeting on Enfield's future - making this a better place for older people, the meeting on developments at Chase Farm with the older people's champions on health, and the meetings with cancer specialists and Tony Allen the trading standards team leader in Enfield - not forgetting the question and answer session with the 3 MPs and the very good Christmas buffet lunch attended by some 80 people.

We are, of course, open to suggestions for the speakers you would like to hear and you will notice that in coming months we have the new police commander while for the

first meeting of the new session we will have the chief executive of the Primary Care Trust - so there you have the two top people in the fields of health and crime in the Borough coming to address the Forum.

Judging by the number of meetings and discussions the Forum is invited to attend and the response we get to our questions and criticisms we can see our status growing in the Borough. We now have link officers with the Forum being appointed by both the Council and the PCT. And moving the other way, Tony Watts was elected during the year as a Board member of Age Concern Enfield and I think our influence will grow still further to the extent that our membership is more representative not only of older people, but also of the many and varied ethnic communities and organisations of older people in the Borough.

At March 31st 2004 we had 193 individual members and 24 clubs in membership. Already over 50 percent have renewed for 2004/2005. Inevitably, there will be a fall-out every year so but with new development officer's input and your support in introducing and winning new members we will soon be over the 200 mark. I hope we will continue to expand the readership for the newsletter which now goes to members, to libraries and to GP surgeries and we are happy to hear from anyone with ideas for using the newsletter to spread our influence and win more members.

With over 80,000 people aged over 50 in the Borough, we clearly still have a lot more to do in involving them and increasing our influence with local and national decision-makers. I hope that in the next stage of our development people will come forward to organise mini-forums in Edmonton, Ponders End, Palmers Green for example to tackle their local issues.

I have said elsewhere that I would like to see fewer regional organisations of older people often sending out conflicting messages. There are 33 Forums in London - one in every London Borough and all of them are members of the Greater London Forum for the Elderly. But we do not punch our weight because we do not campaign together on the same issues.

We have the GLF, the London Older People's Strategy Group, the Greater London Pensioners Association, the NPC Greater London Region - four organisations all fighting the same cause, all overlapping one another, all sending out different messages and sometimes even confusing messages. Would it not be better if we had just one unifying body representing older people and if we can't have that can we not tell the 4 to get their act together and get some co-ordination, some agreement on a common platform on which we can all campaign together.

There are some issues where we could do more by acting together, such as the drive for the Government to introduce a nationwide free travel concession coupled with better public transport, instead of the postcode lottery schemes we have now where some people get the Freedom Pass to travel within a given area totally free and others have to pay 50% of the fare and some even more.

But this kind of advance can only take place if we act together. We are not short of ideas. With your help, with a stronger committee, I am sure that when we come to report next year we will be able to say we have made a difference - we have made things better. That is the yardstick by which you will judge us.

Monty Meth, Chair

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