

## OLDER PEOPLE AND RESEARCH

### Summary Report and Recommendations of the Years Ahead Task Group

The North East has a substantial programme of biological, medical, health care, technological and social research related to ageing, the health and well-being of older people, and the societal implications of demographic change. This research is undertaken by the five regional universities, the NHS Trusts, the North East Regional Information Partnership (NERIP) and many other public sector, voluntary sector and commercial organisations. While the importance of these activities is reflected, for example, by the inclusion on 'ageing and health' as a major theme in the Research and development (R & D) programmes for both the regional Science City and Northern Way initiatives, and by the recent designation by the Department of Health of Newcastle as a specialist research centre on ageing, the impact of demographic change requires research across many other diverse fields including the finance, housing, leisure, public policy, retail and transport sectors.

The importance of involving end-users in the research process is now widely recognised by the main funders of research, and there are numerous papers outlining policies and guidance for practice. Similarly, the importance of involving services users in policy and strategy planning and research to improve quality of services is explicitly stressed by the National Health Service and other (but not all) public bodies. Generally, there is a move towards greater openness about the research conducted by such organisations and their findings.

*Years Ahead* has drawn attention to the need for the North East to harness the large resource of experience and social and intellectual capital represented by its older people if it is to pioneer innovative, cross-generational approaches that address the impact of demographic change and the opportunities afforded by an ageing population. The purpose of the *Years Ahead* 'Older People and Research' Task Group was to review and inform the ways in which relevant research is organised and managed with the region, and to promote the engagement of older people in the research process. The Task Group sought to understand both the policy frameworks and needs which currently drive demographic change and ageing within the region, and the attitudes of older people to research and development. We also sought to identify examples of best

practice on involving older people in all stages of the research process, and how to address needs in relation to dissemination, implementation and follow-up of research findings.

Several general issues emerged across most fields of research. It is clear that, despite the large programmes of research on ageing within the region, the involvement of older people tends to be piecemeal and project-specific, and involves only a small number of older people - very often the same individuals - at strategic level. There is a need to develop mechanisms that facilitate the engagement of a wide range of older people from different socio-economic groups and backgrounds from across the region.

Researchers in the region require much better understanding of the needs of those involved at strategic level in policy development and service provision, so that the most effective research support can be provided. Also, there are considerable opportunities to conduct research in many areas that are currently neglected but which have great potential for knowledge-led business development and where the North East would be a leader. Much more needs to be done to ensure the effective dissemination and implementation of research findings, including communication with older people and the wider public about the significance of research studies and the potential of researchers as experts to influence change in attitudes around demographic change and ageing.

At the highest level, the North East is faced with a challenge: as a region affected earlier and more extensively than most others by population ageing, does it wish to respond with the development of strategies that will address both the challenges and significant economic opportunities afforded by this transition? If we are to grasp the opportunity, the development of a strategy for Research and Development which promotes the fullest possible engagement of the region's older people will be a critical requirement for success. The challenge is large and complex, and requires to be addressed by many organisations working in partnership working at regional level. The Task Group Report proposes some specific recommendations to move in this direction.

### **Specific recommendations from the Task group:**

1. The region would benefit from a 'research and development resource' of older people who are informed, trained and engaged in research activity. This could potentially take the form of a regional panel and would consist of a large representative sample of older people with a range of ages, socio-economic circumstances from localities across the North East, and including 'vulnerable', 'hard to reach' and 'marginal' groups who are currently excluded from involvement.

Such a panel would provide a platform for user-led research and service design, that could be drawn on for effective engagement of older people in all stages of the research process, particularly in major regional initiatives such as Science City, The Northern Way and regional organisations such as NERIP.

*Years Ahead* proposes to engage with the principal organisations involved in research around ageing and demographic change in the region, to discuss how such a panel could be resourced, organised and trained with the skills for effective engagement, managed, used and evaluated effectively.

2. The 'Science City' regional initiative has identified the opportunity for the North East to develop strengths in design, evaluation and commercialisation of assistive and enabling technologies which promote independence and quality of life for older people. It is critical that those processes are user-led: older people with their experience (as those with disabilities, as carers and as professionals) have a key role in this. An appropriate strategy is required for their engagement in this, and related initiatives.
3. It is our impression that an increasing number of research proposals around age-related issues are being developed by academic researchers who have no previous experience of engaging with older people. While this is both inevitable and welcome, such proposals need to be 'age-proofed' using an age-proofing toolkit. The current toolkits widely used to screen policy and planning documents may need further revision to fully meet the needs of a diverse range of research studies.

4. There are multiple needs around the improved dissemination of research findings, the identification of specific research requirements for policy and planning purposes, and for effective access to sources of research expertise on demographic change and ageing within the region. Those needs could be addressed substantially through the development of a web-based resource to highlight regional research and findings and further co-ordinate and facilitate links on ageing research. Such a development would also support the proposed 'regional panel' outlined above. *Years Ahead* will seek to engage with the major players in this field to consider how such a resource could be developed and supported.
5. Practical steps to facilitate the translation of research evidence into improved service development should include stronger links between the research community and 'older people's champions' within NHS Trusts and Local Authorities. *Years Ahead* plans to organise an initial meeting to discuss how such links could be established and sustained.
6. There is a need to stimulate research in areas that are important to older people and have significant economic potential, but which are currently neglected. For example, the current organisation of retail activity, particularly by large stores and supermarkets is not user-friendly for many older people (issues of access; navigating large units; shelves too high or too low; labelling of foods and other commodities is difficult to read; inappropriate design of clothing, and so on). There are substantial opportunities for research collaboration with the retail sector, with large potential gains for market leaders in the development of age-friendly practices. The wide network of older people's organisations represented on the Partnership Board of *Years Ahead* should act as a conduit so that the priorities and needs of older people can inform the research community at a strategic level.
7. The regions five universities have a flagship role in the development of knowledge-led economic regeneration, and it is a major achievement that ageing and demographic change represent a research field in which the North East is internationally competitive. However, the current Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) system in universities is biased heavily towards dissemination of research findings in peer-reviewed journals of international standing, and

much less towards effective communication and dissemination to a wider audience, particularly to the older people who participate in the research. If the North East wishes to lead in the translation of age-related research findings into improved health and well-being of its older people, the development of regional support of an effective dissemination policy involving the research community, service providers and the end-users of research needs to be considered at a strategic level.