

Active, engaged.....and visible.

This bit of the programme today is about active citizenship and participation...preparing you for the next discussion you're asked to have when you'll be considering the question:

'What are the barriers that prevent OLDER PEOPLE from being engaged and speaking about what they want?'

We've heard already about some of those very real and very practical barriers...about the impact of Welfare Reform, about money...or rather about poverty....about transport....about isolation. These are significant and critical issues for older people and we hope that we'll be able to record your concerns/comments/suggestions about these so that they can be acted on.

I'm going to ask you now to think about other things that may affect older people ...about why YOU think older people ARE or ARE NOT active, engaged and visible. Some of these things may be because of others' views, assumptions or actionsmay be because of society's ageismothers may be down more to the thinking and actions ...or lack of action.....of older people themselves.

I want you to think first about the attitudes of others ..of the AGEISM which seems so prevalent in our society.

Alex Comfort was the author of the book 'The Joy of Sex' that ground-breaking publication of the 60s /70s sexual revolution. However he wasn't only interested in sex, he was concerned about what he saw as society's negative views about ageing and older people. In his book 'A good Age' he gave a very scathing description of what seemed to him to be the stereotype of what society felt the 'ideal' older person should be like.....HOW HE FELT SOCIETY VIEWED OLDER PEOLDER..

'He or she is white-haired, inactive and unemployed, making no demands on anyone, least of all the family, docile in putting up with loneliness and boredom and able to live on a pittance. He or she is slightly deficient in

intellect and tiresome to talk to, because folklore says older people are weak in the head.....they are asexual, because old people are incapable of sexual activity... and it is unseemly if they are not.....

Their main occupations are religion, grumbling, reminiscing and attending the funerals of friends.

If sick they need not and should not be actively treated, and are best stored in institutions where they can be supervised by bossy matrons...who keep them clean, silent and out of sight ...

The rest are displaying unpardonable bad manners by complaining of their treatment, when society has declared them unpeople and their patriotic duty is to lie down and die'

Surely a very extreme and unjustified description....SURELY NOT AT ALL REFLECTED IN TODAY'S SOCIETY??.....but think again.....think of the statements we seem to hear so often these days...about 'the BURDEN of an ageing population....about the costs of looking after all of these older peopleabout how we're bringing the NHS to its knees because of our needs and our demands on it.....about the drain on resources made by older people**not so far really from Comfort's satirical description perhaps???**

I 'm not a Marxist but here I'd go along with Marx's views about what is fair.... Remember the Marxist slogan..... 'from each according to their abilities and to each according to their needs'. Listening to some people today talking about older people they seem to have forgotten the 'from each' bit...forgotten the contributions that older people made over their lifetimes and continue to make. These people seem to focus only on a sort of deficit view and get caught up in what's involved in 'to each according to his needs'. Maybe we should emphasise more the idea of to each according to his needs...AND RIGHTS...?

To read and hear the pronouncements of some public figures it seems that society has just wakened up to the fact that people get older ...just realised that, in one of the greatest medical and social achievements of the 20th century, MORE people are getting older and living longer...and that as we get older there WILL be demands on services....that's the reality today.

I want to say it's like the anti-discrimination ads which I've seen on buses. 'Some people are gay....get over it'. ...In this case'People get olderBUT they remain part of society with needs and rights...get over it'.and do something about it...other than lament and blame them for being old and having needs and demands.

So we DO NEED to talk about ageism and its impact today. For example....in a workshop we ran in the programme I work on with Health Scotland older people commented on how it felt to be older....quotes from them.....'BEING OLDER PEOPLE MEANS.....:

'you join an under privileged minority', 'retirement is another name for dismissal and invisibility' ...'you're created old by society and too often you live down to expectations'.

BUT in fact...to quote Bette Davis there's another way to think....'OLD AGE AIN'T NO PLACE FOR SISSIES' it's good to be getting older...because the alternative isn't great....BUT it can be tough to some extent because of ageist attitudes...because of the stereotyping ...the assumptions and perceptions of others about what it is to be old...and what others think it SHOULD be AND WHAT OLDER PEOPLE SHOULD BE.

When I worked for Age Concern the Manager of a shopping service for older people told me of one her staff who used to get shopping for an older woman of 84but who'd refused to do it anymore. The older woman had asked her to come only in the mornings because in the afternoons she 'lay down with her man' The staff member thought this was not on ...if she was a frail older person she shouldn't be laying down with anyone 'at her age'. Luckily the Manager was a wise and sensible woman who recognised that the older woman had limited energy and couldn't do both shopping and the laying downand the laying down took priority'.

...but so often that's what ageism can mean...stereotyping...attributing incompetence.....and exploiting unequal power..

To combat this I'd like more of the kind of humour which created the **fictional 'Betty Spittal' Pensioner Activist and Radical Granny.....Gen Sec of the fictional Sheffield Pensioners Liberation Army.** who is quoted as saying

'Ageism is a terrible thing...not nice at all... And my comrades and I will not cease in our struggle to have this scourge obliterated from the face of the earth. Intolerance against others purely on the grounds of age is disgraceful, and I'll not tolerate it..... just because some people are unfortunate enough to be under the age of 60 is no reason to despise them.....'

I've talked about SOME OF THE FACTORS IN SOCIETY that may affect older people 's participation and engagementBUT WHAT ABOUT OLDER PEOPLE THEMSELVES...what is it they want and what is it perhaps that they should be doing about that.

I liked some of the messages from the film you saw.

'Negativity is a waste of time

Get up and get on with it...be proactive

It's important for older people to come together ...and it's important to have a good time too'.

...and the evidence we have supports this.....

The UK Enquiry into Mental Health and Wellbeing in Later Life confirmed what we've been hearing about today...it explored what had an impact on the lives of older people. It described the negative effects of discrimination and poverty ...but older people themselves told the Inquiry about what was positive...what made a positive difference to the lives of older peopleAND THAT WAS ..

Participation in meaningful activities

Relationships

Physical & mental health

...and as the film today suggested these are things that older people themselves can do...or can do something about. This is about **participation and engagement...**

I guess what older people want isn't so very different on the whole from what we all want throughout our lives

We want to feel competent.....to feel wanted and loved.....to have something to look forward to..... We want to be part of our communities...though our ways of doing this may change a bit as we age.

.....a bit like the rather nice analogy with how we may change our travel arrangements as we age. As 75 year olds we may still want to go down the NILE ...but the ways of doing this may have to adapt a bit...It may be that it's done in a large boat, not a canoe.....that there's an air-conditioned bus waiting at the end of the trip...not a donkey. In other words the wishes are the samethe ways of achieving them just a bit different.

BUT what WILL work for older people is engaging in new activities...activities that stretch the mind and body. AND this is exactly what the European Year of Active Citizenship says citizenship is all about.....

'it's about the active involvement of all citizens,....including older peoplein the life of their communities and thus in democracy in terms of activities and decision-making ..at all levels..local, regional and national'

It's about meaning....and achieving...'nothing about us without us'.

It's about older people as active, engaged....and visible'

...and I included the word 'visible' because **LANGUAGE AND IMAGES ARE IMPORTANT.**

Active ageing or healthy ageing or productive ageing are all important positive images of ageing.....but I want to push the idea here of some other words to link with ageing.

And the first of these is VISIBLE AGEINGHave you seen the many ads around about magic potions for women to buy? According to these ads it's absolutely vital NOT to be visibly ageing...these magic creams will 'immediately blur the signs of ageing' ...'remove the visible signs of ageing' Maybe it's time to combat this view of the horrors of being and looking older. ... instead I'd like to push the idea of getting older being OK and being a positive thing.....but more than that I want to push the idea of the need for older people to be **positively visible in communities, in decision-making, in politics, and in the media.**

I want my language about getting older to be very clear. Have you noticed how often people talk about death and dying by very carefully NOT using the words death or dying.....we avoid those difficult words. In the same way we tend to use a number of ways to talk about ageing and getting older ...or we add other positive words to the notionas if it's too difficult just to talk about getting older and what this means.

Think about your own attitude to getting older. I used to run workshops for people working with older people where I wanted them to think about their own attitudes to their own ageingand I'd ask them to complete the following statements:

- **I hope people think I look older/younger? than my age**
- **I'd like to be....years old**
- **I'd feel...WHAT?.....if someone guessed my age as 5 years older than I am.....**

How would you answer these?.....THEIR answers suggested some attitudes about ageing and getting older which weren't very positive..I don't remember anyone NOT being concerned about being thought to be older than they were.....being OLD/OLDER isn't seen as positive

SO it IS important for us to present positive images of ageing and to talk about healthy ageing and active ageing...but I think I'd like us also to think of other ways of talking about it. I don't think I want necessarily to think of myself as on an 'ageing journey' ...I'm getting older..and the words **I want** to link with getting older are visibly, loudly, assertively. I want to be a pensioner with attitude...a Grey Panther...a Silver Fox....I want to be heard and listened to.....

SOPA commissioned a review of examples of engagement and good practice in engagement of older people in Scotland. One of the key findings was that *'while the values of engaging the knowledge and expertise of older people has been recognised by policy makers , participating or being engaged does not necessarily mean that older people have a clearly heard voice . SOPA needs to ensure that older people feel able to express themselves...in turn policy makers need to be receptive to the voices and opinions of older people and to give clear justifications for policies and practices'*

SO THIS IS YOUR CHALLENGE ...YOU SOPA...If we are to be active, engaged, visible, assertive ...and listened to...how do we do this?...and that is what we want you to think about and discuss.....

‘WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS THAT PREVENT OLDER PEOPLE FROM BEING ENGAGED AND SPEAKING ABOUT WHAT THEY WANT...AND MORE IMPORTANTLY BEING LISTENED TO?...OVER TO YOU...’