

## **Elders Council Commentary on 'Fair Choices in Tough Times'**

### **Introduction**

The Elders Council commends Newcastle City Council for continuously improving the clarity of the budget papers. We also wish to thank the officers who have given time to explaining key budget proposals to us in some detail. We welcome Appendix 4 of the budget papers which sets out the cumulative impact of budget cuts, as we believe it is important consider how cuts across a range of different services and departments and the resulting reduction in services (e.g. reductions in face to face contact with older people), impacts on people's ability to live well and independently.

Elders Council recognises the severe pressures on Newcastle City Council and is keen to use its own resources, in particular the time, expertise and commitment of older people, to play its part in enabling people in the city to live and age well. In particular, the Elders Council is focusing on encouraging older people to be well informed and to plan ahead (via newsletter; radio programme and Information NOW); and to build up their social networks.

Picking up on the themes in 'Fair Choices in Tough Times', the Elders Council has the following comments:

### **Working City**

We urge the city to fully take account of the potential of the ageing demographic to contribute to the economic development of the city. Paying attention to the needs of an ageing workforce and supporting older jobseekers into employment, will benefit the city in the longer term. Developing innovative products and services for the ageing population and those that meet practical needs also offers significant opportunities for the development of new business.

The significant capital investment in the city provides us with great opportunities to demonstrate in practice what it means to be an age friendly city. Infrastructure developments which promote good quality, reliable public transport, walking and cycling are important to us. We welcome the 'quality contract' proposals as a way of improving bus services, and we consider the concessionary bus pass to be vital in enabling people to maintain social connections and contribute to the life of the city, not least by spending their grey pound.

We note the proposed changes to the Shopmobility service and the Blue Badge scheme. We do have concerns about these changes and the possible impact on people's ability to get out and about. We would welcome further information about how the Shopmobility service is being re-designed and whether there is potential for the service to meet a wider range of needs and to be made available to people visiting the city rather than being restricted to members.

## **Newcastle a great city**

The cultural offer available in the city through the main cultural venues, as well as community-based arts activities are very important to us and to enabling people to stay active and connected. We think the Council should continue to explore ways to protect this offer for both the citizens of the city, and as a significant attraction to visitors to the city. We welcome the positive steps the City Council has made in developing the Cultural Investment Fund.

We note the proposed closure of the Tourist Information Centre in Market Street, but we recommend that a tourist information facility is retained in the city. Whilst many people do use web based information services, they still look for personal advice when they arrive in the city. We would suggest that such a facility be part of the Central Station development and/or located in City Library.

In the negotiations to transfer the leisure estate to a leisure trust, we hope that emphasis will be placed on ensuring that leisure facilities offer a wide range of activity aimed at all ranges and abilities and at affordable prices. Given the health inequalities in the city, we believe that priority should be given to provide easily accessible opportunities for people to stay active and therefore increase their chances of ageing well.

The proposals for securing local libraries and for sustaining our great parks and open spaces will depend significantly on volunteers, many of whom will be older people. Older people are already demonstrating that they are willing to contribute in this way, but there is still a need to provide a sound infrastructure which can harness and support this contribution. This also applies to the engagement of citizens in a range of neighbourhood activity. Under the current proposals, the vision for how this will be achieved and the ways in which resources will be aligned to support greater community involvement are not clear to us. We are aware that voluntary sector organisations and colleagues are keen to build on what we have but also take a new look at how we harness the skills and talents of older people who are looking for an experience that matches existing or new skills and talents. Closer connection with large employing organisations in the city may be one area of fruitful development.

## **Housing**

We welcome the investment in specialist housing for older people. However we continue to emphasise that every opportunity should be taken to ensure that all new build meets age friendly standards, so that we are developing housing stock which is fit for the future. There is a growing body of evidence that older people are seeking different types of housing solutions ranging from co-housing to different types of retirement housing models. Newcastle could be at the cutting edge of testing new

ways of living in older age. We are concerned that the reduction in planning policy resource will mean that there is less capacity to explore this type of innovation.

We also recognise that most older people live in general housing stock, and we need to ensure that there is a provision of quality support services to enable them to live independently in safe, warm homes. There is a need to support and encourage people to plan ahead, and to provide the information, advice and support which enables people to do this. We use the mechanisms at our disposal to encourage people to plan ahead through information days and housing options sessions.

### **Social Care**

We feel strongly about the need for closer integration between health, housing and care. We appreciate the briefings we have received on the Care Act and would welcome continued updates on progress in relation to the proposed changes to services in response to the Care Act and Better Care Fund proposals. Identifying ways of being more efficient and effective whilst still responding to need is becoming even more challenging, particularly when we hear headlines from BBC research telling us that spending on care for people aged over 65 has fallen by a fifth in England over the last 10 years.

We note the importance of people being informed about the changes, as well as having good quality information about changes to services. We are fortunate in having Information NOW as a core information resource and other key information and advice services, such as the independent Advice and information service that Age UK Newcastle provides which has been a mainstream part of provision in the city for over 25 years and has just secured some Big Lottery investment. In addition, the Elders Council will use its information resources to support the dissemination of information, and to engaging with our members in monitoring the impact of changes on the wellbeing of older people and their carers in the city.

In terms of the proposals for Equipment, we would be interested in further information about how the web based self assessment model for equipment works and how this will be promoted to older people, particularly if it enables people to identify needs and solutions at an earlier stage.

Two of the proposals in older people's care will mean reduced face to face contact between older people and staff - equipment and complex moving and handling. Whilst we appreciate the need to redesign services; to encourage older people to assess and find their own solutions and to ensure that staff time is given to those with higher needs, we do have concerns about the reduction in face to face contact with older people, both in terms of their quality of life but also in relation to safeguarding. Age UK (England) 's recent scorecard which showed the high level of unmet need amongst older people, illustrates a worrying trend in reduced support for

older people . We also know from a recent small research project in Fenham/Wingrove that people's stories illustrated how older people are supporting friends and neighbours with increasingly complex needs. Whilst people might be willing to do this up to a point, they need a much stronger interface with community health and care services to enable them to do this safely and effectively.

We recognise that Newcastle City Council is continuing to maintain its investment in the voluntary sector and we welcome this. We know that resources to support preventative/early action are very limited, and we recommend that developing a shared vision together with a framework which sets out the types of provision we currently have and notes the gaps, would provide all organisations with a shared understanding of where to target our resources and enable us to be better prepared when funding/development opportunities arise. We are impressed with the way the Arts and Culture sector has worked with Newcastle City Council to stretch its reach and develop sustainable business models including getting capital support from the City Council and wonder if there is a parallel process that could be got underway with the VCS to enable it to innovate and prepare for an even harsher economic future.

### **Digital by Choice**

We understand the rationale for moving to digitally enabled services. Increasingly older people are using digital technology. But we need ways to continuously update our skills, particularly if some of the longer term ambitions around assistive living technologies are going to be realised. Our partnership with Northumbria University and the delivery of an IT drop in has proved very effective, and we will be seeking opportunities to replicate this and well as promoting IT skills training offered by a range of providers in the city. We are also keen for every opportunity to integrate skilling up older people with IT skills into their mainstream lives eg. by encouraging side by side working practices in all health and social care and the wider voluntary sector ie. a volunteer, community worker, social worker, reablement service worker showing an individual how to get on line as a routine part of the support conversation/dialogue they are having with them. We would like to see this commitment bedded into Newcastle Fund and other contract baseline requirements.

30.1.15

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