

Sustainability Learning Review 2015

Age Sector Platform



The
ATLANTIC
Philanthropies

Introduction

Age Sector Platform (ASP) was established in 2008 to campaign for older people across Northern Ireland and provide a strong, unified voice for some of the most vulnerable people in society. Managed by an executive committee of 12 older people, ASP currently has a membership base of 34 organisations and networks, which represent about 200,000 older people across NI. The organisation emerged from the Age Sector Reference Group, which was set up in 2000 when a number of groups and forums came together to discuss issues that affected the lives of older people.

The group had limited resources and no staff of their own until The Atlantic Philanthropies provided a three-year funding grant in 2008. This enabled the organisation to employ its first members of staff and procure office space, after which the organisation was relaunched as Age Sector Platform. The organisation was established to:

- Incorporate older people's perspectives into the formation of legislation.
- Increase awareness and improve understanding among older people of legislation that affects them.
- Ensure public authorities understand and comply with their statutory obligations as outlined in Section 75 (of the 1998 NI Act).
- Participate in the political and decision-making processes that affect older people at both local and regional government level.
- Sustain a two-way communication process between Government bodies and older people's organisations and networks across Northern Ireland and beyond.

Overview of Age Sector Platform

Since 2008, ASP has provided older people with a voice on a wide range of issues, including health and social care, fuel poverty, fear of crime, age discrimination, and loneliness and isolation. In 2011, the organisation established the NI Pensioners Parliament, which widened the scope of engagement work and enabled any older person aged over 60 in Northern Ireland to have their say on the issues they felt were important to them. Since its establishment, the parliament has engaged with thousands of older people across NI through an annual survey, local parliaments and an annual two-day parliament conference. These have provided a strong platform to support older people in their campaigning and advocacy work.

This approach to advocacy has been extremely popular, and each year growing numbers of older people have volunteered to take part in the NI Pensioners Parliament, supporting its campaigns and working on its various committees. The key challenge for ASP is to continue on with its effective advocacy work once Atlantic funding comes to an end. Age Sector Platform has been heavily reliant on Atlantic funding and the organisation must therefore find a way to replace this financial support if the significant impact from ASP activities can be sustained long term.

This short paper outlines some of the work and successes of Age Sector Platform over the past seven years and summarises how the organisation plans to sustain its work in the future.

Main activities

ASP campaigns to tackle the problems older people face. These vary in nature but each campaign will typically involve the following:

- Detailed discussions with ASP membership and Pensioners Parliament attendees
- Agreement on campaign aims and objectives
- Motions passed at NI Pensioners Parliament
- Communications with the appropriate authorities and decisions on the best method of communication
- Partnerships with other organisations across the age sector
- Identification of research and information to support and strengthen the campaign
- Development of a communications strategy, including the identification, support and training of older people as spokespeople
- Agreed timelines and key dates and opportunities to influence

The campaigns have involved a mixture of activities. The exact approach depends on the issue but these activities have included:

- Public rallies
- Ministerial meetings and meetings with other elected representatives
- Evidence to Stormont committees
- Consultation responses
- Written correspondence to MLAs, MPs and Councillors
- Engagement with government departments
- Attendance at political party conferences
- Press releases
- TV and radio interviews
- Qualitative and quantitative research with older people

Impact and successes

Since its establishment, ASP has had a significant impact by ensuring the views of older people are politicised and heard. While more work can be done on a wide range of issues, the organisation has achieved a number of notable successes that have benefited the lives of older people. These include:

- £22.5m in extra payments to low-income pensioners to assist with fuel poverty
- ‘Feel Safe’ campaign to tackle fear of crime
- Successful campaign to prevent the abolition of cheques, a preferred method of payment for many older people
- Appointment of an NI Commissioner for Older People
- Programme for Government commitment to tackle crimes against older people
- Programme for Government commitment to outlaw age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services
- Creation of the NI Pensioners Parliament as an innovative model of participatory democracy
- ‘Hands Off’ campaign to protect universal pensioner benefits

NI Pensioners Parliament (NIPP)

The NIPP was created by ASP in 2011 with the aim to further strengthen the voice of older people in the local community, particularly those who are most vulnerable and isolated. Events associated with the NIPP include a two-day Parliament, a country-wide survey and numerous ‘local parliaments’. Each county has sought to ensure the NIPP is wide-reaching and incorporates the views of older people from every background and location. Further objectives of the Parliament include:

- Increasing the number of opportunities for older people to have their voice heard on the issues that matter to them

- Connecting older people to key decision makers within government and service providers
- Increasing the confidence of older people to participate and to uphold their rights
- Broadening older people's knowledge of their rights and entitlements
- Increasing awareness and access to services that can improve quality of life for older people
- Enabling older people to utilise experience and skills acquired over their lifetime to help develop solutions on important issues

Increasing levels of engagement

Initiatives such as the NIPP have developed as the single biggest engagement event with older people across NI each year. Since it was launched in 2011:

- More than 5,000 surveys have been completed by older people.
- About 2,000 older people have attended 28 local Pensioners Parliaments in 17 different locations across Northern Ireland.
- Four NIPPs have been held with about 200 older people in attendance at each.
- Some 94 motions have been passed at the NIPP to date.
- Numerous high profile speakers, including government ministers and senior politicians, have addressed the NIPP.
- An annual special sitting of the NIPP has taken place at the Senate Chamber in Parliament Buildings each year, chaired by Speaker of the house
- Eight campaign committees of older people have been established to take forward issues raised at the NIPP.

Strengths of the NIPP model

The NIPP is an inclusive, cross-community project that reaches out to older people from every area and background across all of Northern Ireland. Its grassroots, 'bottom-up' approach to advocacy appeals to a wide range of people and its format has been specially designed to ensure everyone who takes part has an opportunity to have their say on the issues discussed.

As well as being cross-community in nature it also has an excellent urban/rural mix of participants and has also gathered the views of the main ethnic minority groups of older people living in NI. The NIPP has also been successful in encouraging more male participants to engage and discuss issues that affect them. This is something the age sector has struggled to do in the past. The Pensioners Parliament has captured the imagination of a large section of older people who may previously have been disengaged from older people's activities.

The results from the evaluation of participants at the NIPP highlight the positive impact it has had on the lives of older people:

- 90% who attended the NIPP said they better understood local and regional decision making structures after taking part.
- 69% of older people recalled how they were more aware of the benefits to which they might be entitled to.
- 71% of older people felt they knew more about the services/facilities in their local area.
- 91.1% said their knowledge of issues affecting older people had increased.
- 89% felt increasingly more confident to share their views.
- 90% said they were now more interested in reading and responding to government consultations.
- 84% felt more connected to their own age group and 79% had made new friends



Above: Members of the NI Pensioners Parliament in May 2014

Top: Executive Ministers being quizzed by Members of the NI Pensioners Parliament at Parliament Buildings, Stormont, January 2014

Developing a sustainability strategy

Review current operations

As part of the ASP sustainability strategy, the organisation has evaluated performance in order to identify how the structure and processes can help deliver charitable aims and objectives.

This would provide a clear reflection on what could be achieved in the future and also how it could be achieved. The following questions were considered:

- What difference do we make?
- Are we needed?
- What do we do well?
- What can we change/improve?
- What is our value?
- Who is it valuable for?
- What can we do differently?
- What must we not do?

Not only did this encourage reflection on the day-to-day running of ASP, it served as a reminder of the important role the organisation has and the important contribution it can make to the lives of older people.

However, the process of change for organisations is always challenging for ASP to build on its successes it was clear that significant changes to how the organisation operates and is funded need to be implemented in a relatively short period of time.

Identifying the challenges

During the work on developing a sustainability plan, ASP also considered the wider social, political and economic barriers to success and how these can best be managed, if not overcome. These included:

- The impact of the 'age of austerity' on statutory funding
- The increasing competition for funding available from within and outside the age sector
- The 'trap' of chasing funding for projects that did not align with ASP's core objectives

In addition to the external factors ASP has also undergone a major shift in culture as it looks to adapt to securing income from a wider variety of sources. This has had implications for staff roles and responsibilities but also for the mindset of ASP's executive committee and wider membership.

At present there is a growing priority to focus on income generation and fully costing all work. This has been most keenly felt in research services, where the organisation currently has to ensure funding is acquired for any support work provided to outside bodies and agencies.

In response to the obvious challenges to obtaining funding, there were clearly other major factors that supported the need for a strong older people's advocacy organisation. There was also a consensus the NIPP represents a strong model of participatory democracy that has proved extremely popular with older people and key stakeholders alike. This innovative model should be supported and developed further in the future.

Pillars of Sustainability

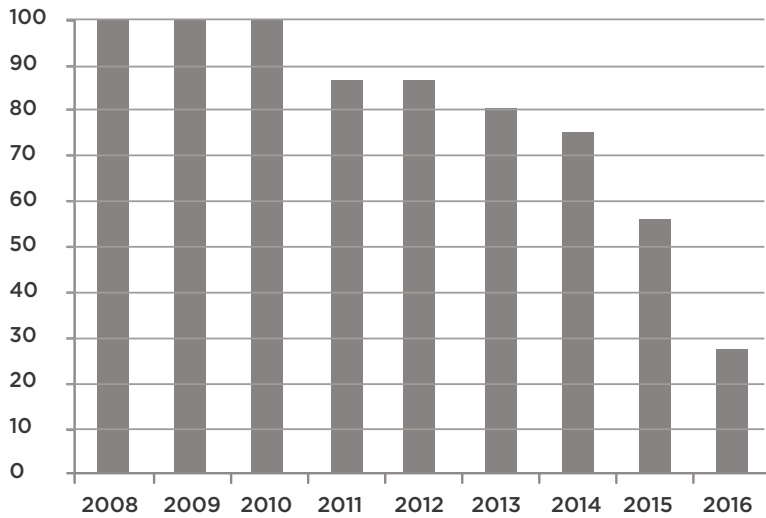
On completion of the self-evaluation it was important to consider what factors were required to enable the ASP vision to be achieved. In addition to attracting alternative funders, ASP will look to:

- Further support from existing/previous funders
- Grow and develop membership
- Maintain a strong, committed staff team and member committees
- Develop partnerships and collaborations with other organisations
- Continue critical campaign activity and promotion of our work
- Increase capacity to fundraise
- Develop the Pensioners Parliament Research Panel
- Restructure and further develop and promote the NIPP

Bridging the funding gap

After securing an initial three-year Atlantic grant in 2008, ASP secured a further three years of Atlantic funding in 2011, with conditions to develop alternative funding sources. ASP received a final grant in 2014, which part-funded the organisation and set challenging targets for acquiring alternative funding from a range of sources over the following three years. ASP will look to become financially self-reliant by 2017, when Atlantic funding across all sectors will terminate.

Although Atlantic has been the main funder for ASP since 2008, evidence presented here suggests a steady growth in income received from other sources, whether by alternative funders or through sponsorship, fundraising and the provision of research services. The final section of the report will review these alternative funding streams and how they will feature in ASP's future plans.



Percentage of ASP funding provided by The Atlantic Philanthropies 2008-2016

Alternative funders

ASP has received funding from other sources to support the development and implementation of the NIPP as well as conduct a project to help reduce the high levels of fear of crime felt by older people. This funding has been obtained from both charitable foundations and statutory sources. Both have the potential to increase funding support in the near future. ASP is also looking to strengthen partnerships with local authorities as this would align with plans to further develop the NIPP and hopefully establish individual parliaments in each of the 11 new 'Super Council' areas.

Pensioners Trust

ASP has also raised money through sponsorship, advertising and fundraising activities. In 2014 the Pensioners Trust was established to raise money to support the work of ASP and specifically to tackle the problems that were raised annually in the NIPP. Target audiences for this trust include the general public, pensioners and business donors. Despite limited fundraising capacity, income obtained from donations in the previous year has been sizeable and has exceeded the initial targets of the trust. ASP believes a more sophisticated approach to fundraising has potential to increase trust donations in the medium to long term.

Membership

One of the major strengths of ASP is the size of its membership. Since 2008 the number of member organisations has increased by 40% and now includes the membership of 34 older people's networks. The introduction of an individual membership category has also enabled people not affiliated to any clubs or groups to become involved in ASP work. This has attracted a significant number of passionate and committed individual campaigners. In late 2014, ASP also reviewed and amended some membership categories, which will potentially enable some smaller groups to also subscribe as full ASP members.

Pensioners Parliament Research Panel

ASP's new research service is called the Pensioners Parliament Research Panel. Marketing material and details outlining what the service can offer will be printed during the summer of 2015 and will be distributed through a wide variety of media channels in the near future. ASP has been steadily developing this panel and intends to promote this service more widely to older people in 2016. Overall, older people throughout the province have reacted very positively to the panel, and there has already been significant participation from panel members to date. In addition to representing useful revenue stream for the organisation this panel is now an extremely valuable research tool to support ASP's campaigns. It has already been used on a number of occasions to provide the organisation with feedback from older people on key issues such as age discrimination and health and social care.

Conclusion

Since its inception in 2008, the team at Age Sector Platform has developed an organisation that enables older people to advocate and develop campaigns to improve their quality of life. ASP represents an organised, legitimate, proactive campaigning group among decision- and policy-makers across a range of issues. Not only that, but through the creation of the NIPP, ASP has enhanced its profile and raised expectations on how older people can express their views.

During this period, ASP enjoyed a number of notable successes that have directly benefited some of the most vulnerable older people living in NI. Some of these successes are detailed in the paper. However, by considering the financial payments made to older people alone as a result of the campaigning and advocacy work, every £1 invested by Atlantic into ASP has delivered £20 return to older people on low incomes. The true value of ASP extends beyond monetary benefits, with many older people expressing positive feelings about the impact on their own health and wellbeing by taking part in ASP programmes and initiatives.

Considerable work has gone into developing a sustainability strategy to ensure the organisation can continue in the long term without the reliance on Atlantic funding. Opportunities have been developed to source additional revenue including introducing membership fees, offering sponsorship opportunities and developing a social enterprise arm where research support services can be offered for organisations looking to examine the views of older people.

ASP is currently entering a crucial period in ensuring the long-term survival of an effective model for advocacy for older people in NI. The support and interest in the NIPP from statutory, community and voluntary, and private organisations provides hope this model of participative democracy can be sustained in the longer term. However, the climate of austerity remains a challenging one and work is needed to ensure the long-term sustainability and viability of ASP is secured.

Ultimately, the vision and commitment shown by Atlantic have created a platform for older people to voice their concerns, as well as a robust mechanism to enable older people reach out to policy- and decision-makers. ASP believes what has been created with the support of Atlantic represents a model of best practice for old-age advocacy that could be replicated internationally.