

Critical Learnings Tactics in Advocacy

July 2013



The 'Can't Heat or Eat' rally, which took place outside Stormont (Parliament) Buildings in November 2008. The rally was in response to rising fuel and food costs, and an inadequate income for older people.

Traditional forms of advocacy in Northern Ireland have led to some key gains for older people but are no longer enough to secure change.

Effective approaches in the past, such as gathering petitions, holding public protests and presenting demands to politicians, are insufficient to ensure that older people, particularly those who are most vulnerable, obtain their rights.

Instead, Northern Ireland ageing organisations need to consider taking an approach to advocacy that emphasises legal challenges and sophisticated negotiations with government officials.

Background

Advocacy has been at the heart of the work of The Atlantic Philanthropies since it began its Ageing Programme in Northern Ireland in 2004.

At the time, the age sector faced a difficult political and social climate in their quest to gain attention to the needs of older people. Politics still revolved around Protestant and Catholic identity and most political debate focused on whether the region should become independent or maintain its union with Great Britain. Ageing issues were low on the political agenda.

Atlantic believed that unless effective advocacy increased, older people would be even further marginalised.

Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament

The Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament began in 2011 and allows older people from across the region to have their say on issues that matter to them.

In this video, participants talk about the importance of having a platform to voice their concerns to members of parliament. To watch it, click on the hyperlink below.



www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/PPVideo

What Was Accomplished?

An evaluation² of advocacy work by ageing organisations funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies found that their efforts led to six key outcomes:

- **New legislation.** New laws provide broader protections for older people. This includes special Winter Fuel Payments and the extension of equality rights to Goods, Facilities and Services that aims to ensure that a business cannot offer an older person an inferior service than it would offer a younger person.
- **New resources.** Advocacy campaigns led to more funding for older people. The “Can’t Heat or Eat” campaign, which challenged the traditional trade-off choice that many older people face to either keep warm or spend money on food during winter, led to a government announcement that £12.5m would be made available to provide 85,000 pensioner households with a £150 payment.
- **New policies.** Advocacy work created new policies that benefit older people. The Age Sector Platform and Age NI played an instrumental role in revising a Community Safety Plan to address older people’s needs.
- **New governance and decision-making.** Research projects helped inform key decisions affecting older people. Research by the Changing Ageing Partnership on discrimination and older people’s rights helped ensure the Commissioner for Older People has strong enforcement and investigative powers.

Similarly, funding for the Access to Benefits programme enabled older adults to receive previously unclaimed government benefits. Since 2008, 26,000 people in Northern Ireland have collected unclaimed benefits totalling £58.2 million.

- **New political concern.** Ageing was significantly ratcheted up on the political and policy agenda. Advocates can point to both more attention and more action on issues facing older people. For example, the number of Assembly Questions related to older people more than doubled between 2009 and 2010. The questions reflect the key concerns of the sector including fuel poverty, pensions and public spending on older people and welfare.
- **New evidence-based advocacy.** One of the key strengths of age advocacy has been the increased use of professionally produced research across a range of policy issues. CARDI, Volunteer Now and Engage with Age have all produced comprehensive evidence using data to evaluate the impact of public policy, strengthen volunteering and tackle loneliness among the most isolated old.

£58.2m

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Theresa Clarke speaks about her experience with dementia care during the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament.

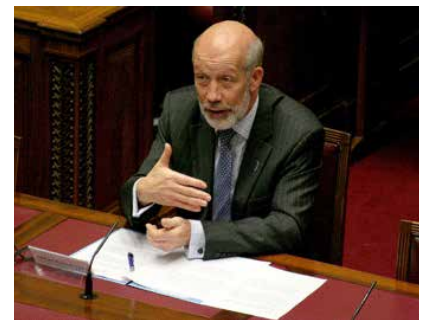
The number of Assembly Questions related to older people more than doubled between 2009 and 2010.

²Brendan Murtagh, *Tactics in Advocacy in the Northern Ireland Age Programme*, 2013.

Challenges

While the age sector in Northern Ireland can point to key gains for older people, organisations must employ more provocative and nuanced tactics if they are to make further inroads. The age sector faces the following challenges:

- **Advocates must work in a much more difficult political environment** than they ever have in the past. They face politicians and civil servants still unaware of ageing issues and the reality of significant public sector cuts. Much of the advocacy tactics used by the ageing sector are more appropriate to a time when the state was resource rich and could afford to pay for more benefits.
- **The sector is still too reactive, responding to crises**, rather than developing a longer term plan that would prioritise what is necessary and what is not.
- **Some models of advocacy remain unchanged in two decades.** It is no longer sufficient, for example, to engage in street protests and media campaigns that demand increased benefits for all older people.
- **Older people are often mobilised as photo opportunities in crude and simplistic ways**, which reduces their potency and impact. This approach also raises ethical questions, especially given the vulnerable nature of the target population.
- **Research still must be translated into concrete policy or practical steps for it to be most useful.** Too much research does not address the real-life concerns of older people or if it does, does not make clear the steps policymakers must take to resolve those concerns.



Justice Minister David Ford MLA responds to community safety issues raised in the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament.

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Crowds of older adults gathered at Belfast City Hall in April 2010 for the launch of a pensioners' election campaign in an effort to harness the power of the 'grey vote' in the lead up to the general election.

Action Steps

Moving forward, the age sector can build on its gains by broadening and deepening its approaches to advocacy for older people in the following ways:

1 Embrace more approaches that challenge the government and private sector. It is not enough to “make a good case” for the needs of older people. Politicians and civil servants will sometimes only respond to older people’s needs and rights when compelled to do so. These practices challenge—often through legal actions—the state and private sector to provide fairer services for older people. Among the key tools that age sector will need to employ are:

- **Judicial review and challenge.** If the government does not provide services for older people, particularly around social care, it can be challenged under judicial review. Public litigation, where court cases are brought to argue on behalf of the needs of a particular group, such as people who suffer from dementia, is another effective way to successfully advocate.
- **Bargaining and hard negotiation.** Age sector organisations need to get representatives appointed to special committees focusing on ageing issues where much of the critical decision making takes place. Similarly, organisations need to be willing to embrace tough bargaining as they did when they insisted that the Community Safety Plan included separate provisions for older people.

The age sector also needs to actively participate in legislative debates. For example, to gain approval of a strong Commissioner for Older People, the age sector engaged in committee debates and provided well-thought out answers to legislators’ concerns.

2 Commission more applied research. The age sector gets better policy traction when it builds careful arguments that are based on good research. It is difficult for policymakers to dispute a well-thought out argument based on empirical evidence. Research can also provide solutions to entrenched problems, which is appealing to politicians and civil servants.

The “Can’t Heat or Eat” campaign is a strong example of a sophisticated advocacy approach that used research rather than simple emotion to make its case for higher fuel payments.

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Older people’s demands for government response to fuel and food costs generates significant press coverage.

Action Steps continued

- 3 Prioritise the most important issues.** Not all challenges facing older people can be addressed, particularly in a climate of fiscal restraint. Prioritising the most vital issues, perhaps those that affect vulnerable and poor older people, can help organisations focus on what is achievable. An example of such successful prioritisation is fuel poverty, fear of crime and the future of pensions.

The Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament, meanwhile, offers a model for learning about what is most important to older people.

- 4 Increase alliances with other sectors including criminal justice and legal reform and organisations addressing poverty.**

The issues that the age sector confronts require alliances with other organisations grappling with similar challenges. Campaigning is sometimes too parochial and narrowly focused in a way that reinforces the “silo” mentality of the sectors. By joining forces with other sectors, such as disability, youth, children and women, age sectors can strengthen their advocacy efforts.

For example, Linking Generations Northern Ireland involved the Age Sector Platform, Northern Ireland Youth Forum and the Beth Johnson Foundation to develop intergenerational practice by creating opportunities for older and younger people to meet and learn from one another. The programme identified common areas for advocacy and mutual support through an intergenerational approach that included an end to discriminatory age employment practices, strengthening social attitudes between the ages and widening access to public transport.

- 5 Develop skills in the age sector to take on more aggressive approaches, including legal challenges.** If age organisations are to use litigation and challenge the government, they will need professionals who know more about the law and tactical advocacy.

- 6 Build up social enterprises to help the sector become more self-sufficient and less dependent on the state for resources.** It is difficult to challenge the government if an organisation or sector receives significant funding from it. By diversifying income streams through setting up a series of businesses and attracting independent funding, the age sector can become less dependent on the government for money and more willing to call it to account on policies.



Campaigners for an Older People's Commissioner say 'We don't want a toothless tiger.'



Junior Minister Gerry Kelly speaking to Patricia Donald and Meg Holmes of the Age Sector Platform.

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