

## **Southampton: A city in balance**

### **Introduction**

1. As previously reported southampton is working with other European cities on a bid for EU funding under the INTERREG Ivb programme.
2. This paper sets out the proposal and initial action proposals for submission as part of the Cities in Balance bid. It represents current thinking rather than a final proposal. The programme requires matched funding, and so some funded projects are already included within the whole.

### **Context**

3. Research by the Social Exclusion Unit has identified significant social exclusion in the UK amongst senior citizens reflected in, for example low levels of service take-up and participation, in low levels of mental well-being and significant social isolation.
4. The national Better Government for Older People Programme identified a clear demand for seniors to be engaged and involved in the decisions that affect them, individually and collectively, and in society as a whole – particularly in respect of opportunity for future generations – grandchildren. Research also shows high levels of volunteering amongst seniors.
5. Research is showing that mental and physical well-being are best retained by those who are both physically and mentally active, and there is a strong connection between speed of aging and the volume of social contact. Isolation prompts dependency and affects physical and mental well-being.
6. Society needs to capture the knowledge, skills and time of senior citizens, not only as social contributors but also to transfer skills and wisdom across generations in the social and economic spheres.

### **The importance of information and networks**

7. Poor access to information is key to social exclusion. Research has identified a number of key factors – the 'digital divide'; inaccessible communications and information; sight, hearing and language barriers; lack of co-ordination between agencies; complex patterns of entitlement; lack of understanding of seniors' life patterns and networks; and quite often, simply ageist attitudes.
8. The knowledge economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century thrives not only on information, but also on networks. Networks enable the transfer of information and knowledge, stimulate group activity and shared experience, and provide support and motivation. They support social cohesion, drive economic and technological advance, and political activity.
9. Within society networks are generated through education, work, parenting, and increasingly through technology. However, these are all networks that seniors are not engaged in, and this has a doubly damaging effect. On the

one, research shows that lack of positive social contact directly affects ageing and well-being. On the other hand, research also shows that seniors gain most information by word of mouth. We shall not address the social exclusion of seniors without facilitating and support networks that increase social contact and information dissemination.

### **Southampton's strategic approach to later years**

10. The Council's strategic approach to the ageing population is to promote independent, active ageing by:
  - Providing opportunities for an active and stimulating lifestyle in later years.
  - Promoting and encouraging a healthy lifestyle, beginning well before old age, and continuing throughout life.
  - Tackling inequality and reducing disadvantage to ensure that all members of all sections of society have the best opportunity for an independent and dignified old age.
  - Ensuring that older people, and those who support them, have good information and ease of access to a wide range of support and opportunities, in a city, which recognises their needs and caters for them across the whole spectrum of their quality of life.

### **Cities in Balance**

11. The City in Balance project provides an opportunity to develop a knowledge – based focus within the senior economy, addressing similar needs across the wide age spectrum of later years.
12. The project will operate under the umbrella of the Later Years Partnership, a group of city agencies and organisations committed to improving the quality of life of those in their later years. Different elements of the project will be delivered by a variety of partners.
13. **The Seniors Information Project** will work across the city to improve the quality of information available from agencies, work with seniors to understand their information needs, and co-ordinate and disseminate information. It will develop a web-portal that will enable access to information from any PC in the city – at home or at service reception counters. It will broker partnerships between agencies to provide access.
14. The **Southampton Seniors Council** is the voice of seniors. Improved support will enable it to reach out and engage more seniors in its work, linking as it does to a range of other groups and networks. It will be able to tap into the knowledge held within the senior population and bring it to bear in making Southampton 'a city that is good to grow older in'. It will make it more effective in providing a voice for seniors and give it greater impact in the affairs of the city, and the development of services.

15. **The Senior Health Mentor** project will train and co-ordinate a team of senior volunteers, passing on knowledge and information, by working in the community promoting healthy ageing.
16. **The Third Age Centre** is an established building but currently dormant and in transition. Re-launching the centre at the heart of the project will provide a physical hub for networks – of seniors and agencies, and information. Its computer learning suite will provide a hub for the city's learning programmes, currently based in the community rooms of sheltered housing schemes, with the aim of developing a network of IT seniors who can act as trainers and supporters of other senior IT initiatives.
17. **The Southampton Inter-Generational Network** will provide a network resource to champion inter-generational projects and offer inter-generational solutions to economic, social, and environmental issues.
18. **A 'Safety at Home' co-ordination project** will work with housing, fire, crime and security, benefits, health, care, and good neighbour agencies to introduce home safety checks for seniors in the community – linking up with health mentors, and voluntary groups to tackle social isolation.
19. In addition, the project will undertake:-
  - a) **action research** to assess the feasibility of establishing further transactional networks in the city. These will include:-
    - volunteering and support networks;
    - time-banks enabling seniors to trade skills and experience;
    - a flexible market for senior labour, such as the "Slivers of time" model;
  - b) a **senior visitor** project to improve the marketing and accessibility of the city;

### **The Southampton Later Years Congress**

20. In 2006, Southampton held a Later Years congress involving hundreds of people discussing ageing issues. We are currently discussing with the national Better Government for Older People to hold its annual conference in the city in the final year of the project, and developing it onto a European level.

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