

EXPERT OPINION: JO CLARKE



JO CLARKE is Deputy CEO of Age UK West Sussex, Brighton & Hove, where she leads work across partnerships, localities and system-wide collaboration to improve outcomes for older people. She brings more than 15 years' experience spanning local government, the voluntary and community sector, and national charities, with a particular focus on commissioning, place based working and cross-sector partnerships.

Before becoming Deputy CEO, Jo was Director of Partnerships and Localities, and previously held senior roles at Adur & Worthing Councils, Birmingham City Council and Shelter. Her career has centred on tackling inequality, supporting vulnerable communities and strengthening the role of the voluntary sector within public service delivery.

Jo is also an active voice in regional collaboration, serving as Older People and Commissioning Representative for Community Works.

WHY DEVOLUTION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE SUSSEX GENUINELY AGE-FRIENDLY

With our ageing population, ageing well should matter to all of us

Hopefully, with good health and a dose of luck, we'll all grow old. When we reach that stage (most of us never really feeling the age our birth certificate states), we'll want a community that's geared up to help us thrive.

We'll want issues like healthcare, transport, housing, social inclusion and buildings to be planned with us in mind. For example, public places, new homes, services and facilities should be accessible to all ages, including those with a wheelchair, a walking aid or a buggy. We'll want our neighbourhoods and communities to work for us, not add to our isolation, and we'll want to be respected, consulted and cared about.

The issues outlined above are some of the pillars of an age-friendly society. Our immediate environment has a significant impact on our health, well-being and the quality of our lives, so getting this right is essential for our ageing population.

Nothing about us, without us

So what does that look like at ground level? Devolution and our local government reorganisation presents us with tangible opportunities to improve life for older people locally. Firstly, bringing decisions to a more local level should allow for services to be shaped by community need.

“Nothing about us, without us” couldn’t be more relevant here and we’d hope to see older people getting opportunities to be fully involved in service and environmental design and redesign, whether that’s looking at bus routes, public spaces or healthcare issues like hospital discharge.

Our staff and volunteers hear what works for older people and what doesn’t, both from our customers and as we’re out and about locally, keeping our ears to the ground. There are already active Older People’s Councils based in Horsham and Brighton & Hove and rolling out models like this makes perfect sense. Involving older people isn’t a box ticking exercise for inclusion - it ensures decisions are based on lived experience and works for budget bottom lines too, ensuring that money is spent wisely, based on need, first time.

Joined up community care & prevention

Across healthcare, neighbourhood based integrated models should allow for close collaboration between the NHS and the third sector. Investing in joined up care, with a focus on prevention should be a shift we’re all pushing for.

Health doesn’t start in hospitals, it starts where we live. Around 80% of a person’s health concerns can be attributed to non-medical factors like income, housing and loneliness, as well as diet, exercise and smoking.

With this in mind, we think the focus should be on services to keep people healthy, independent, informed and connected in the community. Social prescribing and initiatives to address frailty, tackle falls and keep older people fit and active should be a priority. Getting people out of their homes and meeting others in accessible, welcoming spaces also promotes the health, independence and connection we all need.

There’s huge potential here that’s untapped and adding a local lens will hopefully identify that. Charities are often the glue that holds things together and with adequate investment our impact could be much greater, keeping people out of the health service and care homes, while reducing pressure on healthcare services. Conversely, if third sector grants are reduced, pressure shifts back to councils and health services, who must then support people more intensively in surgeries, urgent care and wards.

AN OLDER PEOPLE’S COMMISSIONER

There’s also an opportunity for strategic leadership, someone whose role is to ensure older residents are visible, heard and valued. An England cross-party Older People’s Commissioner in Government would focus on bringing all these things together, be that advocating on transport and other age-friendly pillars, influencing funding priorities or championing older residents. Many people aren’t aware that this role currently doesn’t exist, however there is a Children’s Commissioner for England.

An England Older People’s Commissioner would also create regional accountability for older people and provide a unifying strategic voice in a complex policy landscape. Finally, a Commissioner’s office can challenge ageism and run key campaigns. The Commissioner for Older People in Wales ran a campaign to improve access to pension credit, increasing uptake by over a quarter. That’s vital money in people’s pockets when they need it the most. A similar role for England could be transformative, but could we do even better and have one in Sussex too?

As a charity, we’re excited about the possibilities devolution will offer. We’re ready and waiting to work with local government, the health service and third sector partners to improve life for older people locally. Let’s make Sussex age-friendly together, so all our later years are quality years - healthy, happy and fulfilled.

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