FINDING OUR VOICES, MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Participants from Age & Opportunity’s Get Vocal programme have their say
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Acknowledgements

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Hexhibit

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Foreword

Get Vocal ran as a grant-giving initiative from 2008 to 2013 and, although it was complete before I began in Age & Opportunity, I am delighted to have the chance to pay tribute to its achievements as a programme. The intention behind this final publication is to honour the spirit of what was gained thanks to Get Vocal in a way that could inspire people who want to make a difference within their own communities. The personal accounts, and the different perspectives they provide, create a nuanced yet powerful example of grassroots advocacy and active citizenship among older people.

Get Vocal encouraged capacity-building for older people to play a greater role in their communities and to have a greater say in decisions that affect their lives. These interviews show the importance of the energy that sustains local networks, so often rooted in local issues. They also show, however, that local groups are not always self-sustaining and that it is vital to have support organisations with a community development ethos, that can support a group and provide opportunities for that group to develop.

I was heartened to see how certain projects slowly dissolved the barriers to understanding and the barriers to empathy. That commitment to work slowly to incorporate diversity, as happened among two groups of older people in the Voices through Art project, for example, was key to so many Get Vocal projects. Significant projects such as the ‘Visible Lives’ research on the lives of older people in the LGBT community, as mentioned by Brian Harvey, work with Respond! Housing, as discussed by Philip O’Reilly, Southside Traveller Action Group, as reflected on by Nan O’Brien, the work of Breda Lymer and West Training and Development in promoting the voices of people living in residential care; all of these projects, and more, have begun to build a mosaic of what it means to be older in
Ireland, moving far beyond the stereotype of people’s preconceptions about who older people are and what older people want.

It is impossible to acknowledge everyone who contributed to the successes of Get Vocal but I would like to recognise the hard work of Age & Opportunity’s board and staff in driving Get Vocal, especially my predecessor as CEO, Catherine Rose, the Get Vocal Programme Managers Kate Carbery, Catherine Boland, and Paul Maher and those who supported them, Barry Lynch and Marie Louise Byrne. I would also like to thank the external members of the Get Vocal Steering Committee: Phyllis Murphy (chair); John Brady; Jack Horgan; Barry Lynch; Kieran Walsh; Aidan Warner. The committee provided an expertise and an intellectual depth to the development of the programme which is to be celebrated. The scope and the diversity of Get Vocal could not have been achieved without, of course, the support and funding of the Atlantic Philanthropies, who recognised the grassroots impact that a multi-faceted advocacy programme could have.

To read these stories, and to hear the voices of people who became involved in Get Vocal, is to see far beyond the ‘passive recipients of care’ model. It is to appreciate something very powerful about local advocacy and community development. It is to perceive the untapped potential of older people to transform our communities, our counties and cities, to transform the country itself.

Karen Smyth CEO, Age & Opportunity
Age & Opportunity’s Get Vocal programme encouraged capacity-building for older people as expressed by the mission ‘to enable the diverse communities of older people in Ireland to articulate, and effectively address, the needs, issues and concerns that they experience’. Through Get Vocal, Age & Opportunity supported a wide range of organisations, by providing grants and additional supports, to implement projects with the broad focus of enabling older people to decide what they want, to articulate it and to be able to lobby effectively at every level to ensure that their needs are met. Get Vocal created an atmosphere where people found that they could have more of a say about their lives and their communities and that this could be a very positive thing.

It was Age & Opportunity’s experience from the pilot phase that, prior to Get Vocal, there was not a strong tradition of collective advocacy activity at a local level by groups of older people, outside of formal political or representative structures. Get Vocal became a way in which to mobilise and educate people around local advocacy. A point, which was reflected in Kevin Molloy’s interview, was that there existed a lack of understanding or appreciation for what local advocacy could do. People often want to see change in their local community but they do not connect that to advocacy.

What also began to emerge was that, while older people in different parts of the country were facing the same issues and concerns, these issues are primarily considered by older people from a local perspective. While national initiatives were welcomed by local networks, for example the work carried out by Older & Bolder, these ‘national initiatives’ gain their impetus or energy from what difference can be seen and achieved at the local level. As Bob Gilbert highlighted in his interview, the ‘difference’ in question might be
as straightforward as the height of kerbstones in one village. While there can be guidance produced at a national level on the built environment, the energy to advocate on the implementation of the guidance may often be at local level. Through identifying what change is needed at a local level, advocates can gain an appreciation of how public policy at a national level can affect what happens locally and then interrogate that policy.

What became clear, however, from Get Vocal is the importance of support organisations with a community development ethos. These can support groups and provide opportunities for them to develop, such as happened with Anne Kavanagh’s annual meetings, as well as providing a way to build engagement across communities and across issues.

There must also be an understanding that, when local advocacy networks develop, they do so in different ways, depending on circumstances. In some areas, a network can be at county level, in others, it is citywide, while in others still, it relates to a particular interest group or community. Any activity which tries to nurture local advocacy needs to be able to accommodate a diversity of groupings. This is at the heart of what Age & Opportunity saw time and again; grassroots advocacy does not lend itself to just one model.

Get Vocal helped Age & Opportunity to understand the dynamics of successful local networks. From those experiences, the successes and failures, it became clear that local networks are at their most effective when:

- they have developed from a local nucleus of older people representing diverse groups;
- they are supported by a full-time or part-time community development worker with a commitment to the sector and to diversity;
- the worker is linked to a local organisation with a community development ethos;
- the local network has access to opportunities to interact with other networks and organisations through a national organisation;
members have access to a range of education and training opportunities, from personal development to policy analysis and campaigning.

Certain ‘learnings’ from Get Vocal are not surprising. Despite much progress over the years, older people are often still perceived as being the passive recipients of services. Changing that perception, repositioning older people as being ‘active partners’ rather than a ‘target group’ which must be ‘taken care of’, has informed much of the work of Get Vocal. As Bob Gilbert points out about conversations with Transition Year students, people often disconnect their perception of what and who ‘older people’ are and the actual engaged active older people who form part of their lives.

Also worth considering is the diversity that the interviews reflect. Older people form part of all kinds of other communities, including those at risk of discrimination or social exclusion beyond ageism. The projects discussed in the interviews with Denise Croke, Nan O’Brien, Breda Lymer, Philip O’Reilly and Brian Harvey tackle this issue, providing a clear picture of what is achievable without minimising the work necessary on all sides. There is also a diversity of experience to be found: Seán Kinsella’s interview reflects another chapter in a lifetime of advocacy while Phyllis New’s shows a new departure.

It is clear, too, that a lack of self-esteem, particularly among socially excluded groups, still remains a barrier to advocacy. Some accomplished advocates played down their significant achievements in their interviews. The ‘pre-development’ courses, such as Ageing with Confidence in Marie Brady’s interview, are vital in building confidence and creating an atmosphere where people feel that advocacy is possible.

It is vital to recognise the need to build the skills, capacity and the confidence of people to engage constructively. It is also important to create agile and flexible structures so that the diversity that exists among older people can be accommodated and so that grassroots organisations that have been carefully nurtured from the ground up can develop further and achieve more. Get Vocal achieved these things and, as can be seen from the interviews, the results can be transformative.
I couldn’t even tell them my name; I couldn’t say one word

There’s a black and white photograph on the dresser in Marie Brady’s breakfast room. Two young people look out of the frame; a bit hippyish, his hair as long as hers, shy yet confident at the same time. This is Marie and her husband Bobby on the day before they married. Ahead lay marriage, raising five children in Dublin, the financial tsunami that hit in 2008, followed by what was meant to be semi-retirement in the tidy village of Kilmuckridge, Co. Wexford. “I put the photograph there to remind the children that we weren’t always like this.” Marie puts her hand up to her greying hair. “We were young too.”

In the garden, hens cluck and peck at the wire fencing that keeps them in and the fox out. Marie sits at her table with her back to the glass door. “This is not it,” she says of her current life. “I want to work. I’m going to do some work. I’m fairly confident now that I will do it.”
There has to be more. I’m going to see how far I can push it.

“I never classed myself as an old person when I moved down to Kilmuckridge. You don’t think of yourself as old; the same, perhaps, with a bit more experience. I didn’t know anybody here though we’d been coming down from Dublin for camping holidays for years. I knew the place well, but not the people. I had to put myself out there and look for stuff to do. I knew I wasn’t going to get a job, as I was 58 at the time. So I joined a local folk group in the church. Now I don’t particularly ‘do’ church but it was a way of meeting people.

“So I went to rehearsals and I said ‘hello’ to people and sat down. And they said ‘hello’ to me and that was it... and I said to myself ‘Why am putting myself through this?’, but I kept going back and eventually I got to know people and they got to know me. And the choir director was involved with Wexford Local Development, and she told me that she was trying to get this group going for men and women in Kilmuckridge, and she asked me to go to a meeting. So I got my friend across the road and down we went. I met Orlaith Rowe and Billy Murphy there that night, and they explained what they were trying to do, to set up this group (the last club I’d been in was a youth club when I was a teenager), so I thought I’d give it a go. And the group was formed and, before I knew where I was, I was on the committee of the group and, through that, got involved with Wexford Local Development.”

“Wexford Local Development (WLD) is a community development organisation working with groups in the county, promoting social inclusion and rural development.

“This was the start of the ‘Circle Of Friends’, that’s what we called it. I used to do this one-mile walk on the telly at home with a DVD [you walk on the spot while watching the DVD], this was something we did at our meetings, and it snowballed from there. The Circle Of Friends we formed was an active group, not a knitting group (I do knit, but I wasn’t bringing my knitting outside the house). For me, it was to be active, about doing things, dance and mind games. It was about fun things to do, encouraging people to come out and meet others.

“I joined the committee by accident I think and, through the group, I met more people from the WLD. Billy Murphy and Orlaith Rowe showed us the ropes. We had a couple of men, one of them taught
us how to jive, and that was great, but then he left; all the men left. We were looking for something else to do, so I bought a couple of children’s footballs and we all got round in a ring and played ‘Donkey’ – if you dropped the ball you were out. Then we played ‘Queenio’, a children’s game where you throw the ball over your head. This was stuff we hadn’t done in years. It was such fun; you should have seen those women running for ‘Queenio’.

Then the group did an eight-week Age & Opportunity Ageing with Confidence course, arranged by WLD. The course helps older people to adapt to physical and emotional changes and make the best of the opportunities that go with them. Topics tackled often include health issues, memory loss, emotional, spiritual and sexual issues, and practical problems such as isolation. Generally, the course seeks to equip participants with skills to deal with their own concerns. The format is flexible, allowing participants to ‘tailor’ the course to their specific requirements.

The group in which Marie participated included people aged from about 58 upwards, the retired and about-to-retire, and the oldest was in their late 70s. “We all sat around in a circle, with two facilitators. They asked us to introduce ourselves. I could see that my turn was coming. I knew the people there to see. My husband was there and, even though he was beside me, when it came to my turn, I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t even tell them my name; I couldn’t say one word. I suppose it was the first time that I had to think about my life; this is where I am now in my life; about what I had done with it; this is what’s in front of me; and the first time I really faced up to the question of what I’d do with the rest of it.”

Eventually, Marie found her voice and, as the weeks went on, her confidence grew. “We talked about all sorts of things: our lives and how people felt; what they wanted; and how we felt about ourselves. It was tough, not just for me but for all of us, at the early stages. There were people there whose husbands had died, or had been left to rear their families on their own, who had come through difficult phases but, as the weeks went on, it became easier and people became closer. I spoke about things that happened in my life.

“The very first day was hard for all of us; I could see that, but, as
the weeks passed, we all got better at speaking out, expressing our opinions. I spoke about something difficult going on in my life to a room of people who had been strangers to me when we started and I have never heard anything back. What was said in the room stayed in the room. We came to know we could trust each other.” She picks up a photograph of the group and names the women in it: “I have never heard one whisper of anything that I said within the group outside the group if you know what I mean. And now, I see all these people or phone them regularly.”

They put together a fitness and health regime, scheduling talks by professionals and others on ageing, and people there would have their say. “One person might say that she couldn’t take long bus journeys any more, for example. Then I said, ‘I have a daughter and grandchildren in California and, if I don’t get up and go there, then I won’t see them as often as I’d like.’ So when people talked about things like that, someone else sitting there says, ‘My God, if she can do this, I can do that’ and so we were getting ideas from one another, pushing each other along. I heard people talking about things they thought they couldn’t do and saw how many ended up doing them.

“Now, I had been two years in the area. Many of the others had been here all of their lives. Each of us had something hurting. We just fused together and became a very tight-knit group. Although most of us were members of the same parish, it took the push from WLD to get us going. There were other groups in the area, and some people belonged to more than one.

“We meet every Tuesday. Last Tuesday, we had a nurse from St James’s Hospital, so we invited outsiders to attend. This week, we have a man showing us how to get out and walk properly. We play curling, we do the one-mile walk and we have a raffle, and we don’t just have tea and plain biscuits, we always try to have something nice. We have two rooms in Kilmuckridge Memorial Hall, so, if someone just does want to sit and knit, that’s fine too. We got a chiropodist to come to the village for a day and people could make appointments to see him at a reasonable cost. And we invited non-members to use this service too.”

As part of a European Union Grundtvig programme for people involved in non-vocational adult education, Wexford Local
Development was invited to send a group focused on older people’s needs to Krakow in Poland. The trip was to observe the work of a community largely composed of people with autism operating a communal farm. Marie was a member of that group, which went on what became an educational exchange.

“It was great to visit people who, in previous years, would have been institutionalised but now they were getting out and making a go of farming with just a little help. Some lived in, some went home at weekends and others just came each day. We were at the beginning of learning how to use computers so when they came on a return visit to us in Wexford, we were able to show them how we were getting on, among other things. They were autistic, we were older people; it was all the one to them. They visited our projects in Wexford. We invited them to the village hall, entertained them with tea and traditional Irish scones, and showed them Irish singing and dancing. They sang and danced for us, and we brought them to the sea at Morriscastle Beach – they were really chuffed at that, as they don’t see beaches at home.

“And when it was all done, and the visitors had gone home, I was so proud of what we did. We were just a crowd of ‘aul wans’ if you like, but we really put our back into entertaining and seeing that they got some value out of their visit and it worked.”

After this experience, Marie’s horizons widened. She joined the executive of Co. Wexford Age Equality Network and became involved in the Defend the State Pension campaign in 2010. She proposed collecting signatures for petitions supporting the state pension outside post offices on the day the pensions were paid.

Initially the idea of lobbying politicians, in person, by phone and by email, was daunting but Marie soon took to it. Co. Wexford was divided into four areas for the purpose of the campaign: Gorey, Wexford Town, Enniscorthy and New Ross.

“We identified the main issues, and split them up for maximum impact. Older people from Gorey would, say, talk to TDs and senators on Items One and Two, Wexford Town would take Items Two and Three, and so on. After lobbying someone, you filled in a feedback form, saying what the person had said and what follow-up action he
or she had promised. Some of them (TDs) got to know us quite well. I went to one TD’s clinic and, when he saw me, he put his head in his hands and said ‘Not you again’.

Marie attends events and seminars promoting positive approaches to ageing and the diverse lives of older people. She was very impressed and moved by meeting people involved in the GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) survey of older Irish lesbian and gay people, also funded through Get Vocal.

Having had media skills training funded by Get Vocal, she discovered an aptitude for radio interviews and TV appearances. And, after attending a speech by US civil rights campaigner the Rev. Jesse Jackson in Dublin in 2011, she was inspired to speak when invited to address a seminar hosted by Co. Wicklow Older People’s Network, attended by Minister Kathleen Lynch in 2012.
There’s a tremendous apathy out there and we need to break that down

Seán Kinsella’s experience of community activism offers a perspective gleaned over almost half a century of getting involved. He has been a member of the St Vincent de Paul Society for almost 60 years, and is also a member of the Dun Mhuire Parish Hall Group. He is chairperson of Co. Wexford Age Equality Network and the Wexford Division of the Irish Senior Citizens’ Parliament.

He first became interested in older people’s issues in 1965, designated ‘Old People’s Year’ by the Irish Red Cross. At local level in his home town of Wexford, St Bridget’s Old Folks Club was formed (now subsumed into today’s thriving St Bridget’s Day Care Centre). At a national level, the government published the influential Care of the Aged report in 1968. This led to a huge growth in voluntary groups promoting the welfare of older people and the establishment
of social welfare councils throughout the country, followed in 1971 by the National Social Services Council, on which Seán represented the Southeast for a number of years.

At local level, the Wexford Community Council was formed, and Wexford Town’s own information centre, staffed by volunteers, was opened in the Mechanics’ Institute in 1974. It was a time for networking, making links with other groups that had identified needs that were not being met, as a network of community service provision was being put into place, mostly from the ground up. “The experience of the social service councils taught me that, while on your own, you couldn’t achieve much but, working with other voluntary groups, you got more done and, when you drew in the statutory providers and worked with them, quite a lot was possible,” Seán explains. “When we wanted to set up information offices, I learned from Muintir na Tíre’s experience in Carlow, where a woman called Peg Brophy told me that proposals like that had a much better chance of success if they were backed by a broad coalition of groups.” And the Wexford Community Services Council filled that need. It was the vehicle needed to set up the first information centre 40 years ago.

When a local branch of Alcoholics Anonymous asked the council to sponsor a public meeting, highlighting the dangers of alcohol abuse, Seán had a better idea: “I told the AA if we just have a meeting, we’ll get about 20 people, and we all know who they’ll be. Let’s try something different.” Seán formed a small committee. “A brilliant local man, who was a recovering alcoholic, contacted some top class speakers. We held four meetings at different venues and a thousand people attended.” This initiative continued for seven years, with a changing focus each year: alcohol and work, alcohol and sport, alcohol and women. High-profile people – such as Rita Childers, Jim Sherwin and Bishop Peter Birch – came to chair public meetings but, after seven years, it had run its course. One conclusion Seán drew from this was that voluntary bodies sometimes abandon good ideas too early: “I believe in chawing on the bone until there’s no meat left,” he says.

One consequence of the alcohol abuse campaign was the realisation that, for many people, there was little alternative to the pub or the hotel. So, in the early 1980s, Seán and his co-workers organised
exhibitions in a local hall to show people how many hobbies and activities were available: “We had pigeon fanciers, model railway groups, bridge clubs, knitting circles, you name it; all displaying their activities. It would take you an hour or two to get around all the exhibits.”

Meanwhile, the St Vincent de Paul Society had noticed that some young women were finding cooking difficult. One answer involved bringing together the people providing Meals on Wheels and women who needed to know more about cooking, and what to buy to feed their families well. They learned, for example, about buying and preparing cheaper cuts of meat. For the young men, there was training in making things, usually from wood. They gained the skills after a while, but the enterprise failed because of lack of marketing, something which only became clear later. For Seán and other volunteer community workers, however, important lessons were being learned.

The European Year of Older People in 1993 led to the Irish Senior Citizens’ Parliament, established with the help of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions’ Retired Workers section. Seán was one of two people from Wexford invited to take part. He chaired the Wexford section in 1998, and worked with the Wexford Area Partnership on initiatives such as the WARM Project to help older people insulate their homes, a transport project to reduce isolation – the rural transport scheme – and the employment of a co-ordinator to bring those working with older people together and pool their resources and experience, on a countywide basis. He was elected chairman of the Co. Wexford Age Equality Network and has been re-elected every year.

Along the journey, Seán became aware of Age & Opportunity and the success of its Bealtaine arts festival. So, when its Get Vocal project began, Wexford activists saw an opportunity to ‘train the trainers’, equipping people with skills that they could take back to their rural communities, and helping them to get involved and make themselves heard. He says that this has worked to an extent that is very welcome, but it needs to go further: “Take meetings, for example. You and I go to a meeting, but that meeting is not just for you and me and the others who attend. If volunteers do not report back to their own people who sent them to represent them, then part of that
Finding our voices, making a difference: Participants from Age & Opportunity’s Get Vocal programme have their say

meeting is being wasted. What was said, what happened, if that is not communicated back, the circle is not complete.”

Seán also believes that the majority of older people have not yet been affected by the work of the groups working in their interest. “The majority are not affected by the Irish Senior Citizens’ Parliament. They are not members of Active Retirement groups. They live good independent lives until they get sick and, then, they may find themselves on a trolley in a hospital corridor, or on long waiting lists, when older people don’t have all that much time left. And I keep saying to people, including younger people, that if we want these things to change, you don’t wait until there’s a crisis, you start working on them now so they don’t happen. Another problem for older people is that everything is going along well, then they’re burgled or attacked and nothing is ever the same again, because their peace of mind is gone. There’s a tremendous apathy out there and we need to break that down.”

Some of that he puts down to the Celtic Tiger years, when pensions and benefits for older people rose, lifting many older people out of the risk of poverty. This made the wider society feel that there was no problem; that older people were being well looked after. Then things changed. The Christmas bonus pension payment was withdrawn, prescription charges went up, new taxes were brought in and state pensions were frozen, while some private pensions were decimated. Seán cites the hostile reaction to the plan to withdraw medical cards from them as the first time in his 50 years of activism that older people made their voices heard in a united and purposeful way. He praises the way the Older & Bolder group campaigned to defend the basic retirement pension. “We got 10,000 signatures on a petition to defend the pension in Wexford Town then.” And another 10,000 signatures were collected around the county. “The big breakthrough there was that people weren’t afraid to go and talk to their TDs and tell them what they thought. At the last general election, we invited candidates to meetings and we’d have maybe 200 older people there, confident and able to put their case, because they had been trained to do so.”

It is not all positive, however. Seán has noticed a tendency in the media to drive a wedge between different groups of people in receipt
of social welfare: “I’ve read a number of articles which say the elderly are not the worst off – when you compare them to young children in deprived families, or disabled people and so on... We older people who are involved in this work have to connect with younger people. I visit a local secondary school every year to talk to students, and the Transition Year pupils come here and work with older people at this centre. I tell the younger people you don't prepare for old age at age 60, you start at your age... I hope that they will be better prepared for the whole of their lives than earlier generations were.

“I would love to see older people having a focus in every parish – like the GAA has – with links to a central core. So you would have a local committee keeping in touch with older people in the parish, arranging that if one fell ill, someone would take the dog for a walk, things like that, and keeping an eye out for potential new members. At the same time, the local committee is forming external links, through taking part in a county network, sharing experiences and resources. Local knowledge plus central linkages, the GAA have that, and we should strive for it. We shouldn't be waiting for problems to arise; we need to get out and meet the people wherever possible.”

Seán sees the benefits of Get Vocal as follows: “It brought people together. It helped them to come out of themselves, gave them the confidence to speak up for themselves at meetings in a way they hadn't felt comfortable doing before. And they learned to prepare for meetings, figuring out ‘I'll say this, you'll mention that and someone else will describe what happened last week’, and so on. So there was a methodology to our approach. And a course in writing for the media showed us how to get key points over in print. Being on radio works differently, but if you prepare, then you have the confidence to be effective, and people learned how to run meetings.

“But there is more to be done than helping individuals to realise more of their potential. I want to see a leaven, yeast in society that spreads benefits to more than just those who participate in a course, that the ‘ammunition’ gained is put to use for the whole of society. The learning must filter out into every phase of life, benefiting the young, the middle-aged and the old alike. And that is the work I hope to continue doing as long as I have the health and strength.”
Reducing the isolation of older people in rural communities in Co. Kildare, and increasing their participation in community activities are objectives shared by several statutory and voluntary agencies working in the county. But when staff at Co. Kildare LEADER Partnership or CKLP (at that time Action South Kildare) developed the ‘Voices Through Art’ programme, its approach broke new ground in bringing older people together in ways and with outcomes few would have anticipated. To understand what happened, Older Voices Kildare co-ordinator Denise Croke suggests taking a few steps back and considering the journey taken. Voices Through Art began as a programme for older people developed by CKLP. The pilot clearly highlighted the need, not
only for that programme, but also for a sustained mechanism to include and empower older people, particularly those experiencing the most isolation. CKLP had a long history of working with older persons’ groups in Kildare but the focus has been one of supporting recreational engagement. While not undervaluing the importance of this type of support, the CKLP team of Community Workers and Community Artists believed that another approach was needed if change for older people was to take place.

Through applying the principles and practices of community development, the Voices Through Art Programme would, for the first time, give voice to the very real issues affecting older people in the county. The six-week structured pilot programme proved to be a great success, was great fun and was highly effective in bringing very relevant issues to the surface. Following the pilot, the Kildare Vocational Education Committee, the CKLP and the HSE Health Promotion service for Dublin Mid-Leinster came together and secured funding for the Older Voices Kildare Initiative.

Older Voices Kildare began by setting up a steering committee on which older people were represented. A part-time co-ordinator was appointed, and consultations with existing groups began and linkages established. One of the most significant relationships was that formed with Age & Opportunity and, in particular, the Get Vocal scheme, which funded the further development of Voices Through Art and Older Voices Kildare.

“Our job is to go out and find ways of engaging with older people, and stimulating them to engage with each other and the wider community,” says Denise. She described the baseline approach which included running Age & Opportunity’s Ageing with Confidence programme to facilitate discussion for people around their experience of the ageing process, both physical and psychological, and to stimulate greater participation by older people in wider community affairs. Some 90 people participated in the eight-week programme which ran six times during the two-and-a-half year programme and they had learned much about speaking up for themselves in an effective way.

“We were very pleased with the outcome. [Ageing with Confidence] is
a fantastic programme and now we knew those people and we could see that they were taking part in the community in ways they had not done before. But, in a sense, that was easy enough, as we were working with a ready-made, tried and tested programme,” Denise explains. “We wanted to go further and find a way to get to the more isolated older person, older men or women with mental health problems, the older person living in sheltered accommodation or a residential home, the person whose isolation tends to be invisible until you look closely at it.”

This is how Voices Through Art evolved. “It is ideally facilitated by a community artist and a community worker. It sets out to break down barriers, not just between individuals but also between concepts of ‘them and us’, whoever ‘them and us’ might happen to be.” She explains how Voices Through Art brought together two disparate groups. The first was older people with intellectual disabilities living at St Raphael’s Centre, Celbridge. They were an example of older people who were “invisible to the rest of the world”. Some had no meaningful contact with the outside world; they lived and would probably die within the four walls of the home, and their only social life was interacting with other residents. The second group of participants were involved in U3A – the University of the Third Age – activities, so there was quite an unusual mix.

“At the beginning, the two groups didn’t mix; each stuck to their own side of the room,” says Denise. “The first day I looked at my co-facilitator and I could see we both had the same thought: ‘This is never going to work. How did we get ourselves into this?’”

Then the people in the room began to take over.

“It was a very moving programme to be involved in,” describes Denise. “I’m not sure if any words or any report could capture the moments that occurred. And, of course, because it was arts-related, it didn’t matter what your intellectual skills or your literacy skills were, it was all about sitting around a table, making something, drawing something, even if you were just colouring something in.

“At any one moment, you might see a retired teacher using painted rice to make a sun, together with a man with Down Syndrome whose chosen job is to paint lollipop sticks that are being used for the sun’s
rays. At another table, the wheel of life was being depicted using knives and forks for the spokes; ‘Food is vital to staying alive, after all,’ they told me. The focus was absolute. The silence only broken by the odd question: ‘Here?’ or ‘How about this colour instead?’ or, the most important, ‘What time is tea?’

“They worked companionably, this seemingly disparate group, growing in friendship and ease with each other. Their seeming incompatibility has long since been replaced by a respectful and affectionate synchronicity. They are a group: they decide together, they work together, they achieve together. As if to emphasise the point, the unconscious humming of one woman becomes a song that is joined in by the group without even looking up from the work at hand. Every voice has its place and is welcomed.

“One of the U3A participants has a daughter who has profound autism and has spent her whole life living in a residential home. I was puzzled when this participant became visibly upset one day. I was worried this experience was bringing up unhappy memories. ‘Not a bit of it,’ she told us through her tears. She was so pleased to think that her daughter could have as happy an experience as the people she was now working with. She’d never imagined that possibility existed for her child. That was a remarkable moment, I can tell you.”

The longer-term outcomes of the programme also began to become clear after the programme ended. “A very strong bond of friendship was formed between individuals across what had previously been a divide. There was understanding, in particular, among those who had not previously spent time with people with an intellectual disability. Even those most challenged to engage, those perhaps with no speech and very little motor function and who had to have a staff worker with them all the time, even they managed to participate in some way. Although that programme ended just two years ago, contacts between participants remain. People from U3A attend photographic exhibitions and other events in St Raphael’s. A resident there told me: ‘It’s great now, when I walk down the street in Celbridge, I meet people. I know them now. I say hello to them and we talk’. That has meant something to him, and it goes to what we are trying to do, break down isolation among older people. I feel that, even among those who could not speak, there was greater confidence,
more reaching out as a result of the programme. Being able to do something creative among others builds social skills.

“And the informal moments were significant too. The cup of tea, without which nothing happens in Ireland, even the journey on the bus we provided, according to some of the feedback we got, had a value. The most frequent reaction we got in feedback is the word ‘enjoyable’. People told us they had ‘good craic’.”
Now I have places to go, people to see

Rosaline Connolly and Gabrielle Dempsey met in church: “I was at Mass one day and, when the hymns began, I heard an angelic voice singing behind me,” explains Rosaline. “I turned around to see who it was. Afterwards, I introduced myself and told her she should join the choir.” The two women, both widows with grown-up families, soon became firm friends.

Gabrielle joined a local Ladies’ Club in Co. Kildare. Through that contact, she enrolled in Age & Opportunity’s Ageing with Confidence six-week programme. She encouraged her new friend to sign up too, but the course was full. Instead, Rosaline took part in the Voices Through Art programme.

She thought the name, Voices Through Art, off-putting and initially
wondered what she was doing there. Then, the course co-ordinator began by showing a painting, an illustration of London with smoke billowing out of a chimney. She pointed to the smoke and began to explain why that painting meant so much to her. When she was younger, she had gone to London, ‘the big smoke’, and her experiences there had shaped her life. And so she introduced her group, sceptics like Rosaline included, to the notion that a work of art, a poem, a song or a story can express important truths about one’s life. Inspired by this, Rosaline later produced a representation of a garden, a tree, a table in the shade of the tree with a wine glass and a teapot, reflecting her love of nature and gardening and the joys of companionship.

The idea of doing something to benefit their local community was implanted during the engagement with the Older Voices Kildare project. Both women would become members of the organisation’s steering committee, and there was other, more local, work to be done.

“Five or six of us were meeting once a week for knitting and crochet sessions,” says Gabrielle. “Then we thought about putting a notice in a local magazine and the numbers jumped. We call it a Friendship Group; there’s up to 40 members but the usual attendance is about 20 – you pay three euros each time you attend and that covers a cup of tea and lighting and heat and insurance. Recently, we had an excursion to Powerscourt paid for out of the surplus funds.”

Then they were asked to think about an intergenerational project and the idea arose to teach knitting in a local primary school, Allen National School. Five women now go to the school once a week and teach the children how to knit. “Girls first, and then the boys joined in after a bit,” says Gabrielle. “We explained about the local tradition of knitting (the ‘Allen Stitch’) in this part of Kildare, and the different stitches associated with families, and how the men were very much part of this.” So, after an initial slow start, boys took to knitting. “I’m not sure if I should say this, but some of the boys are now better at knitting than the girls.” And so a traditional craft, which was in danger of being lost, is now being passed down in the time-honoured way, generation by generation. Each class produces a patchwork quilt on which names of pupils and teachers are recorded and the intention is that they will be given to people in need.
Those older women were gratified by the welcome they got and the respect shown to them by the young students. “There’s a much better relationship between pupil and teacher than there was when I was a child. The children are friendly with the teachers, but not familiar with them. I was very taken by this,” says Gabrielle.

The effects of the economic downturn have been felt during the time of Older Voices Kildare. The ensuing cutbacks particularly hurt and frightened older people, both women say, but the confidence-building aspects of the process helped them to understand and to frame the questions to which they wanted answers. Both agree that the threatened withdrawal of medical cards had been very traumatic for older people and it continues to be a threat made against older people.

“Earlier in my life, I had been afraid to go into a room full of strangers,” says Gabrielle, “but now I have places to go, people to see.” For Rosaline, it was about seeing possibilities and opportunities, personal development and friendship: “Seeing a 90-year old woman signing up for her fourth computer course... that says it all, really.”
In late 2009, Breda Lymer of West Training and Development (WT&D) was approached by a publicly funded nursing home to help set up an advocacy group in-house. Under the Health Act of 2007, and the National Quality Standards for Residential Care Settings for Older People, the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) had begun requiring residential and day care centres to develop a formal structure of advocacy for those in their care.

As a result, the Director of Nursing Mary Curran at Áras Mhic Dara, based in Connemara, contacted WT&D for help in training staff and residents to meet this new requirement.

As funding had not yet been obtained for the work, Breda suggested to Mary Curran that she and her colleague, Elaine Cosgrove, would
begin training in advocacy and group skills on a voluntary basis. In the meantime, WT&D hosted a Train the Trainers: Advocacy and Older People day led by John Redican (formerly of the Irish Advocacy Network) in November 2009.

In January 2010, the first session for staff and interested residents of Áras Mhic Dara took place. The session was bilingual and written materials prepared by WT&D were presented in English and Irish—the participants’ first language. Clinical Nurse Manager Sinéad Uí Choisdealbha was a very helpful presence and translator. The group chose the name Grúpa Cairdiúl le Chéile (Friendly Together Group), and a sense of group ownership, independence and confidence started to grow. WT&D facilitated a final set-up session in March 2010. With this, an advocacy group was established and an Advocacy Handbook developed in Irish and English by WT&D. Grúpa Cairdiúl le Chéile nominated arts & crafts volunteer Sr Áine to be the group’s trusted independent facilitator.

One early example of requests made by the advocacy group was that the home’s garden included raised beds, that the poly tunnel be revived and some hens obtained. Interested residents and day care people, staff members and volunteers – men and women – got involved, and the garden became a feature of the home again. Having a plot of land to tend and hens to feed is a normal part of rural everyday life for this generation. Tending the garden and the hens brought joy and also the realisation that speaking up about likes, dislikes, wishes and wants was a wholly positive experience. It conveyed a clear message that staff are willing to respond as far as they can, overcoming any anxiety among residents that they might be seen as ‘demanding’.

The process of developing a group advocacy model template for use by other residential and day care homes was under way.

Other residential care homes were now being required to set up advocacy groups and, in July, Rose O’Connor, Director of Nursing at St Francis Community Nursing Unit in Newcastle, Galway, contacted WT&D, following a positive recommendation from Áras Mhic Dara. In parallel, WT&D sought funding from the Get Vocal programme at Age & Opportunity. Breda and Elaine of WT&D ran an advocacy training
programme in August 2010, and a handbook was developed for St Francis’. Using the learning from the work with Áras Mhic Dara, the training aimed to enable participants to be aware of their rights and form an advocacy group, the Sunflower Advocacy Group. Around this time, it became known that St Francis’, hitherto both a day centre and a residential centre, would become a day care centre only. The introduction of an advocacy group was seen as being of great value in adjusting to this change.

As the year ended, preparation for work in a third centre began. In 2011, the residents of a private nursing home in East Galway met for training and facilitation provided by WT&D and adopted the name the Daisy Chain Group, after considering a number of names.

The advocacy handbooks for Grúpa Cairdiúl le Chéile and the Sunflower Group were subsequently updated in the light of an internal review process carried out by WT&D.

Around this time, WT&D began to look at raising the involvement of people with cognitive difficulties at group advocacy meetings. If a person could not speak at a discussion about, for example, diet, they could be facilitated by using storyboards depicting choices of meals. Out of this, a formal proposal on group advocacy participation for people with cognitive difficulties was formulated and funded by Get Vocal.

In May 2012, WT&D organised an exploratory workshop to document ‘on the ground’ experiences of people working / volunteering with older people who had cognitive difficulties. Experiences came from professional artists, advocacy facilitators and retired nurses. ‘Storyboarding’ was one method that was discussed as being a potentially useful way to encourage and capture the voices of older people with cognitive difficulties at meetings. The Group Advocacy Model Toolkit and Template was further refined in 2013, following external guidance from Alice Mary Higgins (formerly of Older & Bolder) to include a section on ‘Supporting Advocacy’. In this were a number of tools and ‘tips’ to support group meetings and stimulate discussion: memory boxes, colour-coding topics and storyboards.

At a meeting held in April 2013, at which Age & Opportunity and representatives from public and private nursing homes were
invited to participate, along with voluntary workers in advocacy and older people’s issues, the toolkit was shared with nine further care communities in Galway. At this meeting, Leonora O’Sullivan, a community worker, presented the use of memory boxes to engage the senses and therefore stimulate both verbal and nonverbal communication. They proved very popular with those in attendance. Some hoped to use them and the toolkit to introduce independent group meetings into their centre, others to revive or formalise an existing structure.

In this way, a structure was developed and refined to respond to a new regulatory requirement to involve older people in making decisions about matters affecting their lives.

Strategies and techniques were explored and developed. Supporting documentation was compiled and updated and creative tools were developed, such as storyboarding and reminiscence boxes, and shared with others providing care for older people.
But if I say I’m doing something, then I’d better be doing it, because the Sunflower Advocacy Group is going to want answers!

“It was a process we developed with WT&D to engage our clients and staff. Advocacy was a very new and strange word for our older people. We had to break it down step-by-step, answering the question ‘What is advocacy about?’ in a way that everyone could understand,” explains Rose O’Connor, Director of Nursing, St Francis Community Nursing Unit in Newcastle in Galway. “It was about engaging, bringing everyone into the process. It was to give everyone a voice, and to choose someone to speak up for them, if they could not speak for themselves.

“This had to be in a setting where everyone was free to speak, no intimidation, no talking behind people’s backs, no recriminations, no blaming others for speaking out of turn. Everyone had to be made feel comfortable and able to state their views, their wishes and their
preferences. This was very clear from the outset. The message to participants was, ‘You are bringing something positive to the table and you will be heard. In turn, you listen to others and consider their concerns as they consider yours. Everyone has something to say and is entitled to say it; you may not agree or like what is said – so be it’. The right to be heard is the key.

“The initial programme ran for about eight weeks. We needed time to consider the project, what it entailed, what we could hope to achieve. That applied to staff as much as to residents. One of the first questions was ‘Has it been done before?’ And it had... in Áras Mhic Dara in Carraroe. So, I was invited to attend a group meeting there and I could see how positive it was, and I discussed it with the director of nursing there.

“So we fixed a date and time [with WT&D] for an exploratory meeting here in St Francis’. We talked to clients and explained what we had in mind. We didn’t know if they would want to get involved, but I hoped they would come along anyway and listen to what was said. And almost all did.

“We had invited some former staff to come also; some of them drop in here from time to time, some come here to help out on a voluntary basis and they’ve made friends with staff and clients here. And it helped that they came along. They got very attached to the people here, and our older people to them. One of the stipulations from HIQA was that the group be facilitated by someone independent rather than a member of staff, so we were hoping that some of them would take this on. And there was an element of trust in those individuals because they were seen as friends rather than strangers.

“Some families of clients who volunteer here also took an interest. And then it became noticeable that residents got dressed up in their best clothes for meetings, so that confirmed for us that they saw the process as important. The meetings were held on Wednesdays, and a pattern began to emerge of residents refusing invitations on that day. ‘I’m not free; I have my advocacy meeting on Wednesday.’ A woman who needed a dressing changed asked for the time to be changed because she wanted to attend the advocacy meeting.

“And it was very important that the advocacy group belonged to
the participants. Hence, it was not the St Francis’ Advocacy Group, which might be taken as ownership by the centre or staff, but the Sunflower Advocacy Group, the name the group chose for it. And people sometimes would bring a bunch of sunflowers to meetings. Some people had grown sunflowers in front of their houses, so the name had a special meaning for them. The advocacy handbook has sunflowers on the cover and it begins with a poem written by a resident. The poem encourages the living to be generous in praising others before it is too late. ‘Now is the time to slip it to me [praise] for I cannot read my tombstone when I am dead.’ The writer of that poem, Bríd Loughlin, has since died. Her family gave us permission to put it in the handbook.

“Another visible statement of independence is that the group has its own separate noticeboard. The legal documents reciting the rights of people are made available there, not just to residents but to families too.

“As director of nursing, I attend the group meetings [to give feedback on requests made at previous meetings and then leave for the discussion with the independent facilitator to commence] and, in the beginning, I was not sure what to expect. Lighting was one subject that I had not seen coming; people wanted extra lighting. Laundry was a big talking point; people wanted separate laundry bags to avoid precious items of clothing going missing. A need for higher chairs for those who had mobility problems was another point. Each point that was raised went on the agenda for the next meeting so I knew that, come the next meeting, I was going to have to have a meaningful response.

“Not everything could be fixed in so short a time and there were matters beyond my control, of course. We couldn’t allow candles burning in the room, for example.

“Menus had been raised and times of meals. People wanted more choice and the dinner time changed. We were able to meet that by having advance menus prepared, so people could make choices. And for those with speech difficulties, we got photographs of dishes taken so, if you wanted fish, you pointed to the relevant photo and so on. Simple enough when you think about it but a person’s dinner
is an important part of the day. We had people spelling out words by pointing at letters of the alphabet too – all that helps break down isolation.

“But if I say I’m doing something, then I’d better be doing it, because the Sunflower Advocacy Group is going to want answers.

“A good deal of time was taken up with the transition from being a mixed day care and residential centre in 2012. That was a big change because people living here and those coming to the day centre knew each other and they were losing this contact. Group meetings discussed this thoroughly. Lots of questions were being asked. This was a decision imposed from above; nobody here could change it, but we could make the transition easier by talking to people and listening to their concerns.

“How did the staff react? Very well. They are pleased that clients have a channel through which they can express themselves. And, in a way, it takes a bit of responsibility off their shoulders knowing that people can speak up. The independent facilitator, Teresa Walsh, used to be a member of the staff at St Francis’, so the staff know and trust her, as do our residents. That is a big advantage we have.”

Men and women took part in the advocacy meetings. Women tended to get involved more in the nitty-gritty of issues like diet and clothing. The men tended to take a more detached view. Some people who Rose had thought were very placid and easy-going became quite animated contributors to discussions. They came out of themselves. And the topic of Galway in times past always brought on a dam-burst of detailed and informed knowledge of the history and geography of the city.

“To get business done, a committee was formed initially, with the idea that it would represent the group at meetings then report back to the group. However, rank and file members decided they wanted to participate in all the meetings, so the committee idea was dropped. Having found their voices, they weren’t going to hand them over to someone else.

“Today at St Francis’, there’s even more consultation. In addition to the monthly advocacy meetings, each person has an individual care
plan on which the person is consulted. Procedures and outcomes are discussed on a one-to-one basis. It’s all part of a process of greater involvement of the individual of which the advocacy programme is an important building block, and the support and skills of WT&D and Get Vocal was vital in getting it up and running.”
People should be allowed to decide for themselves and encouraged to find their own limits

Bob Gilbert retired to Cavan to be close to his grandchildren. There, he got involved in lobbying and campaigning for older people in the county and in Get Vocal.

He sees changing attitudes as the key to making progress. It is, however, a two-way street: “You need to make contacts with people in authority, show them what you are suggesting makes sense, and work patiently with them. And you have to bring your own constituency with you.”

This is based on his experience of trying to advance the cause of the older person. When he arrived in Co. Cavan eleven years ago, he got involved in setting up an Active Retirement group and in teaching English to people from overseas. He became chairperson of the Cavan
Over 50s Network which subsequently obtained funding from Get Vocal.

“Everything begins and ends with consultation,” he explains. “We brought groups of older people together. We also included older people who belonged to other organisations like parish groups, etc. In discussion, we got them to discuss their problems and concerns. Then we asked them to fill in a questionnaire. The questions covered areas such as housing, the built environment, health and safety, security, communications and information.

“One issue of concern arising out of these consultations was a lack of awareness of the high incidence of elder abuse in Ireland. As a group, we decided to start an awareness campaign. After some workshop sessions, we developed a short play which depicted some aspects of elder abuse and performed it in a number of centres. This resulted in much discussion and an action plan by the HSE. Drama can be a very useful vehicle for raising awareness, thereby changing attitudes and perceptions.”

A campaign to get Cavan designated as an ‘age friendly’ county, as defined by the World Health Organisation, was a major help in the work funded by Get Vocal. “The age friendly designation covers eight topics, one of which was buildings and outdoor public spaces, such as parks, streetscapes, car parks, etc. So, we looked at supermarkets to see if goods were clearly priced and on accessible shelves, for example. The thing was that, once we started talking to people in those terms, shop / business people, local officials, most of them began to look at things in a different way and wanted to help. That’s where changing attitudes kick in; we got the concerns of older people on to the agenda.

“One village had kerbstones one foot high at the edge of the pavements, making it difficult for people with mobility problems to cross the street. Councillors and engineers said they were there to stop cars parking on the pavement and also to prevent flooding, in some instances. We asked if bollards would not stop the parking just as well. Eventually, bollards were installed.

“We then began to look at the placing of pedestrian crossings. They were usually outside schools and that was it. Yet older people told us they need to cross the street to get to post offices, banks, etc.
We were told that more pedestrian crossings would slow traffic in villages down (was that such a bad thing?) but we did get some improvements to make the villages more ‘age friendly’ and that includes all ages. After all, broken pavements and hazardous crossings affect everyone, not just older people. Now older people participate in consultations on planning matters along with others.

“Getting Jack Keyes, the County Manager, on side was a big boon. He communicated his interest to his staff, and we got a hearing on matters like planning, etc. The Cavan County Council Social Inclusion Unit is also very supportive and the staff there opened many doors for us. I’ve always felt that going to the person in charge and making a well-argued case is the way to move things forward.

“I have seen a change in the attitude of local government staff and other service providers. They have become more approachable and willing to discuss issues. The old pattern of ‘them and us’, the public in one camp, the officials in another, is diminishing. If you want to get something done, you don’t need an intermediary, like a councillor, as much as you used to. You can ring the relevant director of services.”

Bob explains that, while winning the support of key decision-makers is essential, “you have to work with your own side too. I’ve seen older people turn up at a meeting with a fixed idea in mind and, after hearing what others said, they have changed their minds.

“And, you know, sometimes older people’s own attitudes need challenging. I sometimes hear one older person say of another ‘He’s too old’ or ‘Aah, you wouldn’t be able for that, Paddy’. Like flying long distance; with children emigrating, many older people want to travel to see grandchildren and so on. Other older people are sometimes too quick to discourage them … people should be allowed to decide for themselves and encouraged to find their own limits.”

Bob thought that the introduction of the household tax was not handled as it should have been; it took little account of the legitimate fears and concerns of older people. “There was a job to be done in telling people how it affected them and about the various ways of registering and paying it. Instead, people read scare stories in newspapers and heard very frightening accounts of it on radio.”
He also criticises media reporting of the protests by older people against the withdrawal of the medical card. The use of phrases like ‘the charge of the blue rinse brigade’ and ‘walking sticks raised in the air’ trivialised a matter of great concern for vulnerable people. He also regrets the way that the state retirement pension is often described by the media as a benefit rather than an entitlement funded by lifelong contributions.

Older people can be disadvantaged by unfamiliarity with digital communications, but he describes encouraging signs: “Transition Year students in St Patrick’s College Cavan chose to give one-to-one tuition to older people in operating computers. Cavan County Library service is stocking official forms so that people who cannot download them from the internet can access them. The County Librarian is working on a plan to have staff available to help people fill in official forms. And groups of older people are meeting younger people and finding they have greater common ground than they expected.”

He was amused by one such exchange in which younger people were asked about their preconceptions about older people. “The younger group was asked about attitudes to older people. They saw them as being frail, not being able to get about, needing help, etc. Then they were asked if that description applied to their grandparents. ‘Not at all, no. My Nan is great’ was typical of the answers given by the young people. Frailty, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, it seems. And attitudes, like the generation gap, are not set in stone.”

He also found the reactions of people to being older instructive. Many of them said they really enjoyed the greater freedoms they had in retirement, the ability to do things and go places as they wished.

An ‘age friendly’ strategy is being worked on for Cavan. The HSE has been given a number of issues to work on, identified following consultation with older people’s groups. The Garda Síochána is working on measures to improve security for older people who feel isolated, and a group of ‘ambassadors’ have been trained to visit people in their homes and advise on measures to make people more secure. A ‘bottle in the fridge’ scheme, originally developed by Muintir Na Tíre, is also being implemented. A list of medications being taken and other essential information is placed in the older
person’s fridge. Then, if someone has a fall and an ambulance crew or doctor unfamiliar with the person’s medical condition is called to the house, the bottle contains an instant and comprehensive update on what the health professional needs to know. This scheme is being piloted by Gardaí in the Cavan Monaghan district.

Like having Transition Year students visiting older people in their homes to help them get to grips with computers and, in some cases, befriending them, all these things came out of consultation. Similar to the estate agent who was asked what was most important about choosing a new home and replied “location, location, and location”, Bob is convinced that “consultation, consultation, consultation” is the key to removing barriers hindering older people from fuller participation in society.

And he hopes to see Cavan win official recognition as an ‘age friendly’ county by the end of 2016, thereby benefiting all who live there, young and old and everyone in between.
Kevin Molloy worked for the post office for 46 years. When he retired twelve years ago, he had more time for community activism, which had always been an interest. He became involved in advocacy work for older people. He was president of Active Retirement Ireland at the time of the major protest outside Leinster House in 2008; the day the Silver Revolution began, according to the Irish Independent, when it seemed that the medical card was about to be withdrawn from older people. “That was the day that older people turned out in thousands to warn government that they would fight for their rights,” Kevin says. “And one big thing older people have going for them is the fact that they vote and politicians know that. The job now is to explain to decision-makers how to factor our needs and entitlements
into their plans, just as they do with more vocal groups.”

It was a natural progression to get involved in the Co. Wexford Age Equality Network, of which he is currently vice-chair, which rolled out the Get Vocal programme with Wexford Local Development, funded by Age & Opportunity’s Get Vocal programme.

The Co. Wexford Age Equality Network, with some funds of its own, and then with funding from Get Vocal, was running advocacy and basic media skills training courses for older people, with the aim of equipping them to “fight their corner” when dealing with decision-makers and making sure they put their case effectively in public. “You have to know how to put your case across clearly, not to waste time on irrelevancies, and to make sure your information is correct,” says Kevin, “and when you realise what the media want, it seems obvious, but you need to understand the process.”

Kevin explains that planning is vital: “One of the main things we picked up was how to plan our campaigns. I’d go and see a politician and make a case about, say, public transport. The next guy would be talking about, say, medical cards. A third would concentrate on another issue. We’d know in advance what we were to concentrate on. Then we’d compare notes afterwards. Sometimes, you’d get quite different responses from people in different parts of the county and we could make some ground from raising those differences. A Wexford Town TD who gives one answer to a question has to stop and think when I tell him, ‘That’s not what your colleague in New Ross is saying’.”

One thing Kevin is very clear on is good manners when talking to decision-makers. “We are there to make friends, not enemies. You can have a good shout or you can have a result.”

He instances the water charge which is being implemented nationwide. “We aren’t fighting against it; that has been decided. We want to see that it is implemented in a way that recognises the needs of older people.” But the tactic of picking an issue and building a case to support it doesn’t just apply to formal meetings. “Through Get Vocal, we encouraged people to engage with politicians when they called to the door looking for votes. Don’t have a list a mile long; raise your main issue and show that you have done your homework. That’s effective lobbying.”
Kevin is amused by some of the contradictions he encounters: “You meet people who say they don’t want to know about advocacy, they just want to know who to contact about having the public library open longer hours. They look at you when you tell them ‘THAT’S advocacy’.”

He has worries about the digital communications revolution which has left some older people behind. “There’s an assumption in the official system that if information is made available online, then everyone can access it.” His Active Retirement group is running a ‘train the trainer’ course with the Waterford and Wexford Education & Training Board in which older people learn how to show other older people how to come to terms with important aspects of modern life.

There also has to be official recognition that some older people are not being reached through digital media. “My argument with the powers that be is this: an older person can walk down the street and go into a shop, pub or restaurant, and do business there. But go into an internet café and you don’t know anything; don’t know how to send an email, download an application form or book a cheap flight.” He believes that older people have a right to training in the basics of internet communication, that it is a basic equality issue.

And he worries about some older people who are wilfully shutting their eyes to the possibilities offered by social media, for example. “People who are well able to master it, they tell me they don’t want to know. Yet social media and email are great for keeping in touch, in reducing isolation. For an older person with family abroad, being able to see a grandchild’s birthday party in Australia, for example, through emailed photographs or by talking on Skype, can be a wonderful benefit.”

Kevin is also concerned about those who would set older people in conflict with the younger generation. Senior politicians have been quoted putting a value on the homes which older people are living in, as if this was a blatant accumulation of conspicuous wealth. This encouraged others to discuss older people’s issue in terms of ‘fat cat’ pensioners versus struggling young couples crippled by unemployment and negative equity. “There were efforts by some commentators to set one generation against the other. Thankfully,
that seems to have gone away recently.” He cites meetings between the Union of Students in Ireland and representatives of older people as helping to bridge the gap of misunderstanding. He has also given talks to Transition Year students in local colleges. “When you talk to them, and listen to them, younger people grasp that we are all the same, just at different stages on the journey of life.” Similar exchanges took place with young unemployed people, where one of the most important pieces of learning went like this: “If you have a demonstration about youth unemployment and it gets out of hand, you may get TV news headlines that night but, the next day, your members are still out of work. You’re better off looking for investment or training commitments, stuff like that.”

If Kevin were to sum up the Get Vocal programme in Co. Wexford, and his part in it, it would go something like this: older people were stimulated to take a more active role in decisions affecting their lives, they saw their issues as part of a wider picture affecting the whole community and made linkages with younger people, politicians and officials.

“I’ve lived through three recessions. Older people who have lived through recessions are now expressing themselves more confidently in public. And we can tell younger people that this has happened before and we survived it. There is hope at the other side of a recession. There is light at the end of the tunnel, and younger people are that light, they need to remember that and not to lose faith. Bringing about an honest and inclusive dialogue between the generations is the best legacy of the Get Vocal programme.”
We learned who to talk to, to get things done, and how to talk to them

Nan O’Brien is a member of the Traveller community who has lived in a house in south Co. Dublin for many years. She’s a powerful advocate for her community and was invited, in 2007, to address a United Nations International Day for Eradication of Poverty event in New York, attended by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and international delegates.

She works as a volunteer for the Southside Traveller Action Group and has a particular interest in the welfare of older Travellers. Travellers age quickly; their traditional way of life was hard and they tend to die younger than members of the settled community. Today’s older Travellers lived a harsh nomadic life which few of their descendants experience. In her childhood, Nan’s family lived half the year on the roadside. Get Vocal funded the Southside Traveller Action
Finding our voices, making a difference: Participants from Age & Opportunity’s Get Vocal programme have their say

Group to make contact with surviving older Travellers and try to break down their isolation. Nan, having lived both the nomadic and the settled life, acts as a link to a fast-vanishing way of life.

To explain the particular needs of older people from the Traveller tradition, she describes her childhood: “They were hard times but they were good times. Today, you wouldn’t want to live like that but we didn’t know anything else. We never parked in a town; we'd park about five miles away up some back road. We’d pull in and my mother would put up the tent.

“She’d light the cast iron stove in the wagon. It was called a queen stove and it would be worth a lot of money if you could get one today, and it had little cooking rings on it. But it would get very cramped if everyone came in to eat together; you’d be sitting on top of each other. We ate healthy enough: turnips and scallions and cabbage. But you ate what’s there; nobody asked you what you’d like this evening, like I hear children being asked nowadays.

“When we arrived in the horse and wagon outside a town, we had to be quick; my mother and father would go into the town with the trap and they had to get back with the food for the dinner before it got dark, because you had to get off the road before dark.

“In winter, we stayed in Wexford and, in summer, we came up to Dublin with the horse and wagon and stopped in various places. My mother would call on women who kept stuff for her, clothes and food. My father taught a young fellow who lived in a house in Blackrock to play the accordion, and he would play the bagpipes.

“In the summer, we took the horse down on the beach and tourists came and they paid for their children to ride on her, and took photographs. My father and my eldest brothers would make money that way. Meanwhile, my mother had a basket of ‘shop work’ and she went around the visitors’ caravans, selling bits and pieces.” ‘Shop work’ consisted of small items: needles and thread, pieces of ribbon, charms, clothes pegs and tea towels. Shop work fitted in a suitcase which, when opened, displayed its contents in an attractive fashion.

Traveller children grow up fast: “While my mother and father went out looking to get money for the dinner, my eldest sister and my
older brothers had to mind us, and get sticks for the fire, and fill the
churn with water, and keep the place clean and tidy so everything
would be ready for when my parents came home with the makings of
the dinner. It wasn’t that my mother and father were being hard on
us; they weren’t. That was the way we lived then. Everyone had to do
their bit. But the eldest girl always had it hard.”

When Nan was 15, she attended a course at St Kieran’s in Bray, Co.
Wicklow. This was a step into another life, taking her, for a while, out
of the round of cleaning and cooking and minding younger children
which was the lot of girls in her community. There, she learned
practical skills, things to do with her hands, cookery and craftwork,
as opposed to reading and writing.

After the course ended, the Southside Travellers group was working
with young married women, and Nan got involved. “Although I’m not
educated, there were things I could do, like finding out information
and entitlements, like learning about health matters affecting
Travellers, and circulating that information to others. I learned about
personal development, art, a lot of different things.” Lots of Traveller
women never got out to do a course, so it was a whole new change of
perspective. Nan got married at 19, and had five children, one a year,
in quick succession. “So it was great for me to get the children up for
school and then go off, outside of the home and learn something for
myself. Traveller women never had that opportunity before.”

She said it was difficult to get her children into school. “With
Travellers, there are always barriers.” But this experience, finding
out that her children were entitled to attend school, and insisting
that places be provided for them, was key to her development as an
advocate and liaison for other Travellers. If she has a mantra it is this:
information, as in knowing that all children are entitled to school
education and knowing how to assert that right, leads to progress.

With the advice and backing of the Southside Travellers Action
Group, Nan and other parents of Traveller children were able to insist
that officials met their responsibilities to provide education for all
children. And, along the way, she learned that having a shouting
match was no substitute for having a well-argued case. “We learned
who to talk to, to get things done, and how to talk to them.”
None of this was easy. “Children were still being called ‘knacker’ and things like that. Even now, Traveller children have barriers put in front of them that settled children don’t have. Someone has to stand up for Travellers.” Nan’s generation had to face that problem at its very sharpest end. “Don’t get involved in rows with the bouncer,” she tells people, with a twinkle in her eye, “talk to the manager and, before you do, make sure you do your homework.” And she’s a firm believer that if you have an issue to raise, say your child is being bullied in school or called names, you get a better hearing if you bring someone along with you when you go to see the head teacher than if you go alone.

And, as things changed for the upcoming generation, an older one was becoming more isolated. The generation before hers was now dispersed, living more or less permanently on halting sites. The only way of life they knew, the rhythm of the changing seasons, the seasonal fruit picking, meeting friends and relations on their journeying, that was over.

“I know the hard times I went through. I know the hard times that the older people went through. With the funding from Get Vocal, we were able to do more with the older people; we could bring them over here (to the Southside Travellers premises in Sandyford) for a meal. But, usually, you have to go and visit them. Getting them things they should have, like getting the nurse to visit, just don’t happen. They can’t read and they get letters about the heating allowance or the flu vaccination, they don’t know what to do with them and they miss out. Or, if they may be living in old accommodation where maybe the bathroom is unsuitable, whereas the settled person would get a grant to put it right, the older Traveller doesn’t know that. Some halting sites have shower rooms and you’d nearly be better in prison, they have such big heavy steel doors on them. I saw one where the toilet bowl was made of steel and, if you used it in winter, you’d be stuck to it with the cold. Settled people know how to get that sort of thing fixed, older Travellers don’t.”

Nan does see that good relations between council officials and the Southside Traveller Action Group are delivering improvements in Traveller accommodation. “They listen to us now at the planning stage. We get to put our point of view before the places are built.”
With the funding provided by Get Vocal to work with older Travellers in the Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Council area, it became possible for activists like Nan to visit the various sites, make contact with older people and arrange events to reduce their isolation and bring them together. That isolation cannot be overstated; many of the present older cohort had little idea of the wider world, had never read a newspaper, had been immersed in the struggle for survival and had few friendships outside what had once been a very tightly knit community. Services for other older people such as ‘Meals on Wheels’ were not for them.

Day centres also seemed to be off-limits for many older Traveller women: “The women would say things like, ‘I don’t know any of them. What would I be talking to them about? They wouldn’t want to know me’ or ‘I’d have nothing in common with those women, they’re all from the country.’” Nan explains that sometimes people would initially refuse point-blank to take part but change their mind, so it is important to stay in touch with them. “You might say to them, ‘Mrs So-and-So is going down there (the Day Centre) on Wednesday. You know her, don’t you?’” The older women are very religious and they like visiting shrines, she says. And they enjoy sewing and making paper flowers, like they used to do in their old life. “And when you get the older Traveller women together, maybe for a Christmas party, and they start talking about old times, and one story sets off another, then it’s all worthwhile. You can see the life coming back into their eyes.”
Above all, it is transformative

The audience sees him in shadow, a weary man stumbling along the quays in Waterford. A voice-over tells us that he is on a significant journey. “The years of drinking have taken their toll; life has become unbearable for John.” Earlier, we saw him sitting in a run-down bedsit “with only himself for company”.

John stumbles onwards on his Via Dolorosa along the quayside, until a mysterious woman passes him, going in the opposite direction. “Good evening John,” she says. He realises that hers may be the last human voice he will ever hear and that, in some way, she was important in his past life. Eventually, he turns around and follows her.

John, our everyman, is saved... for now. The story is simple and the manner of telling it stark. The audience sees a screen with detailed
Finding our voices, making a difference: Participants from Age & Opportunity’s Get Vocal programme have their say

Painted backgrounds, a church spire towering above warehouses. Hidden hands move the near life-size shadow puppet figures haltingly across the stage as the commentary, spoken by an older male voice, describes the action in minimal terms. Everything about the production is sparse; the participants when they emerge at the end of the show are dressed in black pullovers and trousers.

“It was part of my life. I lived it,” says participant Tom Skelton, of this first theatre show Loneliness. “It took me a while to let that part of my life out into the public. Everything was true on that shadow puppet screen.” While Tom had worked in the theatre for twenty years, he never imagined that he would be writing and performing, particularly something so personal. He was, however, delighted with the reaction: “You would hear a pin drop in the audience while the show was going on. As Eamon, the narrator, was sitting in the audience during the show, he would often tell us later about the audience’s strong emotional reactions.”

The idea for the project began with Respond! a social housing organisation operating in Waterford, but with national reach. Philip O’Reilly of Respond! explained that its take on social housing involves building communities rather than just providing accommodation, and finding means of tackling the isolation of older men had become a priority. Thus, it sought funding for an older men’s group under the Get Vocal programme and used some of its own funds to put together Waterford’s innovative shadow puppet theatre project. “The shadow puppets project differs from, say, providing Men’s Sheds or allotments because of the greater creative and self-expression elements. In that way, it was breaking new ground,” says Philip O’Reilly.

Facilitator Philip Cullen, who is better known as a sculptor, hit the ground running on the project: “We grasped the nettle from the beginning and decided to look at issues in a creative way. The men identified concerns that included loneliness, depression, suicide and alcoholism.” The scripts were probably the most sensitive area. Participant Gerry Rea, whose personal experiences were reflected in Bereavement, explains the painstaking process: “We had to go through it all. We thought we’d have one line of it sorted when someone would come along the next time and change it. It was taking
up a lot of time that way, but it was well worth it."

The subject matter for the plays may seem daunting, particularly considering the dark issues raised. “Some initial members found the discussion of issues difficult, preferring to assist in the making of puppets and set,” says Philip Cullen. “As well as occasional conflicts and frustration, there was great humour, caring, openness, support and fun. Many combined years of experience and care went into the creation and performances of the two short plays.” Gerry Rea concurs: “We had a lot of fun doing it. The subject matter was serious but the work wasn’t always serious. We’d look forward to Thursday mornings.”

Philip O’Reilly sums up the project: “From a Respond! point of view, the Waterford Shadow Puppet Project was very successful and an extremely worthwhile initiative. All participants on the project extended their social network and have undoubtedly grown in self-esteem and confidence. It is often the case that innovative approaches are required to ensure that important issues affecting the lives of our residents can be brought up in a safe and supportive environment.

“Prior to the Shadow Puppet Project, if we brought a group of men together to talk about important issues that affect their lives, they would be very slow to engage. However, a lot of conversation can take place during the course of performing a task. Throughout the whole experience, the participants develop very specific practical skills in creating, making and performing puppet shows. More importantly, the lads developed their capacity to identify, analyse and articulate the issues affecting them and their community.”

One of the biggest lessons of the project was the inability to recruit new members after the first play was written and performed. It was extremely difficult for a new member to slot into the group as there were so many experiences shared among the other participants in a safe environment.

Another major learning was the fact that the project relied on the paid facilitator who was with the group from start to finish. It would be extremely difficult for one of the participants to effectively bring this project any further as they lacked the training to effectively deal with taboo issues such as depression and suicide.
The Get Vocal-funded programme ran from July 2010 until January 2013. The Waterford Shadow Puppet Theatre’s performance of *Loneliness* was staged at Garter Lane Theatre, Waterford, in May 2012 as part of the Bealtaine festival. The shows *Loneliness* and *Bereavement* have been staged at community halls and other venues around the country. For Philip Cullen, the driving force of the project is clear: “As an artist, I believe in the power of creative expression. It can be liberating, exhilarating, even frightening – but, above all, it is transformative.”
It is there for us, to help us to have our say

Phyllis New’s husband died when she was in her sixties. After a period of mourning, she realised that she needed to do something about her life. First, she became a Eucharistic Minister in her local church and joined parish groups. There was no Active Retirement group in Arklow, so she worked with others to set one up, and was chairperson for the first year.

Having seen a TV report about a craft group in Finglas in Dublin, Phyllis thought a similar idea would work for Arklow and she set about getting a group of women together. It was, at that time (and remains), the best thing she could have done, she believes. But it was also the beginning of a journey, a step at a time. Even now, 13 years on, she talks about it as if it were organic: “I didn’t do anything, I don’t do much,” she says. She has to be prompted to acknowledge the steps
Finding our voices, making a difference: Participants from Age & Opportunity's Get Vocal programme have their say

she has taken and to recognise the importance of the communication network, sometimes formal, sometimes informal, that she has helped to create.

“There are 12 to 18 of us, all women, mostly elderly. It is a very social kind of group. We help each other and we crochet, knit; that sort of stuff. Some of us had knitted in the past and had almost forgotten how, but it comes back with practice, and some of us are very good. Those who are grandparents find that grandchildren don’t need knitted garments nowadays, like they did in the past. They won’t wear them, so it is nice to have a project we can work on together like we have now for Crumlin Children’s Hospital. At one stage, we did some watercolour painting but now we are into knitting and crochet.” The group met beside an office used by the Co. Wicklow Network for Older People, and members of the craft group got to know community worker Anne Kavanagh, who was based there. The Network was being funded by the Wicklow Get Vocal programme run by Age & Opportunity, Wicklow County Council and the County Wicklow Partnership.

Phyllis explains: “From meeting people like Anne Kavanagh in the office next door, we were invited to the annual general meetings and other events arranged by the Network.” The Network provides training and information events, seminars and educational trips to promote healthy and confident ageing.

And when members of the craft group wanted to attend a seminar, the Network arranged for a bus to pick them up, and Phyllis provided the names and identified pick-up points for the driver. The problem of isolation of older people in rural Ireland, and rural towns such as Arklow, is pervasive. Without transport, very little participation can occur. Getting involved in arranging transport was an important stepping stone to greater involvement in the Network for Phyllis as well as being absolutely essential for getting people to venues and reducing isolation.

Phyllis took part in the Network’s pilot Ambassador Programme, which identified people who could act as links to the wider community, and she attended information and training sessions. The Ambassadors then held local focus groups and reported back to the
Network on the concerns expressed. “We quickly found that people were confused and upset about the household charges which were about to be introduced in 2012. They were upset by what they were hearing on radio and seeing in the newspapers, and some were afraid they would be sent to prison. We didn’t know much about it in the first place. Some had difficulty in paying and the Network went out and did interviews with older people, listened to the problems and that gave us a voice and we could make our feelings and problems heard.”

A fellow participant in the Ambassador programme told Phyllis of being phoned at home late at night by people looking for the forms to be filled in so they could be lodged before the tax offices opened the next morning, such was the fear of being fined or jailed.

“From our point of view, it was great to discover that the Network was there to speak up for us. They see our problems and they listen to us; we have this back-up. It is a security blanket for us.” Phyllis adds: “For me, personally, when I found I could pay [the household charge] in stages over four quarters, I felt better about it and, you know, a lot of people simply didn’t know how to go about paying it.”

The feedback obtained became part of a submission for the Department of Finance, which was then preparing the 2013 national budget. This was a formal channel of communication with legislators that few of those involved in the process would have previously contemplated. The Network also circulated the pre-budget submission to local TDs and the Revenue Commissioners. A Revenue official contacted the Network’s chairperson, praising this initiative and wanting to discuss a possible follow-up.

For the 2014 budget, it was decided to focus on home heating costs. “This is a huge worry for older people: the fear of not being able to afford to keep warm when you most need to. Again, we put in a pre-budget submission on energy costs. Being able to do so was a great support for us, having someone and some way to speak up for us. Although energy costs remain a huge worry for older people, it is better for us to know that the information has been collected and that we have made our case.”

Phyllis puts this point in a broader context: “Older people are not
demanding; we don’t want more than our fair share, that’s never been our way. But we do want to have our say and be listened to.” She continues: “For myself, I’m not inclined to kick up a fuss on my own behalf about the property tax or anything else. I know many others feel the same. If a bill is there to be paid, we may worry about it but we’ll pay it, but we like to be consulted, and that is what the Network does for us. It is there for us, to help us to have our say.”

The Network arranges information and training sessions. Topics include advocacy and lobbying, education for positive ageing, ageing with confidence, awareness of elder abuse. Campaigns included matters as diverse as the defence of the state pension, and public transport again, this time in the form of the location of bus stops, not just in Co. Wicklow, but on the routes into and out of the county. A Bus Éireann bus stop at Nutley Lane in Donnybrook, which Wicklow people use to attend St Vincent’s Hospital in Dublin, was dropped to speed up the route, in the face of competition from private services. Some services were restored following a campaign by local Arklow groups and supported by the Co. Wicklow Network for Older People, an example of an otherwise ‘below the radar’ problem being identified and dealt with.

Asked to expand on what her role as Ambassador for older people means, Phyllis downplays her contribution. “There are lots of things that I should be doing that I’m not doing, I genuinely feel a fraud in this.” Some of that she puts down to a recent spell of bad health. It should be said that the Ambassador programme is a new one, and she is part of a pilot scheme in south Co. Wicklow and, to that extent, the programme is a work in progress.

It soon becomes clear, however, that she actually is carrying out the core tasks which the Ambassador programme is intended to achieve, like bringing the opinions of older people to the attention of the Network, getting to know what services are available and signposting them to older people, and informing other older people in her personal network about the wider formal countywide Network.

However, Phyllis is her own severest critic and it takes community worker Anne Kavanagh, who is also present, to disagree and to cite instances of solid achievements. “I’m the local co-ordinator for
personal alarms with Active Retirement Arklow,” concedes Phyllis, taking up one of Anne’s points. “I do visits, to arrange for the personal alarms to be fitted. I bring the forms and help people to fill in their applications. Sometimes, people raise other matters that bother them and I can either help or put them in contact with someone else who can help.”

Experiences like that, since getting involved with the Co. Wicklow Network for Older People, have taught Phyllis a very valuable lesson. “I have learned to pick up on situations from time to time by listening and watching with a greater understanding,” she says.

Despite all she has achieved, one of her earliest successes remains the most satisfying part of her life: “The craft group, no doubt of that. I love the craft group. You know, one Friday evening, about three weeks ago, 12 people turned up in the most torrential rain. It is such an important part of their lives. They wanted to be there that much, they had to come. You don’t have to do anything. You can just have the chat and drink a cup of tea. That’s the best thing.”
And some don’t want to join older people’s organisations, but we need to try to include them.

Community development worker Anne Kavanagh describes how the Co. Wicklow Network for Older People is making things happen on the ground.

When Phyllis New began to get involved in efforts to improve the lot of older people in her own area, changes were also happening at a county level to achieve similar aims of improving the lives of older people.

The Co. Wicklow Network for Older People was set up in 2007 by the Social Inclusion Unit at Wicklow County Council. Statistics were showing that the percentage of older people in the whole population was increasing. In addition, older people tend to be less visible to service providers than other age groups. They are often
more isolated and less likely to look for policy and administrative responses to their needs. Those needs were and still are evolving over time, sometimes imperceptibly, and the first thing the ‘system’ knows is when there is a crisis.

The purpose of the newly founded Network was to find out what older people’s needs were in Wicklow, and to give them a voice in decision-making at local, regional and national levels. Wicklow is a varied county physically: much of the north is suburban, the rest a patchwork of towns, villages and rural communities; and the west of the county is geographically cut off from the general north/south axis.

With funding from Age & Opportunity’s Get Vocal programme, it became possible to appoint a development worker. Anne took up this position in early 2010. By 2011, increased resources had doubled the numbers of older people participating.

Anne explains that the numbers were drawn from older people’s organisations around the county: “We held annual general meetings, but not in the formal sense inasmuch as any older person who was interested could come along and listen and take part. Of course, groups were also represented.” The event involved the formal annual general meeting followed by guest speakers and in more recent years a social event in the afternoon. “We held seminars and attendance at the first one in October 2010 astounded us. About 250 people from all over the county and these figures have been matched every year,” says Anne.

“To lobby, we found we had to bring people together to feel they were part of the larger movement. Had we just invited two representatives from each organisation to these events, we wouldn’t have got the same level of support and commitment. And we wanted to link with any organisation that worked with older people, not just those like Active Retirement groups and Old Folks clubs exclusively targeting active older people in the community.

“We looked at nursing homes, also people in long-term care, as well as older couples and people living on their own. We tried to build closer links with religious and clergy, women’s groups, pubs where older men gather, and those who work with people of all ages, and widen the Network that way.
“And some don’t want to join older people’s organisations, but we need to try to include them. We started looking at building a strategy, asking ourselves ‘In five years’ time, what should the Network be doing?’ And we came up with the idea that the Network would be the voice of all (the ‘all’ is very important) older people in the county.”

The annual seminars (which some began to call ‘conferences’) operated on a mixture of having brief presentations in the morning with afternoon discussion in groups, responding to the issues raised earlier. It was in those ‘breakout sessions’ that the voices of older people began coming through.

Two seminars on elder abuse, organised with the participation of Age Action, attracted more than 100 people in total. Not all were older people; participants included intermediaries working with older people, Meals on Wheels personnel, St Vincent de Paul Society members and others visiting older people at home were encouraged to attend. “People need to know what the signs are and who to go to if they think abuse may be happening.” While it is a difficult and sensitive topic, it can be dealt with when people are made more aware and given guidance on who to contact in tandem with exercising common sense and goodwill.

“One person who attended the workshop mentioned, a couple of months later, that she suspected a person that she had come into contact with was experiencing financial abuse. As a result of attending the workshop, she had the confidence to raise the issue with the local health nurse who took on board her concerns and said she would discreetly investigate and contact the HSE, if she felt it necessary.

“On issues like the property tax, we didn’t say we were for or against it, but we said to government – if you are going to implement it, you are going to make it understandable and payment methods manageable for older people. Through our volunteer Ambassador programme, we organised focus groups, identifying concerns and worries that older people had. In summary, it is probably fair to say that, while nobody wanted to pay another tax, they were happier when they knew about the various ways they could pay and some of the scarier coverage on radio phone-in programmes and the like, which really frightened people, was seen for what it was.
“It is probably true to say that when we talk about lobbying now, it is not just about writing letters to officials and politicians, more about getting to know who’s responsible for what and bringing decision-makers and older people affected together. Now through the Network, the older person’s voice can be heard, and the sum becomes greater than all the parts, as the saying goes.”

For example, one of the Network committee represents, and is passionate about, the needs of people with dementia. “We were encouraged to facilitate the bringing together of a consortium of key stakeholders to make an application for funding.”

While the initial funding application was not successful, these tentative initial steps were able to bring agencies like the HSE and the Alzheimer’s Society in Wicklow around a table with representatives of older people to learn from each other’s experiences, and how best to encourage ‘dementia-friendly’ communities. “Helped by funding from the Alzheimer’s Society, we have embarked on an ambitious project of making Wicklow a friendlier place to live for people living with dementia and their families and carers. This project is effecting positive changes for some of the most vulnerable older people, with a social group for carers now being set up in one rural town. We also envisage the delivery of some new projects with the help of the HSE. At the most recent seminar, I remember one woman saying that it was a very big problem in her family and it was great to be able to discuss it, and learn what was being done to help people deal with it.

“The long-term sustainability of the Network is, of course, a concern to the committee from both a staffing and financial perspective. Our volunteer ‘Ambassadors’ are invaluable. With the help of funding from the Community Foundation for Ireland, and the assistance of coordination by Dr Marita O’Brien’s social researcher, we hope to have 25–30 ambassadors this year. These volunteers enable us to communicate with and be representative of all older people in the county.

“In 2013, the Network co-ordinated 12 eight-week Ageing with Confidence courses in Wicklow. Age & Opportunity trained facilitators to run the courses. We envisage that some of the 130
participants who took part in those courses will go on to play a role in the wider work of the Network, either by taking formal roles as secretary or committee member of a local group or representing those groups on the Network’s executive committee. We need groups to continue nominating representatives to the executive committee – rotating members will enable the Network in the long term to maintain a vibrant and effective organisation,” says Anne.

While confident of the continued support of the volunteers, having the services of a part-time paid worker has been pivotal to the development of the Co. Wicklow Network for Older People’s activities, and sustaining this into the future is an immediate concern for the executive committee. The delivery of courses is being funded by Co. Wicklow Partnership LEADER programme through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: Europe investing in Rural Areas.
By any sensible yardstick, that has to count as a success

Independent social researcher Brian Harvey formally reviewed the Get Vocal programme for Age & Opportunity. In this interview, he reflected on what he learned from the project.

“This was the first advocacy programme of which I am aware that was aimed squarely at older people. It has long been known that ‘Official Ireland’ has not been comfortable with NGOs providing advocacy training to groups,” he said. “Ministers and officials have traditionally preferred to fund NGOs providing frontline services, rather than ‘training people to make a nuisance of themselves’ articulating demands on behalf of marginalised groups. Even Ministers over the years have given expression to this sentiment, if not those exact words, and some fellow politicians and officials have been happy to take their cue from them.”
“The geographic spread of the projects for Get Vocal chosen worked well. West Cavan, Leitrim and Donegal, for example, are all places with low social capital and tend to be neglected when initiatives like this are being allocated.

“I also think that the decision to locate projects using a county-based structure and a community development approach was crucial. It drew on the strengths and linkages of existing community development workers. They knew the organisational aspects, the pre-development work essential for success. Often there were existing relationships with decision-makers, public representatives and statutory and voluntary bodies which proved useful.” Brian agreed that Irish people identify with counties on all sorts of levels. Both national and local government see counties as discrete units, and the general public has natural affinities that don’t extend to regional health board areas or numbered social work administrative units, for example.

Brian is clear that Get Vocal was a successful programme: “If you take a place like West Cavan, for example, Get Vocal reached out to a population of older people, many of them women, often the breadwinners for their families or people with little access to formal education, often without experience working outside the home, and turned them into engaged and confident spokespeople for their communities. By any sensible yardstick, that has to count as a success,” Brian explains.

“Similarly, the focus on road transport which developed in Co. Wicklow arose from identifying a pressing need affecting the lives of people who needed access to essential services. We know the difficulties that older people experience getting to hospital when there is no transport. On the other hand, perhaps the route and frequency of calls made by Cavan’s mobile library is not a ‘high visibility’ problem in administrative terms but, for those affected, improvements meant a great deal and did not involve major expenditure.”

The learning process was twofold, he found. “In learning to deal with
one problem, those involved discovered the capability of dealing with others, made contacts with people in power and – if the structures were in place – that learning was passed on to others.”

He also observed that the work in Wexford early on developed an equality-based approach, and that GLEN’s identification of where older gay, lesbian and transgender people live, how they are living, the rugged independence shown by many and their interaction with medical services based on the HIV experience was truly ground-breaking. “For someone like me who makes an assessment of such a project, then has no further knowledge of it after the report is complete, it can be frustrating not to know what has happened in the meantime. Were the experience and knowledge gained put to work to tackle the problems revealed?”

He cited West Training’s work with older people in Galway as also being ground-breaking in the sense that it ‘piloted’ a response to a new requirement to establish a means of consultation for those living in residential care settings for older people. In doing so, it revealed much about how older people see themselves, not demanding as such but quietly requiring to be heard in a situation where, previously, complaints had been dealt with in a personalised way. One resident tellingly remarked: “We are not pushy or assertive; we just want to be heard. The generations to come may well be more demanding.” For now, it was not unreasonable to want laundry labelled so that it may be returned to the owner, to have a choice of TV channels to watch or to express preferences in food. And if what was sought was not going to be feasible – for whatever reason – people were due a hearing and a reasonable explanation. “A significant outcome was that residents in the homes involved were prepared to defer outings rather than miss the consultation meetings when they clashed. And it was encouraging to see that staff in the homes welcomed this new regime.

“West Training & Development fully documented its work. It should be remembered that Ireland is behind other European countries in consulting people in residential homes.” Harvesting the hard-won learning gained by such projects relies on good practice in recording objectives, minutes of meetings, outcomes of encounters with public
representatives, publication of accounts and of annual reports. Where community development workers were involved in projects, this tended to be done as a matter of course, but some other projects were not well documented.

“Too often, in compiling my report, people would tell me proudly ‘We met so-and-so and he/she was very supportive’, but on being asked what was said, or promised, there was no record. This suggests to me that the groundwork was not done. Before the meeting, an objective was not agreed. Keeping records may seem like a chore, but it is a necessary one.” The Get Vocal projects largely coincided with the 2011 general election – as another one approaches, holding politicians to account for undertakings given at the last election is a vital tool.

In Co. Wicklow, the tactics deployed by Get Vocal participants were very effective. “The five TDs elected in 2011 were confronted by delegations with the newly published programme for government and wishing to discuss aspects of it. One Network also wanted to know why a junior minister with responsibility for older people had not been appointed.” This was soon addressed but the point had been made. “The ‘buddy system’ of pairing an experienced campaigner with a novice when meeting officials and public representatives worked well. As did the tactic of allocating to each pair one topic, as part of a team approach, rather than have multiple issues fudged and lost in an overlong agenda.”

Brian welcomed the fact that participants received media skills training and populated radio talk shows and phone-ins articulating older people’s concerns. “In Donegal, too, there was a very effective media presence developed with, at one stage, a regular column in the Donegal Democrat newspaper providing a forum for defending older people’s interests.

“There is no doubt in my mind that the threat of the removal of medical cards galvanised older people in their own defence, as did the fear that the old age pension would be cut.” Brian noted that, among the people demonstrating on the street outside Leinster House and collecting signatures on the streets of town
and villages, counties with Get Vocal programmes were better represented than those without. “I was struck by the fact that not wanting to be seen as grasping, nor looking for more than what was due to them, was a common strand linking participants. Most were very aware of the hardships of the government’s austerity programme suffered by younger people and I wondered to what extent intergenerational transfers of funds were taking place. However, the effect of what the media called ‘the grey revolution’ meant that the old age pension was not reduced as many feared it might.”

Of course, Get Vocal was about more than advocacy. Brian praised the Ageing with Confidence programme, in which many people took part. “It offered older people a period of reflection on the stage of life they had reached, and an opportunity to recast the final stage of their lives in the light of their experience and their needs. They thought about and discussed possibilities and outcomes and what changes and services would help them reach their potential. And they emerged with a new sense of purpose and confidence. Those who had never approached a public representative found the confidence to do so, and gave thought to the most effective way of achieving their objectives.

“It was a journey. As veteran activist Kevin Molloy noted, ‘You meet people who say they don’t want to know about advocacy, they just want to know who to contact about having the public library open longer hours. They look at you when you tell them – that’s advocacy’.”

And there were setbacks and failures too. “Perhaps Get Vocal could have pooled know-how among activists more effectively?” For example, how and why did the local authority in Cavan adopt being an age-friendly county as an objective while other towns and counties refused to do the same, or did so but without allocating resources to the programme? In Leitrim, older people are represented on a primary healthcare forum but such participation is denied in other counties. Brian asked how the tactics that won the day in Leitrim can be shared with the 25 other counties; “Must other lessons be painfully learned, fought and won, county-by-county?” he queries.
Brian has other questions. Is enough being done to help older people adapt to the internet age when virtually every application form for a benefit must be downloaded? Are campaigns for older people making enough use of social media? “There are questions for networks about ‘housekeeping matters’, about keeping better records of projects, about sharing knowledge among participants, about how best to ensure that time-limited projects have an afterlife.

“My formal review suggests that it might have been better to fund projects for a longer period, say for three to five years, with annual reviews. I was pleased to see that, rather than Dublin coming first, as it so often does when projects are being allocated, there was a much broader geographical spread. On reflection, however, the inclusion of a larger-scale Dublin-based project might have given the overall programme another valuable strand.

“But the underlying question posed by Get Vocal – is it possible to run a time-limited programme to successfully stimulate older people into greater participation in matters affecting them? – has been answered. The answer is yes. Governments and other decision-makers have had to adjust to a new reality.”

Brian Harvey is an independent social researcher working in the fields of poverty, social exclusion, equality, community development, human rights, the world of non-governmental organisations and European integration.
Get Vocal Grantees

Age & Opportunity wish to acknowledge the Atlantic Philanthropies for supporting the Get Vocal programme to enable the diverse communities of older people in Ireland to articulate, and effectively address, their needs, issues and concerns.

While this publication, by its nature, can only explore some of the stories that resulted from Get Vocal, we would like to thank all of our grantees for engaging with us on different projects and in different ways: AONTAS (Berni Brady); Ballyphehane / Togher in Cork (Siobhan O'Dowd); Cairdeas Kilmovee Family Resource Centre (Jane Thompson); Canal Communities Partnership in Dublin (Sharon Wallace); Carlow Rural Information Services Project (Jarleth Judge); Cavan 050 Network (Bob Gilbert); Clare Local Development (Mary Farren); Clondalkin Partnership (CPLN) now South Dublin Partnership (David Lynch); Co. Wicklow Partnership & Network for Older People (Anne Kavanagh); Community Connections in Leitrim (Brenda Whitley); COPE Galway (Anne Kenny); DCU - The Institute of Recovery & Mental Health Ltd (Paddy McGowan); DCU & Drumcondra ARG (Trudy Corrigan); Dublin Simon Community (Glenda Wright); Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Network for Older People (Dan Hurst); Dunmanway Family Resource Centre (Tracey Holt); Galway City Partnership (Maev Lewis); GLEN – Gay & Lesbian Equality Network (Odhrán Allen); IRD Duhallow in Cork (Helen O'Sullivan); Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (Eamon O'Shea); Irish Senior Citizens’ Parliament (Gerry Whyte); Kerry Connecting (Paul O’Raw); Kerry Education Service (Michelle Ann Houlihan); Killorglin Family Resource Centre (Margaret Wrenn); LGBT Diversity (Poul Walsh Olesen); Longford Older Persons’ Network (Monica O'Malley); Meath Partnership (Jennifer Land); National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (Inez Bailey); O’Connell Court Ltd in Cork (Catherine Cogan); Older Voices Kildare (Denise Croke); OWN – Older Women’s Network (Louise Richardson); Paul Partnership and Limerick Seniors Forum in Limerick (John Buttery); Pavee Point (Fran Keyes); Project West CDP in Dublin (Patricia Burke); Respond Waterford (Philip Cullen); Simon Communities of Ireland (Niamh Randall); Southside Travellers Action Group in Dublin (Niamh Crudden); Tearnann Éanna in Galway (Peigí Úi Chéidigh); Third Age Foundation in Meath (Mary Nally); Tolka Area Partnership in Dublin (Mary Connolly); Voice of Older People Donegal (Mark McCollum); West Training & Development Ltd. in Galway (Breda Lymer); Westmeath Community Development Ltd (Joe Potter); Wexford Local Development & Co. Wexford Age Equality Network (Marie Louise Byrne).
## Referenced projects

While this is not a comprehensive directory of all projects funded under Get Vocal, here are some explanatory notes that provide a background to interviewees’ projects or those referred to in a number of interviews:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Grantee:</th>
<th>Co. Wicklow Partnership and Co. Wicklow Network for Older People</th>
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<tr>
<td>Address:</td>
<td>Avoca River House, Bridgewater Centre, Arklow, Co. Wicklow.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Granting Period:</td>
<td>2009 – 2013</td>
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This project’s aims were to build the capacity of the Co. Wicklow Network for Older People to be a powerful and effective voice for older people in the county; to build the structures necessary to identify, research and create a mandate to take action on issues adversely affecting older people; and to promote a positive attitude to ageing.

The Network held seminars on topics such as the positive ageing strategy and has made representations to government departments, public bodies, local and national representatives on issues such as community supports, respite services, transport and on rights. The Network has established a ‘Volunteer Ambassador’ initiative, encouraging older people to support and to act as ambassadors for the Network, ensuring the voices of all older people in Co. Wicklow are heard.

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<th>Grantee:</th>
<th>050 Network with Breffni Integrated Partnership</th>
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<tr>
<td>Address:</td>
<td>Unit 6A, Corlurgan Business Park, Ballinagh Rd., Cavan, Co. Cavan.</td>
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Breffni Integrated supported the development of the 050 Network to provide representation and advocacy for older people in the county. The main focus of the Network’s activity was the local authority, working through the county manager and the different elements of the council, especially to promote the inclusion of older people in the county social inclusion strategy. Engagement with different services led to practical projects being achieved. The Network obtained representation on the Cavan Community Forum, the Social Inclusion Measures (SIM) group, the Sports Partnership and the Local Anti-Poverty Social Inclusion Strategy forum (LAPSIS). The Network also became the designated lead agency for the Cavan Age Friendly County initiative.
Grantee: **Older Voices Kildare**  
**Address:** Co. Kildare Leader Partnership, Jigginstown Enterprise Centre, Naas, Co. Kildare.  
**Granting Period:** 2009 – 2011  
This project encouraged people to explore the issues that were facing them as they aged with a view to developing a county-wide forum, EngAge Kildare. One of the principal innovations of the Kildare project was the three deliveries of the Voices through Art programme, engaging people using participatory community arts as a model for including people at risk of exclusion and as a way of exploring issues that affect the lives of older people. A manual was developed for the delivery of Voices through Art as part of the project.

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Grantee: **Respond! Housing Association**  
**Address:** Airmount, Waterford, Co. Waterford.  
**Granting Period:** 2008 – 2013  
The aim of this project was to actively involve a group of older men drawn from the Waterford Respond! communities and the inner city in a participatory arts project. A major part of this project was to encourage the men to explore and articulate difficult issues through the process of creating shadow puppets and developing their own original drama pieces. The process was one which adhered to principles of group consensus, open communication and negotiation. Two plays, *Loneliness* and *Bereavement*, were written and performed in a number of venues as part of the project.

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Grantee: **Southside Traveller Action Group**  
**Address:** Unit 5, St. Kieran’s Enterprise Centre, Furze Road, Sandyford, Dublin 18.  
**Granting Period:** 2010 – 2013  
This project outlined the profile, situation and experiences of older Travellers in Dun Laoghaire - Rathdown. It developed strategies through which the voices of older Travellers could be heard in the development of services for older people in the area. It also established a group for older people within the Southside Traveller Action Group, through outreach, relationship building and creating a space where older Travellers could gather, discuss, listen and learn.

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Grantee: **West Training & Development Ltd**  
**Address:** Mayoralty House, Merchants Road, Galway, Co. Galway.  
**Granting Period:** 2010 – 2013  
The purpose of this project was to develop a model of advocacy for older people in residential and day centres. The Health Act, 2007 specified that arrangements must be put in place to support the right of residents of designated centres to participate in their running and that they be consulted. This
The project endeavoured to create a functioning, replicable group advocacy model that empowered residents in three care settings in Galway to have a say in their care setting. The project produced advocacy toolkits and the model has been adopted in a number of other care settings.

**Grantee:**
**Wexford Local Development and Co. Wexford Age Equality Network**

**Address:**
Mill Park Road, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford.

**Granting Period:** 2008 – 2013

The purpose of the project was to build an independent network of older people, the Co. Wexford Age Equality Network, which would engage in advocacy activity. The Network consisted mainly of groups but also individuals and service providers. Typical members are Active Retirement groups, family resource centres, day care centres, Meals-on-Wheels and Irish Senior Citizens’ Parliament groups.

Over the course of Get Vocal, the Network established advisory forums, hosted consultations such as the consultation on the National Positive Ageing Strategy, ran training courses such as the eight-week Media Skills training course and delivered Ageing with Confidence courses in numerous rural communities throughout the county. It also participated in local campaigns in support of Older & Bolder national campaigns.

Also referred to in the text a number of times is the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) research ‘Visible Lives: Identifying the experiences and needs of older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people in Ireland,’ published in 2011. This Get Vocal-funded study was seen by many as ground-breaking in its examination of the lives of older people in Ireland’s LGBT community.
Age & Opportunity is the national organisation that inspires everyone to reach their full potential as they age. Our goal is to turn the period from age 50 onwards into one of the most satisfying times in people’s lives, by facilitating:

- opportunities to engage in arts and cultural activities
- opportunities for sport and physical activity
- opportunities to learn and be involved as active citizens

We deliver programmes like the Bealtaine arts festival and Go for Life – the national sports programme for older people.

Our major partners include the Atlantic Philanthropies, the HSE, the Irish Sports Council, and the Arts Council.
We are living longer, healthier lives. As we age, how can we still make a difference in our communities? How can we encourage people to find their voices so that they can speak up for change? How can we organise together in ways that hear those voices and do something about what they say?

Get Vocal was a grant-giving initiative run by Age & Opportunity from 2008 to 2013. Its aim was ‘to enable the diverse communities of older people in Ireland to articulate, and effectively address, the needs, issues and concerns that they experience’. This book captures the personal accounts of people closely involved with some of the Get Vocal projects. In doing so, it creates a nuanced yet powerful example of grassroots advocacy and active citizenship among older people in Ireland.
Finding our voices, making a difference

Age & Opportunity
FINDING OUR VOICES, MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Participants from Age & Opportunity’s Get Vocal programme have their say