

The Older People's Commission of the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) was established to learn of the experience of being an older person in Ireland today and to draw out the implications both for Government policy and the work of the SVP itself. It was funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies under their Aging Funding Strand in 2010. The Commission, comprising sixteen older people, mostly SVP members and some SVP staff and an independent chairperson (Andy Cullen), worked from June 2010 to March 2011. The Commission oversaw the work of two researchers (Brian Harvey and Kathy Walsh) who carried out a programme of consultations across the island of Ireland, meeting with members of SVP in their Conferences (local branches), users of SVP services, managers and staff and volunteer helpers. The work of the Commission and the consultation process was evaluated externally by Niall Watters.

## The Principal Findings of the Commission are found under the following themes:

- Experiences and Feelings About Aging
- Social Connection
- Income Adequacy and Fuel Poverty
- Public Services: Access and Quality
- Older People: An Asset, but not Assertive Enough
- Government Policy: What SVP should call on Government to do
- Informing the Work and Services of SVP
- How the Consultation was Carried Out

### Experiences and Feelings about Aging

- When younger, older people had given very little thought to what it might be like when older. It was not something that they had prepared for. They began to notice that they

were getting older gradually as they developed ailments, stiffness or more recurrent health problems.

- Important points of transition to old age were the loss of a partner and this research met many women who had been widowed, sometimes not long after their husband left the workforce. Many women faced old age on their own. Other points of transition were retirement from the workforce and the universally positive experience of becoming a grandparent.

- Older people's attitude to old age was generally very positive - a time to be enjoyed, take holidays, be active and fit. The message of the 'active, fit' old age has been firmly embraced. Older people consider themselves much more fortunate than their parents or their children's generation. Their parents lived lives of great hardship, with little money, much physical toil and few labour-saving devices. At the other extreme, they had great apprehension for the future of their children and grand-children because of the economic collapse. They regarded themselves as fortunate



A group of SVP members being consulted in Waterford - Photo: Joe Dalton, Media Officer, South-East Region

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the study, older people are defined as over 60, but the study also took account of the over 50s and older elderly.

and Ireland as a good place in which to grow old.

- Older people had mixed views of the younger generation, some finding that they showed little respect for older people, others telling of their kindness and courtesy. They felt that young people had high material expectations, were more aggressive (which they attributed to drugs and alcohol), applauded their positive, helping attitudes to people with disabilities and hoped that they would be more assertive than their generation had been.

### Social Connection

- Patterns of family cohesion had persisted. Although there were exceptions, older people had frequent contact with their children and grand-children, who kept in regular contact through telephone and visits. There was no evidence of younger people abandoning and forgetting the older generation. Although crime had grown in recent years, with a need to lock the front door, older people spoke of the enduring quality of neighbourliness in the communities in which they lived. Faith was an important personal and social element for many, while at the same time a number of older people expressed disappointment about the scandals in the church and also sadness about not being able to pass on their faith to their children.

- Loneliness was the biggest individual problem faced by older people living alone. Although SVP made its own contribution to combating loneliness, for example by visiting and the system of personal alarms, it was a much wider issue. Older people noted a reduced level of human contact as a result of declining public services (e.g. post offices, buses and trains) and automation, especially disliking robotic telephone answering systems. To keep in touch, many older people now used mobile phone, mainly for calls and a smaller proportion for texting. Few used personal computers or the internet.

### Income Adequacy and Fuel Poverty

- Income support was a key question for older people, but one where the answer was complex and subtle. Those who received the State pension were just able to manage, but they had long learned to be disciplined in money management. The State pension did not permit saving for a rainy day, emergencies, breakdown of appliances or repairs and this was itself a form of poverty. The Christmas bonus had been used by older people for this purpose and its abolition was still bitterly resented.

- The issue of income support had many important dimensions. Older people under the pension age but who had been self-employed had no form of income support. The research came across cases of people turned down for work in their fifties because they were too 'old' to work. In reality, employers preferred younger workers who were easier to control. Older people reported a range of stealth charges that were eating into their incomes: eye tests, blood tests, dental charges, waste charges, the new electricity charge and the prescription charge (many older people had multiple prescriptions).

- There was a strong sense of unfairness in government decisions about older people, which they contrasted with the extravagant lifestyles of ministers, the political class and the bankers.

- The greatest point of pressure on older people was fuel and heat. Fuel poverty persisted. Although housing, insulation and heating systems had now improved, many older people still had inefficient or expensive heating systems and had to resort to extreme 'siege of Leningrad' type solutions to keep warm.

### Public Services: Access and Quality

- Transport services were a significant problem, with many parts of rural Ireland having extremely limited services. Poor public transport was identified, surprisingly, as a significant problem in built up urban areas as well.

- Older people regarded health services as good - once they got them. The consultations heard many reports of long waiting periods on trolleys (up to three days), long waits for outpatients and accident and emergency (4hr to a day) and prolonged delays to see specialists (up to three years). Experiences of poor hospital care were reported, with a decline in nursing, the lack of stimulation of long-stay patients or people with dementia. There was strong resentment at the way in which people with money could skip the queue through private health insurance. Older people saw these problems as systemic and were puzzled at how the health services are now so badly and incompetently managed.

- A particular problem that was highlighted was the lack of transport services to hospitals. In rural Ireland, where hospitals or health services were closed, ambulance or transport services were not provided in their place.

The research heard numerous examples of older people obliged to make long, difficult and sometimes stressful journeys to hospitals at great personal expense and time so as to keep appointments. Many of the services most valued by older people, like bus transport to hospital and home help services are relatively low-cost and low-tech, and should not be as scarce as they are. In the latter case, home help services have been sharply cut back and are now limited to two sessions a week of less than an hour, reaching the point where their value becomes questionable.

### **Older People: An Asset, but not Assertive Enough**

- Older People are an asset to Ireland, making positive economic and social contributions. They are very significant consumers of services and products and have considerable buying power as well as being generous givers to charitable causes. Older people perform key family functions by meeting costs facing family members, caring, and providing accommodation for family members when their circumstances change. Similarly, among the wider community, older people provide care for frailer older people, looking out for neighbours, and carrying out roles such as house or baby sitting. Older people are more likely

to vote and are well placed to lobby, as evidenced by recent medical card eligibility changes. In effect, older people act as a critical 'Social Glue' in communities, in leadership roles and active membership of community and voluntary groups. Specific skills and experience of older people include crafts, technical & managerial skills from their careers such as negotiation, organisational and money management, and their lifetime experience, helpful for personal advice and wisdom in events such as relationship breakdown.

- Older people do not regard themselves as self-assertive, contrasting themselves with Britain, France and the younger generation. They regret that they are not more assertive and explain their docility as inherited from their parents' generation. An important finding was that older people could find no place or person where they could make complaints about poor public services: the system was incapable of handling, receiving or responding to complaints.



*(Left to right) Kathleen Dalton and Elizabeth Slevin, St Carthages Hospital Visitation Waterford, Brian Harvey (independent researcher), Helen Crowley, St Luke's Visitation Tramore, Terry Dolan and Marie Kimber, St Bridget's Shop, Waterford.  
- Photo: Joe Dalton, Media Officer, South-East Region*



## Government Policy: What SVP should call on Government to do

Older people were of the view that SVP must be much more outspoken in its advocacy work for older people, focusing on defending and improving income supports for older people and related issues such as resistance to stealth charges and specific issues arising from this study, such as:

- Confronting the persistence of fuel poverty through effective policies;
- An effective, fair, accessible, universal health service and Fair Deal;
- Investment in low-tech, high-value, low cost services that make a difference for older people, such as:
  - home help and
  - better transport services to and from hospital and other health appointments;
- More effective pension system, especially for those living alone (people cited the removal of the Christmas Bonus);
- tackling homelessness and challenging local authorities who refuse to house homeless people and health services who discharge sick people onto the streets;
- Government support for individual and community initiatives to combat loneliness and isolation; and
- An effective complaints system in the public services, rebalancing complaints systems decisively in favour of the citizen.

## Informing the Work and Services of SVP

The research identified many important features of SVP work itself. The first was that its services were highly valued and affirmed by those who received them - the visiting services which brought comfort and friendship; the day centres which offered food, companionship and a broad

range of social activities; the holidays, widely praised as the high point in the year for those who came to them; and the social housing projects which enabled older people live the rest of their lives with comfort, dignity and independence. There was still room for improvement: to involve tenants in the co-management of services, promoting awareness of the complaints system and the end of the harsh 'no pets' rule in some locations.

Recommendations were made as to how SVP can better manage its Conferences, involve and retain new and younger members and improve the style and format of meetings. SVP should establish a database of its services, publish a services directory and develop its systems for research, evaluation, reflection and the promotion of good practice, sharing outcomes with other voluntary organizations. Inter-generational projects, already successful, offered considerable promise. A key mindset message is that older people are an asset to Irish society and should never be considered a burden.

## How the Consultation was Carried Out

Meetings took the form of formal focus groups, one-to-one discussions, expert interviews and informal group discussion, using a common template of questions. A total of 567 older people participated in over 43 locations and a cross-section was achieved across the country between the regions: urban, provincial and rural areas; and across socioeconomic groups. Overall, the gender balance was more female than male, reflecting the nature of the older population, but in other groups (e.g. users of homeless services) men were more represented. SVP services included visitation and befriending, day centres, social housing, holiday centres and projects for homeless people.

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This Executive Summary has been produced by the SVP Social Justice and Policy Team, based on the Report of the SVP Older Peoples Commission, authored by Brian Harvey and Kathy Walsh (independent researchers). The Full Report is now available on [www.svp.ie](http://www.svp.ie). September 2011.