

ADVOCACY FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN GREENWICH

- An interview with Eleanor Gibson

*Established in 1996, **Advocacy for Older People in Greenwich** helps older people to make informed choices about their care needs. The organisation recruits, trains and support local people to become advocates, who then work on a one-to-one basis with an older person. We met the Director, Eleanor Gibson.*

Why was Advocacy for Older People in Greenwich set up?

Older people are a group who are not always heard and not always asked. I remember when my father was in a care home. I was sitting through a meeting with him, my mum and the care worker. I wasn't there as an advocate, I was there as a daughter. My father was completely compos mentis but was physically weak. My mum was also frail but completely compos mentis. Throughout the entire meeting, the care worker addressed me, not my parents, not my mum, just me. Only at one point did she turn to my dad to say 'You're alright here, George, aren't you? You're happy?' You see it's that kind of patronising attitude, the idea that we make decisions for them as though they're children. The idea of advocacy is to support those who don't get listened to...

The organisation was setup in 1996 at the behest of a group of older people. There were a lot of older people in the borough without support networks and who didn't understand how the care system worked. Advocacy for Older People in Greenwich was set up to provide short to long-term support, to speak out for people.

How does the advocacy process work?

The group has three profession advocates working closely with a pool of around 25 volunteers. Each is partnered with an older person. It's quite close to befriending. We advocate for older people living independently and in sheltered accommodation and care homes.

For example, an older couple came to us – both had various disabilities. There were living in council accommodation and needed a walk-in shower as they hadn't been able to use a bath for years. They'd made an application which had been rejected and the story had been going on for five years. It was making life very difficult, you might think that you can stand at the sink and wash, but when you're in your seventies and you're disabled, that is not an easy thing to do! We were able to put pressure on the council to get another assessment done and eventually they put in a shower. It was such a change in their lives. It's very difficult to imagine how undignified it is not to have access to these basic things.

Often we help sort the smallest things, like helping someone get a blue card disabled sticker for parking or a taxi card so that they can get cheaper taxis. The smallest things can make people feel differently about their lives.

We helped one lady get a mobility scooter. She was an active lady but couldn't walk very far. Now she has a new lease of life she can get out and about and go to the shops. She lives in sheltered accommodation and she's even shopping for her neighbours. It turned out that from the ages of 20 to 63

she'd had a motorbike so she couldn't wait to get back on the road!

What are the common issues facing the older people that you reach?

A lot of the people we work with have mental health problems, memory loss and possible undiagnosed dementia. They don't understand how things work and don't have any support. This is a whole group of people who are a little bit lost in the world sometimes.

We've been encountering people who have got themselves into financial difficulties. If you're on a fixed income and you're getting into rent arrears because you've forgotten to set up your direct debit, or you used to go down and pay it directly but now you can't and you're not sure how the new system works, you can easily get yourself into a bit of difficulty. Suddenly you find yourself receiving eviction letters. One lady we know got a call from a bank, before the credit crunch hit, asking if she would like a credit card with a £5,000 limit. She said 'Oh yes, lovely!' but had no way of paying it back.

One lady ended up with £35,000 of debt and we have no idea where any of this money went, and neither does she. She certainly doesn't have anything to show for it! She was getting 5 or 10 calls a day from her creditors and she was really distressed. She does have dementia by the way. She went to see the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) but they couldn't work out what was going on. So we went to see her at home and spent six hours sifting through all her paperwork. We sorted everything out, contacted the creditors and managed to put a halt to certain things. We then accompanied her to the CAB so they could advise her. She was made

bankrupt which was the best solution in her case. She's now fine and has got rid of all the debts.

Has the recession had a palpable impact on your service users?

For people who have savings it's had a big impact on interest payments. Imagine someone who has some savings and that extra £20 or £30 a week is helping them to support themselves and supplementing a low pension. This is often the case for women who may not have worked for long and are generally the ones with the lowest state pensions. Also you have to take into account increases in utilities bills. The state pension is fixed and rigid. People may be just managing their finances and then prices go up. They end up borrowing, and when you can add interest payments what seemed manageable can soon spiral out of control.

What are your thoughts on the breakdown of the extended family?

I think it's a real shame that we seem to segregate older people. The idea of the extended family living together may have disadvantages but it also has huge advantages. My grandmother lived in our house, I remember we used to come home from school and we'd go upstairs and spend time with her. It would have been very stimulating for her as there were always young people around. That can make a big difference. When you go to care homes there are people with quite serious issues. There are some really good care homes which try and develop activities but you still get this sense of isolation.

What have been the challenges of running the service?

Although advocacy can make a huge difference to people's lives, it's not a statutory service and it's quite hard to evaluate and prove its cost effectiveness. Funding is a permanent issue, I would like to spend more time developing new projects but I'm permanently looking for new sources of funding. Most funders will fund you for three years but then there is always uncertainty over what happens next. A lot of funders also want to fund new projects. It's very difficult for us as a small organisation when you think about the amount of my time that goes on fundraising. One of the challenges is getting the organisation well known. Raising your profile amongst funders and the local council is very important.

"A lot of the people we work with have mental health problems...This is a whole group of people who are a little bit lost in the world sometimes." Eleanor Gibson

What are you plans for the future?

We are currently developing a new advocacy and befriending project aimed at people with dementia who are in care homes. There's a case at the moment of a gentleman who has dementia but is physically perfectly able. His main hobby is trains as he used to work on them. The Council felt that it was too dangerous for him to continue living at home, so he's now in a care home with other people who are either disabled or have quite serious dementia.

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It's like he's in prison. He can't go out because they can't let him out on his own, and they don't have staff who can accompany him. So we're providing him with a volunteer. He'll take him out to places, like the train museum. That will be such a change in his life. It's very important for people with dementia to live as normal a life as possible. If people are just left in a room they will just deteriorate.

What have you learnt from your work with Advocacy for Older People in Greenwich?

I've realised there are an awful lot of people out there who don't have support networks. I find myself looking at my own future differently knowing how vulnerable you can become. Care services do not offer 'low intervention' to keep people independent at home, for example helping them with shopping. Sufficient support in the early stages can allow people the confidence to remain independent.

The resources aren't there so we need more volunteers. In principle the idea of the 'Big Society' would be a brilliant one. We need more people to become involved local helping other people – more people. I think these days we've lost a lot of that.

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