

Age Friendly Melksham - chronology

Set Up

Melksham Seniors, under the Chairmanship of Brian Warwick, set up the Age Friendly project in 2017 with the support of the Centre for Ageing Better, a national charity, and held public meetings to engage local partners in the cause. The Melksham Area Board on 6 June 2018 supported the work and agreed to lead the local steering group, through Cllr Jon Hubbard as Chair. Melksham joined the national network of Age Friendly Communities, an initiative of the World Health Organisation, and was the first market town in the UK to do so.

Through 2018 and 2019 the Age Friendly project was taken forward through meetings of the steering group and public consultation exercises such as a special Age Friendly themed meeting of the Area Board held at the Assembly Hall on 22 October 2019. The Seniors were part of the steering group behind this activity, which also included representatives of the local authorities, housing providers, GPs, care homes and others. The Seniors were involved through successive memberships of the group. Brian Warwick stood down as Chair of the Seniors in mid 2018 and other members took over, most notably Town Councillor Martin Pain who was Seniors Chair through 2019 until his resignation in February 2020.

Support from the Melksham Seniors

Cllr Hubbard, as Chair of the Age Friendly Steering Group, and Peter Dunford, the Community Engagement Manager, attended meetings with the Seniors committee on two occasions in 2019 at the invitation of Martin Pain as Chairman. On 25 April 2019 an initial scoping discussion was held regarding the “direction of travel” regarding seniors issues. Cllr Hubbard described his vision of a charitable organisation to take forward the management of the Age Friendly initiative and policy issues such as housing, transportation, the public realm, health, employment and social inclusion. In this model, the Seniors and other representatives of older people were to be partners on a steering group to oversee the Age Friendly organisation in its work. The Committee gave its approval in principle for this model, clearly stating that it wished to focus on providing wellbeing activities for its members rather than getting involved in long term issues of strategic policy.

After further consultation at a special meeting of the Melksham Area Board held on 22 October 2019, Cllr Hubbard and Peter Dunford attended a meeting of the Seniors committee on Wednesday 13 November at the Riverside Club where they presented a proposal to employ a consultant to help shape the local project and to engage with stakeholders in developing an Age Friendly Action Plan. The Seniors committee agreed to contribute £3,000 as match funding to a proposed contribution from the Area Board.

Later the same evening the Melksham Area Board received a report back on the special event of 22 October and confirmed its financial contribution to the project. Agenda papers here <https://cms.wiltshire.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=166&MId=12320&Ver=4>

Support from the Parish Councils

To establish a broad partnership across the community area, an invitation letter was sent out to all parish councils seeking financial contributions to the project based on a pro-rata funding formula. Melksham Town Council on 25 November 2019 agreed its contribution of £2,292 (although later referred the matter for further scrutiny to the Finance and Admin Committee to be held on 7 September 2020). Melksham Without and Steeple Ashton Parish Council agreed to be partners, contributing £1,071 and £185 respectively.

Consultancy Brief

A total of £9,548 was promised to the consultancy project by the local partners. These contributions have been collected by Wiltshire Council in its role as accountable body for the project and are being held within a Melksham Area Board project budget.

A consultancy brief was prepared during January with advice provided by the WC Procurement team. A tender for a 3 month project was finally issued in February 2020 through the Bloom procurement portal. The key tasks specified in the brief were:

1. Research and collation of all consultation outcomes to date, including relevant strategies and associated implementation plans and delivery reports, as relevant to the domains of the Age Friendly framework and the wishes of local stakeholders.
2. An evaluation of current management arrangements and recommendations to build a collaborative multi-agency approach across the public, private and voluntary sectors locally to take forward this work.
3. An investigation of the funding environment and opportunities to resource this programme of work on a sustainable basis.
4. Engagement and consultation with stakeholders through events, surveys and other methods, as appropriate, to develop a shared programme of work.
5. The presentation of findings to the Steering Group and partners, to include a 3 year Age-Friendly Action Plan with short, medium and long term outcomes together with recommendations for next steps.

The timing of the publication of the consultancy tender was unfortunate as it coincided with the deteriorating public health situation and Coronavirus pandemic spreading across Europe. No bids were received to the tender.

Coronavirus and Lockdown

The pandemic then hit and the UK went into lockdown. Cllr Hubbard was instrumental in the set up of the Melksham COVID-19 response group - a partnership between Melksham Town Council, Melksham Without Parish Council, Melksham Area Board and Age Friendly Melksham – which recruited a local team of volunteers to provide emergency food and medical support to old, vulnerable and socially isolated individuals across the Melksham community area. The Melksham response was one of the best, if not the pre-eminent, community response during this time and was widely praised for its excellent work.

Despite the grave public health situation there were a few positive outcomes. The response work helped to identify a database of individuals who are elderly, vulnerable or socially isolated in the Melksham area. This negated some of the work that was required through the consultancy project. The crisis also helped to build a team of community volunteers, with many individuals stepping up during the crisis and wanting to stay involved in the community support and recovery effort.

Community Interest Company

The leaders of the Melksham Community Response were keen to protect the contacts, partnerships and volunteers that had been generated through the crisis response and to put in place structures to enable the transition from COVID response into recovery. They saw the potential to establish the Age Friendly initiative as a community interest company, independent of political influence and with the view of seeking charitable status in due course.

The Melksham Area Board, Melksham Without Parish Council and Age Friendly Melksham all agreed to sign up to a model entitled “Melksham Community Support: The Way Forward” which identifies the policy and operational roles of the local partner organisations as we move forward from COVID support into COVID recovery.

A number of individuals already involved in the COVID response and with the required passion and skills-set volunteered to be trustees of the Age Friendly Melksham CIC. The 5 trustees appointed were recruited to the positions of Chair (Jon Hubbard), Secretary (Wayne Stansby), Treasurer (Sue Mortimer), Fundraiser (Saffi Rabley) and Older Persons Champion (Chris Pickett).

A grant of £ 10,000 was successfully raised from the Wiltshire Community Foundation to match-fund the monies raised by local partners for the consultancy project, to fund COVID recovery with particular reference to combatting social isolation and loneliness.

Age Friendly Co-ordinator

Given the changed circumstances, the CIC trustees agreed that the proposed consultancy project had been overtaken by events and was no longer appropriate. Some of the tasks, such as partnership building and a database of the most vulnerable and socially isolated in society, had been achieved through the COVID response work. Instead, they favoured the use of the available resources for the recruitment of a part-time co-ordinator to take forward work in support with the old and vulnerable in the Melksham area, specifically:

- Management of Age Friendly Melksham’s participation in Melksham Covid 19 Community Recovery Programme.
- Creating and maintaining a network of groups and organisations that will provide enrichment opportunities for people’s lives in the Melksham Community Area.
- Championing, developing and coordinating volunteering opportunities

A recruitment process was held in Summer 2020 and Philippa Huxtable was recruited on a fixed term 12 month basis, with a fundraising task to secure funds to extend the post further.

Peter Dunford, Community Engagement Manager
August 2020