1: Background
In 2001, the government launched a ten year plan called the National Service Framework for Older People (NSFOP). This set out to transform the way health and social care services are provided to older people, for example, by rooting out age discrimination.

A fundamental principle of the NSFOP is that older people are involved as ‘genuine partners’. However, early reports of the implementation process suggested that older people were being excluded from key meetings or expected to participate as ‘token representatives’ with very little in the way of practical support.

In 2002, a Reference Group of older people (aged 50 plus) was established by the then regional health authority to support improvements in this area. This small study was initiated by the ‘Greater Manchester Older People’s NSFOP Reference Group’ to assess progress and to reflect on any changes in practice. In particular, the study explored how older people are being involved on special committees or working groups called ‘Local Implementation Teams’ (LITs). These bring together a wide range of agencies and professionals.

Study Aims
- To gather evidence of older people’s experiences of serving as ‘lay representatives’ on NSFOP Local Implementation Teams (LITs) across the Greater Manchester area.
- To gather evidence from older people on their experiences of being supported in the process and how much they think their involvement has been effective.
- To audit new opportunities for involvement, building on the NSFOP.

2: Method
The study was carried out between March and July 2007 and comprised interviews with Reference Group Members (n=16) and paid staff who have a role in supporting or facilitating older people’s involvement (n=11).
3: Findings
Overall, the feedback from Reference Group members is very positive about their experiences of participating on the LITs. Members described a ‘culture shift’ and a resounding sense of having become ‘genuine partners’ rather than ‘token representatives’.

Members believed that their voices were being used to good effect and could identify specific outcomes or service improvements which they perceived to have been driven by their participation (for example, the introduction of red trays on some hospital wards to ensure the staff are aware of those patients who may need help at mealtimes). However, it was said to be increasingly difficult to discern older people’s distinctive contribution as ‘lay representatives’ from that of the wider ‘professional’ LIT membership.

Significantly, while things were ‘moving on’ with six LITs already having been disbanded, there is good evidence of continuity of involvement with lots of new opportunities opening up around work on civic renewal and active citizenship. Ensuring that health and social care issues are not lost as agencies take a wider perspective on older people’s issues is a particular concern for some members of the Reference Group.

In summary, Reference Group members highlight a number of factors which they perceive to have been particularly important in facilitating change and supporting and strengthening their involvement and engagement on the LITs:

- Having the support of a dedicated involvement officer.
- Being able to establish longer term relationships with key officers.
- Having a Reference Group which facilitates ‘peer mentoring’ and learning from other older people.
- Access to an ‘expert resource’ which is independent of the LIT.
- Recognising that some older people see themselves as ‘activists’ or campaigners rather than ‘service users’ or ‘active citizens’.
- Working with LIT officers who are open to the ‘critical perspectives’ of older people.

The Research Team comprised Michelle Cornes and Jill Manthorpe from King’s College London and Pauline Weinstein who is an Independent Older Researcher. For more information about this study or a copy of the full report please contact Mary Duncan Tel: 0161 834 9823 email: mary@macc.org.uk