

Consulting and Engaging with Older People

Dos and don'ts

Over the last 10 years there has been an increase in the efforts of policy-makers and service-providers to engage with and seek the views of older people on the services which affect their lives.

Unfortunately, however, much of the consultation to date has been poorly conducted, causing many who have tried to engage to develop 'consultation fatigue' and become discouraged.

A number of organisations have attempted to address these failures by producing good practice guides to involving, consulting and engaging with older people; some of these are referenced on the back page of this document.

Our aim is not to duplicate, but to provide a quick-reference guide compiled *directly* from the comments, views and experiences sent in to us by older people, which we hope will prove a useful tool to assist those genuinely seeking to engage the participation of *all* older citizens.

Dos

Attitudes

- Remember that older people are people. They are not statistics, service users, clients or whatever else
- Use common courtesy and ask how the person wishes to be addressed
- Avoid stereotyping: remember, 'older people' are just an older version of you
- Always treat older people as you would any other person. They matter as much as anyone else. Don't let their age be a barrier
- Respect the views of older people – mutual respect requires truthful dialogue
- Always speak directly to the older person and not the person they are with (such as a carer or companion)

Inviting participation/involvement

- Ensure that opportunities to engage/participate are communicated appropriately to *all* older people in the area, not just forums or 'usual suspects'
- Ensure that older people are represented on the full range of council and health decision-making panels, boards and committees
- Make sure the person is truly representative i.e. provides a conduit to other organisations
- Think about appointing people in pairs to promote confidence and self-esteem and to ensure continuity
- Use local community magazines, newspapers and radio stations to communicate information about opportunities to participate
- Ask libraries, post offices, bookmakers, surgeries, hospital waiting rooms and/or bus operators to display information i.e. anywhere that people have to sit or stand for any length of time
- Ask social workers, district nurses, Meals on Wheels etc. to disseminate information to ensure those who are less mobile can participate
- Include more small community and voluntary groups in consultations
- Be clear about what you are asking people to do, i.e. what exactly you want views on, as opposed to what has already been decided

Communicating

- Use plain English: jargon and acronyms can create barriers even if they are explained
- Sit at the same level, i.e. eye to eye, when speaking to people
- Be aware of any particular barriers to communication, e.g. language, hearing, dementia, other specific needs
- Speak clearly, but don't patronise by speaking slowly or shouting
- Give the person time to absorb information
- Provide a single consistent contact (not answerphone, voicemail or press button systems) to whom any older person can turn with a query
- Make sure calls are returned or find someone else to answer queries if you cannot

Organising meetings

Before

- Ensure older people are involved right from the start, i.e. at the planning stage. They will have some good ideas you may not have thought of
- Seek advice from older people on appropriate venues and how to advertise meetings to appeal to their peers: e.g. use large, clear lettering and signs; choose familiar settings (e.g. seniors' clubs, local community centres, people's homes), where they will feel more comfortable and confident. Make sure there is disabled access to venues and toilets, and that hearing loops and signers are made available
- Consider carefully the start and finish times of meetings – older people may not be able to get to meetings early in the day, or stay after 3pm, and some may prefer not to attend meetings in the evening
- Make it clear whether or not travel expenses will be reimbursed. People might be embarrassed to ask
- Always give enough advance warning of consultation meetings – at least six weeks. This gives groups time to select the appropriate people to attend rather than just the ones available
- Provide adequate paperwork prior to a meeting: this is always useful, if not essential
- Papers should include a list of speakers with contact details, plus expected attendees and whom they represent
- An explanatory list of jargon and acronyms appropriate to the meeting should be circulated beforehand

During

- Make sure everyone feels welcome. Any meeting/group needs to be friendly and inclusive. Remember, some people might be nervous and unused to attending meetings
- Give people time to acclimatise to strange surroundings – perhaps allowing for coffee and a chat before the start
- If it is a regular meeting, introduce new members and give a brief résumé of past meetings/actions to bring them up to date
- Use name badges as a useful reminder of names and organisations represented
- Be clear and concise
- Make sure speakers can be heard clearly – microphones should *always* be used to include the hearing loop system
- Conduct discussions sensitively
- Make sure all contributors know that their views are important
- Consultations should be meaningful, productive and respect the input of all members
- Make sure any smaller discussion groups are well led and that the reporting-back is done accurately

After

- Remember, there is no point in consulting if no notice will be taken of what is said. Different views must be taken into consideration. People are fed up with getting the impression that the decisions have been made already by those in authority
- Provide an accurate summary of points raised and action agreed
- Provide proper and detailed explanations as to why some suggestions may not have been taken forward

Don'ts

Attitudes

- Never patronise: many older people are extremely *compos mentis* so be careful not to talk down to them. If things seem confused, it may well be your fault, not theirs
- Don't make assumptions (even with good intent) that younger 'professionals' know what older people want: they might be entirely wrong
- Never forget that many older people prior to retirement held down responsible jobs
- Never assume that older people lack knowledge, or are incapable of assimilating information; they may (at times) be slower to assimilate, but that does not mean they cannot. On the other hand, don't assume too much knowledge. Try to strike a balance
- Do not intimidate by being officious, bureaucratic, impatient or excessively formal
- Don't be impatient: too often busy and pressed authorities want to move on to the next person too quickly

Inviting participation/involvement

- Don't offer tokenistic opportunities: in other words, don't ask people about things if you really don't want to know the answer
- Don't wait to be reminded that older people should be part and parcel of your decision-making
- Don't forget that co-opting an older person on their own to committees/groups *may* result in them feeling intimidated by the 'professionals'
- Don't co-opt 'unwilling' volunteers on to committees. They will soon walk away

Communicating

- Don't misspell or mispronounce names or send papers to the wrong address
- Don't procrastinate or use avoidance tactics

Organising meetings

Before

- Don't forget to check that venues are properly accessible, and that all needs have been carefully considered and checked

During

- The chairman of any meeting should not allow the 'professionals' to dominate and confuse but enable all present to participate. S/he should be sensitive to the understanding of the lay members of the group
- Don't create a 'them' and 'us' divide
- Avoid jargon: jargon that is familiar and understandable to you may confuse others
- Don't rush things
- Don't allow single issues to dominate

- Don't assume that people are comfortable feeding back from workshops. Many find reporting-back to be a real challenge, whether to their own group or the consultative group. It can be a worry and can be a cause of non-attendance at meetings.

After

- Don't just stop a series of meetings without explanation or any conclusion having been reached
- Don't pay lip service to considering people's views and wishes, then change nothing in your original plans or policy

Further reading

A number of other documents have been produced on the subject of engagement and consultation with older people. A list of further reading is provided below. Note that Help the Aged does not necessarily endorse the content of any documents not published by the Charity.

Setting the Direction: a participative approach for local authorities to develop their local strategic plans in partnership with older people. English/Welsh. Help the Aged in Wales. 2003, reprinted 2005.

http://www.helptheaged.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/E6F3E859-9BB6-463B-8477-D7769EB5397B/0/setting_the_direction.pdf

Tony Carter and Peter Beresford. *Age and Change: models of involvement for older people.* YPS for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. 2000. £6.00.
Tel: 01904 430033.

EngAGE: involving older people. Age Concern Cymru. 2007. Available from Age Concern Cymru.
Tel: 029 20431555 www.accymru.org.uk

Involving Older People Whose Views Are Seldom Heard. Exeter Senior Voice. 2004. Available from Exeter Senior Voice c/o Age Concern Exeter.
Tel: 01392 202092

Social Inclusion: a call for action. Help the Aged. 2007. *A Toolkit for Organising Meetings of Vulnerable Older People (AGE/Inc. toolkit).* Help the Aged. Available as a pdf via http://www.age-platform.org/EN/article.php?id_article=353

Communicating with Older People. Agewell Sandwell. Available as a pdf via www.agewellinsandwell.org.uk

Postscript

The majority of comments sent in by older people for this document relate to consultation events or consultative board meetings, presumably because these have been, until now, the main method of consultation employed by public service providers. These methods are not, however, appropriate for all. The most vulnerable, who are also those whose reliance on public services is the greatest, are often the hardest to reach, either because, without proper support, they are not easily able to attend meetings, or simply because they are not interested in attending.

If consultation is to be effective and constructive, serious thought, effort and resources need to be committed in order to develop more inclusive and imaginative consultation opportunities. To show that it is truly serious about consultation, the statutory sector needs to listen and learn from individuals and community groups about how they want to be consulted. With the ever-increasing drive for public consultation it is vital that we work together to develop new ways to engage for the benefit of all.

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