

Engaging with older citizens

A study of London boroughs



REPORT SUMMARY



listen



About this report

This is a summary of research into how older Londoners are being involved in developing council policies and services. The full report can be viewed online at www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/bgop.

Approaches to incorporating the public's views and priorities into government decision-making vary. Consultation - asking particular groups of people to discuss and choose between a predetermined set of options - constitutes just one element within a wider engagement framework.

This research has focused on older citizen engagement activities that go beyond consultation to capture more active forms of public engagement. This includes, for example, the local authority and its partners involving older citizens in establishing local priorities, developing and delivering services, and evaluating processes.

Listening and responding to older people is a principal means of empowering older people. The challenge is to empower what is a very diverse and large population of older Londoners (approximately 1.2 million people are over age 60).

As elsewhere in the UK, the size of the older people population is anticipated to rise over the coming years and its profile is expected to change. In particular, the proportion of older people from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups is anticipated to increase from 12 to 23 per cent by 2021.

Although there is heightened awareness of the need for councils to engage with older citizens when formulating and delivering policies and services, there is a gap in the knowledge of effective models for active engagement.

The research was carried out on behalf of London Councils by the Policy Studies Institute with Better Government for Older People. It draws on a survey of London borough councils about their engagement with older citizens and from interviews about specific local engagement. In this study, three London boroughs (Hammersmith and Fulham, Islington and Sutton) participated as case studies. Twenty four interviews were conducted with council officers, representatives from partner agencies and older people.

The London research is part of a UK study on engagement partnerships between older people and the local authorities they live in.

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Support for older citizen engagement in London

London boroughs have a statutory duty to involve the public in service development and monitoring. Financial support for engagement is made available through Local Area Agreements, neighbourhood programmes and London borough grant-making processes. A variety of pan-London networks support partnership working between boroughs, primary care trusts, other London-wide statutory bodies and older people groups, these include:

- the London Better Government for Older People Network
- the London Older People's Advisory Group
- the Greater London Forum for Older People
- the London Older People's Strategy Group.

In addition, responsiveness to the diversity of the older population is a priority in the Mayor of London's Older People Strategy, launched in September 2006. The strategy recognises the positive contribution older citizens make to the well-being of London and the value of actively engaging older citizens in the design and delivery of public services. The strategy focuses on people who are over pensionable age although issues around employment cover people who are age 50 and over as this is the age when discrimination in the workplace becomes more prominent.



Methods used to engage older citizens

Most councils have systems in place to support and encourage local people to engage with the council. In this study, the majority (67 per cent) of respondents said that their council had a corporate policy or strategy for engaging with citizens, with over a third of these having a policy for engaging older citizens specifically. Three out of four respondents said that their authority had plans to increase their engagement activity with older citizens. Over half (57 per cent) of respondents indicated that their council provided training or support to help older citizens engage with them.

Councils are using a variety of means for involving older people in their activities. Older people forums, information newsletters, user feedback surveys and voluntary and community sector representation are the most frequently used methods.

Innovative examples of active engagement include older people performing service evaluations; council officer presence at older people meetings; the provision of training and opportunities for older people from BAME communities to develop the skills needed to engage with the council; community events and informal activities such as health walks, international exchange visits and pub outings that help nurture relationships between older people and their council.

Older people forums are reported to be the most effective means of engagement. These forums provide the opportunity for members to operate a separate agenda from the council while offering channels for exchanging information and views with council officers. Citizen engagement can be initiated by either the council or the older people but it is more often the former.

“It’s nice to have insight into how the council has to work...it’s not just always money, they have restrictions that they are working to. So you do get an insight into why certain things can’t be... as we would hope.”

General meetings and information newsletters are widely used but not seen as particularly effective. Steering group representation, community events and festivals - while highly rated for their effectiveness - are used less frequently.

The least frequently used methods for engagement are involving older citizens in the delivery of services, using older citizens as mentors or inspectors, and the use of timebanks - organisations through which local volunteers share their time and skills.

A range of issues affect councils' efforts to engage their older citizens but the lack of resources (funds, staff or time) are the main obstacles to driving engagement forward.

"They are planning for the future but it's my grandchildren's future. I'm also interested in ourselves, immediate, and this is the thing that is lacking; some policies that affect us now."

The ways in which older people are engaged often dictates the type of older people represented. Common methods like open board meetings and committee or steering group representation rely on formal means of communication. More informal means, in less business-like settings, may be better suited to older people who have less experience of formal meetings.

Some respondents feel that older people engagement includes a good representation of different BAME groups, while others feel that some ethnic groups are involved more than others. This opinion varies by locality. Strategies to engage with BAME groups include the use of interpreters, tapping into existing community groups, providing support to BAME community groups so they can engage with the local authority (such as public speaking training) and 'engagement by proxy' where community members serve as intermediaries.

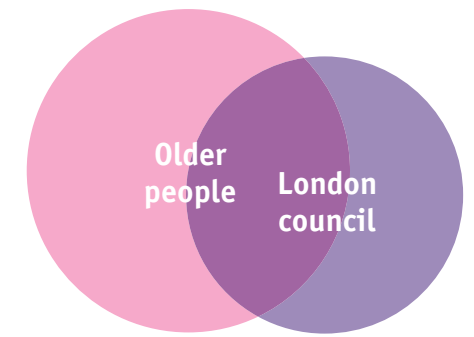
Older people identify a number of reasons for being involved with the work of the council: replicating skills and an identity previously realised through work; keeping busy following the loss of a close family member; satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with a particular service and a wish to serve the community. Key obstacles to engagement identified from interviews with older people included health, disability, care commitments, language issues and a perceived lack of action on the part of the council.

Most common engagement models

The three primary ways in which engagement partnerships are structured are the independent forum, supported groups and older citizens' panels. Each has its distinctive strengths and weaknesses:

The independent forum

- A separate organisation, typically led and administered by older people, that lends autonomy to older people's concerns. Individuals often engage directly with council staff. However, engagement can involve only a few core members and there are sustainability issues due to low funding and time pressures on key members. A sub-type of this model involves a forum of older people that is funded by the council and facilitated by a council officer. This helps to make the forum more sustainable but could also be seen to limit independence.

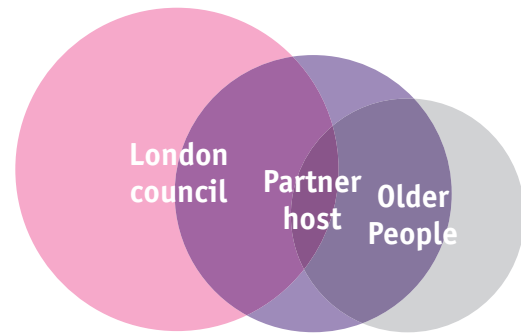


The independent forums model of older citizen engagement

CASE STUDY

Hammersmith and Fulham

The Hammersmith and Fulham Better Government Forum is facilitated by a council officer. The forum is a partnership of older citizens, Hammersmith and Fulham council, the health authority and voluntary organisations in the borough. It offers older residents the opportunity to get involved with the work of the council, to make their views heard, as well as being a social venue. The council has helped to organise various special interest groups (for example, transport, regeneration, health and proof reading) for members to sign up to. The council can draw on the existing structures to involve older citizens when needed. Likewise, older people can identify issues for action and use existing communication channels to raise awareness amongst council staff.



The supported group model of older citizen engagement

The supported group

- In this structure, engagement is organised and overseen by the partner, typically a voluntary sector agency specialising in older people issues, who is contracted by the council to act as intermediary between it and local older people. This facilitates engagement and ensures financial and administrative stability, yet engagement is often reactive and contact between older people and the council is sometimes indirect.

CASE STUDY Sutton

Sutton council has commissioned Age Concern to run a user and carer involvement group for older citizens. The group comprises 30 older volunteers and is partly funded by the council and primary care trust. The group also carries out commissioned work for its numerous functions, for example, quality monitoring evaluations (homecare, hospital nutrition and hygiene), research surveys, training (age discrimination), and proof reading documents.



The older citizens' panel model of older citizen engagement

The older citizens' panel

- A large pool of older people who can be contacted on an ad hoc basis, allowing wide representation and the involvement of those who are not interested in traditional meeting structures. Individuals often engage directly with council staff but engagement tends to be reactive. Since the group does not exist as a separate entity it lacks independence and opportunity for older people to build a common cause is limited.

CASE STUDY Islington

Islington council supports a database of around 3,000 older volunteers which was constructed initially from a mailout based on GP and Freedom Pass lists but to which recruitment is ongoing.

Separate groups of volunteers, who have identified which topics they wish to be involved in, have taken part in consultations about social benefits and a mystery shopper exercise to assess minibus and electric scooter transport schemes, and drafted a letter informing other older people about the flu jab.

Key messages

The health and social care perspective is the main organisational driver for older citizen engagement in London.

The nature and content of interaction with older people is still weighted towards contact with users of health and social care services (and their carers) and usually with the express purpose of discussing health and social care services. Other council departments tend to defer to this lead.

Although councils enlist a variety of engagement methods, there is a reliance on traditional forms of consultation and information sharing.

Engagement approaches that actively engage older people in service delivery and evaluation, for example, are used infrequently. Encouragingly, council staff are aware that more needs to be done in order to drive the engagement agenda forward but they are limited by the resources and skills at hand.

The means of engagement defines who is included and excluded.

Multiple approaches can help to ensure a diverse population is represented. A mix of independent forums, facilitated forums, groups supported by partner agencies or citizens' panels is best because each structure has its strengths and weaknesses.

Older people have a diverse range of skills, interests, needs and priorities and these need to be reflected in the engagement activities available to them.

A single mechanism, such as a forum, will capture a particular group of older people but may well exclude others who are interested in a particular issue and who prefer to work with people in the community, or who are not comfortable in a group setting.

Some councils have strategies to engage with older people from BAME communities not included in mainstream engagement activities.

To enhance BAME representation, councils are connecting with existing community groups and providing support to individuals so that they can become part of the engagement process.

The most innovative forms of engagement typically contain an element of informality.

Social events, one-to-one peer research and accompanied outings all provide an alternative to the strictures of meetings. Some older people may prefer the informal means of communication that these approaches offer. In response, councils could build up their capacity to engage in this way.

Local engagement partnerships can be improved by: corporate mainstreaming of engagement procedures; maintaining communication links; nurturing trust in relationships; varying engagement approaches and settings; ensuring adequate resources such as funds are available, and providing guidance for engagement.

“To engage successfully you need to build really close relationships with the groups that you're trying to work with, not just come in and go and then come back a year later. It takes time to build the relationships. And to offer incentives to get involved and not to expect someone just to...give up their free time.”

Methodology

The research was carried out between June 2005 and September 2006. It combined survey and case study approaches, soliciting evidence from multiple stakeholders. The study was conducted in three stages – two phases of fieldwork followed by workshops with stakeholders. This enabled both a broad overview of existing practices and an in-depth examination of specific initiatives of interest.

Completed questionnaires were received from 22 London borough councils, a response rate of 64 per cent. The vast majority of respondents were based in the social services and health units of the council. A few respondents were associated with housing services or the chief executive's office.

Qualitative fieldwork was facilitated by peer interviewers. This methodology is increasingly recognised as a useful means for promoting the inclusiveness of the research for a study population. Three associates from the Greater London Forum for Older People volunteered to serve as peer interviewers and were each assigned to one of the study locations. To reduce the chance of bias, none of the peer interviewers lived in the case study areas. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in pairs with a peer interviewer accompanied by a PSI interviewer.

The study reference group provided advice and guidance throughout the course of the research. The reference group consisted of representatives from London Councils, London Older People Advisory Group, Greater London Forum for Older People, Better Government for Older People, and Camden and Redbridge councils.



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