



Engaging older citizens

a study of London boroughs

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

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1 Introduction

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

The research was carried out by the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) with Better Government for Older People (BGOP). It draws on a survey of London boroughs about their engagement with older citizens and three qualitative case studies on specific local engagement. The research was carried out between 2005 and 2006 and is part of a wider national study on engagement partnerships between older people and the local authorities they live in.

Background

Integral to the Mayor of London's Older People's Strategy,¹ launched in September 2006, is a commitment to engaging with older citizens on decisions that affect their lives:

"If planning for the future is to take account of older people's changing expectations and needs, it is important to engage directly with older people themselves. It is essential to listen to, recognise and respond to their views and priorities"

(Mayor of London, 2006, p 7).

Listening and responding to older people is promoted as a principal means for empowering older people. The challenge is to connect with the diversity of older Londoners within a vast number of older people (approaching 1.2 million 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 the profile is also likely to change. In particular, the proportion of older people from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups is expected to increase from 12 to 23 per cent by 2021. Locality is also important as the distribution of ethnic groups is not uniform and patterns of ageing for specific groups are expected to vary. Empowerment through engagement is intended to promote social inclusion for sub-groups of the older population that experience discrimination on the basis of other characteristics, such as: age, religion, ethnicity, disability, income, sexual orientation, frailty, mental health and location.

Supporting older citizen engagement in London

To reach the diverse range of older Londoners, the Mayor's strategy recognises the crucial role of partnership working across government and stakeholder groups. At the pan-London level, the Mayor engages with the London Older People Strategy Group (LOPSG) comprising volunteers from over 200 older people groups. LOPSG hosts the London Older Person's Assembly and organises the

¹ The strategy targets 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.

annual Older People's Festival which draw together people from across the capital. The Mayor of London also supports the London Older People's Resource Facility which provides computer services, work and meeting space, skills sharing sessions and officer support to LOPSG and other older people's groups.

Other London-wide networks support partnership working among boroughs, primary care trusts, other statutory bodies and older people groups to improve the lives of older Londoners:

- Since 2004, the London Better Government for Older People (BGOP) network has helped London boroughs, health bodies and other agencies, including pan-London older people groups. The network shares issues and examples of good practice. The network is facilitated by London Councils
- The London Older People's Advisory Group (OPAG) is an elected board of older citizens within the BGOP network. The group aims to ensure that older people are at the heart of local planning, provision and evaluation of local policy and services. For older Londoners, OPAG promotes participation in public governance to ensure that their contributions are valued and recognised
- The Greater London Forum for Older People is a voluntary organisation established in 1988. It supplies a support and information service to aid the development and continuity of the 32 local older people's forums. These forums are typically organised and managed by older people to provide a platform to voice their support and concerns about issues of relevance.

Councils have a statutory duty to involve the public in service monitoring and development. Financial support for engagement at the local level is made available through Local Area Agreements, neighbourhood programmes and London borough grant-making processes. To date, London Councils' commissioning process has prioritised funding to support second tier policy and voice services for older people, and older people's groups promoting older citizen engagement with local and regional government and other stakeholders.

The national agenda

Engaging with people in the community, acting on their concerns and using this knowledge to inform and shape policy and services is being promoted increasingly as a means by which central and local government can help individuals achieve a better quality of life.

Recent national initiatives have moved the citizen engagement agenda forward. In 2005, the *Together We Can* cross-government strategy outlined a 65-point action plan to bring central and local government and communities closer together through citizen engagement in delivering policies. That same year, *Transformational Government* set out the Government's vision for a long-term modernisation of public services using technology more effectively and consulting, involving and engaging a diverse range of people in the design and the delivery of the services that they use. These ideas have recently been reasserted in the 2006 local government white paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, which calls for greater choices achieved through wider citizen

Communities, which calls for greater choices achieved through wider citizen consultation and involvement in developing and running services.² Public engagement in governance and public services, alongside democratic voting, constitute the core of the Government's 'active citizenship' and 'civil renewal' agendas (Jochum et al, 2005).

At the national level, various government sectors have played a role in advancing older citizen engagement. For example, the white paper on primary and community care (DOH, 2006) advocates a new direction for community services with priority given to individual choice for improving the care of older people. In addition, the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) for 2005/06 required that 'excellent' local authorities have a quality of life strategy for older people and area reviews include 'older citizen engagement' as an evaluation criterion.

BGOP has been promoting the voice of older people in local government since it was piloted in 1997 in 28 local authorities. The pilot aimed to "improve public services for older people by better meeting their needs, listening to their views, and encouraging and recognising their contribution" and tested the Government's 'Better Government' themes such as citizen-centred government, democratic renewal, joined-up working and best value (Hayden and Boaz, 2000). The success of the pilot has led to a UK-wide network of partnerships including local authorities, other statutory organisations, older people's forums and voluntary groups. OPAG, an elected body of older citizens, is central to this partnership. The BGOP membership are a leading force behind older citizen engagement in government processes, committed to:

"Increasing the profile of older people and ensuring that their diverse voices are reflected in policies and services, and their contributions are encouraged and recognised" (BGOP, 2003).

A 2004 Audit Commission/BGOP study offers a framework for developing comprehensive strategic approaches to improving the quality of later life. This includes an older citizen engagement component, which specifies that:

- Processes are in place to engage with a range of older people on a regular basis, including older people whose voices are seldom heard, using a range of methods
- Older people are supported to participate fully, for example by offering induction or training sessions.

² Visit <http://www.togetherwecan.info/> for further information about these strategies.


Definitions

Citizen engagement

Engaging citizens in policy making and service development has tended to be understood and achieved through consultation processes, ie. asking particular groups of people to discuss and choose between a predetermined set of options. Recent commentators have provided a wider ranging and more complex framework for understanding the various forms citizen engagement can take. As depicted in Table 1, these can be viewed as a continuum, defined by the level of participation and control citizens have in the process, with ‘informing’ activities at one end (involving little participation/control) and ‘empowering’ activities at the other end (requiring full participation/control). Therefore, consultation can be considered as one element within a wider engagement framework. All types of engagement serve a role and multiple engagement strategies are advisable in order to tap into the more interactive and participative dimensions of engagement (Wilcox, 1994).

Viewed as a form of deliberative democracy, public engagement can be developed as an arena in which more informal communication exchanges can be used in non-business settings. Styles of discourse that are typically excluded in the business context, like telling stories of personal experiences, may be more inclusive (Young, 2000).

Table 1: Levels of citizen engagement

Inform	Provide public with information without requiring any feedback	Depth of participation 
Consult	Enables choice between/feedback on predetermined options rather than an opportunity to propose alternatives	
Involve/decide together	Views shared, options generated jointly and actions agreed	
Collaborate/act together	Direct work with the public to make decisions and carry through agreed actions	
Empower/Support local initiatives	Supporting groups to develop and implement their own solutions	

Source: adapted from the Improvement Network and Wilcox (1994)

Older people

Opportunity Age (DWP, 2005) presents the Government’s strategy on older people and an ageing society. It presents older people as active consumers of public services who have the right to exercise control, independence and choice over their lives. The recent *Shared Priority Older People Action Learning Sets* published by IDeA (2007a) acknowledge that chronological age cannot be taken as a proxy

for the diverse lives of older people. For the purposes of this study, 'older people' is defined as:

"A socially constructed term for community citizens and customers of public services, typically in the later years of life, who collectively exhibit diverse needs and interests that can be found in the younger population but who, individually, set these needs and interests within the context of their unique life experience"

Older people engagement

A prime rationale for seeking out and representing the needs and priorities of older people specifically is to improve quality of life in later life. Therefore, to inform public planning, policies and services that affect older citizens, government needs to understand older people's perspectives. Engaging with older citizens as a discrete group is promoted in the recently published toolkit, *Engaging with Older People* (IDeA, 2007b) which argues:

- Government needs to respond to major demographic shifts in the size and profile of the older population
- Older people are heterogeneous, not a single group
- Certain sub-groups of older people are not adequately represented in current systems of policy and service development
- There is a growing demand for input and choice among older consumers.

The diversity of the older population makes it necessary to enlist several engagement strategies, including individual and group approaches, in order to achieve representation (see for examples: Barnes, 2005; Carter & Beresford, 2000; IDeA, 2007b; Older People's Steering Group, 2004). Furthermore, the challenge of this diversity is compounded by the fact that many older people tend not to identify with the label 'older person', and often do not associate themselves as users or even potential users of services for older people (Darnton, 2005).

This study has adopted the following definition for older citizen engagement with local government:

"The local authority – ideally working with partners – has sought to involve local older citizens to achieve many of the following: establish local priorities, devise plans, develop and design services, deliver services, monitor and evaluate processes and outcomes"

Study purpose

The study aims to contribute understanding to inform practices of active, inclusive and ongoing engagement with older Londoners. Although there is heightened awareness of the need for councils to engage with older citizens when formulating and delivering its policies and services, there is a gap in the knowledge of effective models for active engagement. The specific aims of the research were to:

- Scope the range of participation in council-older citizen partnerships
- Identify gaps in partnership building
- Identify council and older people's perspectives on enabling factors and barriers for building continuous partnerships
- Identify participatory models and innovative examples of engagement.

Methodology

The research was carried out between June 2005 and September 2006. It combines 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. The London BGOP Network Older People Engagement Sub-Group provided advice and guidance throughout the course of the research.

Survey questionnaire

A survey was administered by post to all 33 London councils. It was addressed to the chief executive officer who was asked in a covering letter to pass the questionnaire on to the member of staff who was best suited to respond. A follow-up letter and telephone calls were used to boost the response rate. Most responses were returned by post but, at the respondent's request, some were conveyed electronically.

The survey consisted of a combination of closed and open-ended questions. Respondents were asked if their council followed a policy or strategy on citizen engagement and whether there was a specific strategy for engaging with older people. The survey also elicited views on what is currently helping or hindering progress towards older citizen engagement. It then asked respondents to indicate, from a list of common methods, what forms of engagement the authority uses and which of these are judged to be the most useful. The survey then asked for examples of projects or initiatives that illustrated existing approaches to older citizen engagement (see Appendix A for a copy of the survey instrument).

Survey returns were logged and assigned a unique identifier in order to assure respondent anonymity. Responses were scanned into electronic format and quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. Written responses were analysed and categorised into themes.

Local case studies

Three London boroughs were selected for case study: Hammersmith and Fulham, Islington and Sutton. Selection was informed by survey responses and discussions with the study reference group. Selection criteria included the following:

- Evidence of citizen engagement mainstreamed within the corporate culture, as opposed to ad hoc projects
- Examples of older citizens engaged beyond consultation and meetings;
- The local older citizen profile and diversity issues
- Evidence of struggle and overcoming issues with the engagement process.

A total of 24 interviews were carried out between April and September 2006. Eight interviews were conducted in each location: one face-to-face interview with a council representative; three telephone interviews with representatives from partner agencies, and; four face-to-face interviews with older citizens. Council informants identified partners for interview and both Council and partner respondents facilitated access to older people who had taken part in engagement initiatives in the case study area. The case studies documented processes and probed the circumstances that enabled or deterred older citizen engagement, comparing the differing perspectives of older participants and council officers and their partners. In-depth face-to-face interviews with older citizen informants (four per local authority, 12 overall) collected valuable detail on participants' characteristics, their roles in citizenship in the community, their perceptions on the strengths and weaknesses of the tasks they contributed to and what supports are needed (see Appendix B for the interview topic guides).

Fieldwork with older people 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 assigned to one of the study locations.³ Face-to-face interviews were conducted in pairs with a peer interviewer accompanied by a PSI interviewer. In order to aid the flow of the interview, it was agreed in advance which questions on the topic guide would be addressed by each of the interviewers. Peer interviewers attended briefing and debriefing sessions with PSI and contributed to the interpretation of results.

Interviews were recorded (with informant consent), transcribed and imported into the Nvivo7 qualitative analysis software. Interview respondents were kept anonymous through a unique identification code.

³ To reduce the chance of bias, none of the peer interviewers resided in the case study areas.

Findings workshops

Early findings workshops were conducted with local authority, partner and older citizen informants. These served to disseminate the research findings and to help validate the results. Workshops with older citizen participants were conducted in two of the case study areas⁴ and were attended by study interviewees as well as other older citizens who had experience of engagement with local government. Representatives from the three London Councils that participated in the case studies and their partner organisations joined a feedback session hosted for the national study that was held in London in January 2007. Discussions and issues raised at these workshops are incorporated into the findings of this report and were useful for interpreting the survey and interview results.

Report outline

Chapter 2 presents findings from the survey of London boroughs. It scopes the range of engagement approaches that are used and includes survey respondents' views on what helps and what hinders their engagement activities with older citizens.

Chapter 3 reports findings from qualitative studies of older citizen engagement within three London boroughs. It presents models of how older citizen engagement is structured, emergent themes and issues related to engagement activities, older people's views on their engagement experiences and advice on how to improve engagement as stated by the various stakeholders. Throughout the chapter, examples of active engagement are presented in box format.

Chapter 4 presents the conclusions from the research.

⁴ In the third area feedback was on an individual basis as there was not an appropriate venue for a workshop.

2 Survey findings

Summary

- Completed questionnaires were received from 22 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
- Most councils had systems in place that supported and facilitated engagement activity. Two out of three respondents said that their council has a corporate policy or strategy for engaging with citizens, and over a third of these also had a separate policy for engaging older citizens. Three quarters of 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 provides training/support to help older citizens engage with them
- Councils are using a variety of means for involving older people in their activities. Ten of the 18 methods listed had been used by at least 75 per cent of the responding councils. Older people forums, information newsletters, user feedback surveys and voluntary and community sector representation are the most frequently used methods. Older people forums are reported to be the most effective means of engagement. 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.

Corporate support of older citizen engagement

Two out of three (67 per cent) respondents reported that their council has a corporate policy or strategy for engaging with citizens and 38 per cent of these had a separate policy or strategy that was specific to engagement with older citizens (see Table 2).

Engagement with older citizens seemed to be a widespread priority as three quarters of respondents indicated their council had plans to develop their engagement activity with older citizens, sometimes in the context of wider plans to develop citizen engagement at the corporate level. For example, one respondent reported that together with plans to develop a corporate strategy on citizen engagement, their council was developing an action plan, with the primary care trust and other partners, on older people service and user involvement:

“enabling older people and their carers to participate in consultation and service development”

Some respondents also held up their work on user and carer involvement with social services as a model for citizen involvement in other department services. Over half (57 per cent) of respondents indicated that their council provides training/support to help older citizens engage with the council. Most respondents referred to a dedicated budget to fund older people volunteers’ expenses. Some had dedicated staff. Some councils offered capacity building training, usually in partnership with organisations such as Age Concern and the primary care trust. Two respondents mentioned specific training for harder to reach people, including BAME groups.

Table 2: Corporate level engagement within councils

	Yes	No	Under development	Missing
Council has a corporate policy/strategy for engaging citizens	67%	10%	19%	4%
Has corporate policy/strategy and a separate policy for older citizens	38%	19%	29%	14%
Has plans to develop engagement with older citizens	76%	0	19%	5%
Provides training or support to enable older citizens to engage	57%	5%	33%	5%

Value of older citizen engagement

Respondents were asked what they felt were the benefits of involving older citizens in policy processes and initiatives. A variety of benefits were cited but by far the most common category of response addressed the match between council services and user needs, for example, “it makes services more relevant” and “to identify the priorities for change from a user perspective”. Citizen engagement was also viewed as benefiting the council by nurturing trust and building a partnership with constituents:

“Older people see what the local authority is up to and feel they can influence it which is beneficial to the democratic process and supports the legitimacy of local democratic institutions”

and

“By making our service more open and accountable, shaped by the public view, we can build public trust and confidence in the organisation”

Though not as frequently cited, older citizen engagement was also recognised as benefiting the people involved by empowering them to make their views known. As one respondent stated:

“Older people themselves are experts on their needs, interests and aspirations. They have a huge amount of direct experience and knowledge that we need to tap into”

Common methods of engagement

The survey asked respondents to indicate, from a list of 18 activities, what were the most frequently used methods of older citizen engagement in their council. Respondents were asked to rank the methods used according to frequency of use and effectiveness (with a rank of 1 being most used/effective and a rank of 5 being least used/effective, among the top 5). The results show that councils have tried a variety of means for involving older people in their activities (see Table 3). Ten of the methods listed had been used by at least three quarters of the responding councils. Older people forums and older people champions existed in all respondent areas. In addition, nine out of ten respondents indicated they used information newsletters, voluntary and community sector representation, open public meetings, and user feedback surveys. The least frequently used methods for engagement were timebanks – organisations through which local volunteers share their time and skills – (n=4), using older citizen to deliver services (n=6) and engaging older citizens as mentors or inspectors (n=7).

Older people forums were the most frequently used means of engagement and were judged to be the most effective means of engaging with older people. A majority (71 per cent) of respondents indicated they frequently turn to forums for engagement and the method received an average ranking of 1.3 out of 5. Forums were also assigned the top rank (averaging 1.5) in terms of engagement effectiveness.

The figures in Table 3 also suggest that the most frequently used strategies for engagement were not necessarily deemed to be the most effective, and vice versa. Information newsletters or publications and open board/general meetings were among those methods used most frequently by councils but they received lower rankings in terms of their effectiveness. Other methods of engagement such as older people’s champions, steering group representation and community events and festivals were used less frequently but were considered to be among the most effective (typically ranked 2 out of 5).

Table 3: Methods of older citizen engagement

	Councils using this method %	% Chosen in top five most used (average rank)	% Chosen in top five most effective (average rank)
Older people forums (n=21)	100	71 (1.3)	57 (1.5)
Older people's champions (21)	100	29 (2.7)	24 (2.0)
Information newsletters/publications (20)	95	50 (1.9)	24 (4.2)
Voluntary and community sector representation (20)	95	43 (2.4)	33 (3.4)
Open board/general meetings (19)	91	26 (2.2)	14 (3.0)
User feedback surveys (19)	91	48 (2.6)	33 (3.0)
Community events and festivals (18)	86	38 (2.3)	33 (2.4)
Steering group representation (17)	81	38 (2.3)	38 (2.1)
Sessions in day / recreational centres (16)	76	19 (3.0)	14 (3.0)
Consulting 'expert' older citizens (16)	76	19 (2.0)	19 (2.8)
Citizen's panels (15)	71	5 (NS)	10 (NS)
Sessions with cultural / faith groups (15)	71	5 (NS)	10 (NS)
Community planning/regeneration representation (12)	57	10 (NS)	NS
Local Strategic Partnership representation (12)	57	15 (2.0)	10 (NS)
Older citizens as participatory researchers (11)	52	14 (3.0)	14 (2.3)
Older citizens as peer mentors / inspectors (7)	33	NS	10 (NS)
Older citizens as service delivery agents (6)	29	10 (NS)	14 (2.3)
Timebanks or other forms of co-production (4)	19	NS	NS

Note: Percentages were calculated using all respondents as the base. Average ranks appear in parentheses and were calculated from among those who assigned the activity a rank of 1 to 5: 1 being the most used/effective and 5 being the least used/effective of the activities. NS means there were not sufficient numbers for a figure to be calculated.

To interpret the figures, for example, 95 per cent of respondents reported they have ever used 'information newsletters/publications'; but 50 per cent said they use this method frequently (in their top five most used engagement methods) and 24 per cent ranked this in the top five of their most effective activities. Among those 50 per cent who assigned 'information newsletters/publications' a top five ranking, they typically gave it a ranking of 1.9. But only 24 per cent of respondents ranked 'information newsletters/publications' in the top five most effective and they gave it a typical ranking of 4.2. These results suggest that, although printed materials are commonly used by half of respondent councils, they are not considered to be a very effective means of engaging with older people.

Helps and hindrances

Two questions in the survey focused on ongoing engagement activities and asked respondents their views on what would help improve engagement with older citizens and what barriers they were coming up against. Resources (such as funding, staff or time) were cited as both a help where they were available, and a hindrance where they were less forthcoming. Other factors seen to further and reinforce engagement were:

- corporate endorsement and monitoring
- increased awareness of citizen engagement activities across council departments
- more integrated activities within council departments and with outside agencies
- promotion of engagement as a shared priority, advertising this to the public
- links to existing forums and older people groups
- database of interested participants.

In addition to a general lack of dedicated resources, respondents cited a number of other issues that made older citizen engagement difficult for them:

- lack of capacity (both among staff and citizens)
- older people lacking awareness of engagement activities
- lack of clarity on the role of older people champions
- difficulties reaching older citizens, for example, social isolation, second language needs, transport needs, carer needs
- poor policy planning and tight timelines.

There was also mention of older people's 'consultation fatigue' and cynicism towards the council, perhaps deriving from bad experiences of 'tokenism' in the past:

"Older citizens need to see that where they have engaged with us, they have had an influence on outcomes – the belief that their involvement won't make any difference can be a real disincentive"

3 Engagement case studies

Summary

- The research identified three primary models that structure engagement partnerships, each with 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 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

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.

- 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.

- 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.

Engagement models

“They’ve got to find out first of all what is needed, haven’t they? That is the main thing. What do older people want? What do they really need?”

Older citizen engagement in the case study areas represented a wide spectrum of topics, timeframes, depth of involvement, and scope in terms of numbers involved. Yet common patterns were evident in the ways in which the engagement was structured. These are summarised in three basic models:

- Independent forums model
- Supported group model
- Older citizens’ panel model

The councils tended to work with a hybrid of more than one model for engagement, but it was rare that all three models were applied in one area. Although the models primarily represent access to groups of older people, it is acknowledged that engagement can and does also take place on a one-to-one basis, between council officers and individual older people.

Independent forums model

As the survey findings suggest, older people forums were reported as both a common and useful means for organising citizen engagement. There was an active forum in each of the case study areas, some of which had more than one forum to represent different local interests. The independent forums model, as depicted in Figure 1 by the two intersecting circles, represents council-citizen engagement that is channelled through a group of older people who exist as a separate entity (for instance, having their own premises and meeting cycle) from the council. A generic older people’s forum usually operates a formal committee structure led by a chairperson who directs a volunteer membership (fee paying or non-fee paying).

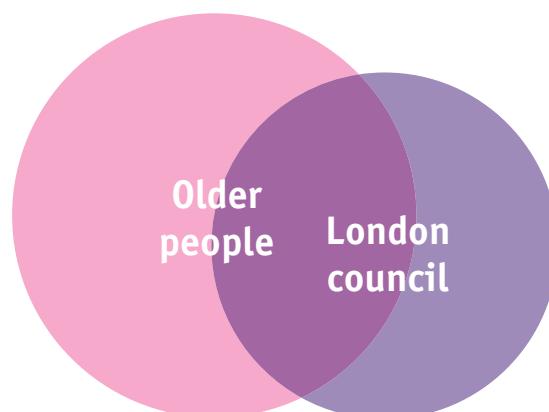
Independent forums are generally for and set up by older people and provide the opportunity for members to operate a separate agenda from the council while offering channels for exchanging information and views with council officers. Citizen engagement could be initiated by either the council or the older people but it was more often the former.

One common approach in Sutton is representation on sub-committees that are led by council staff. This involvement generally takes the form of attending formal meetings. The older person representative feeds back to the rest of the membership. As one forum member explains:

“The council gets involved because obviously they want to know the opinions of the older people. So there are all sorts of groups, from day services strategy planning, users panels, carers forum, Sutton partnerships, police. We have representatives on all of them”

Another key function, sometimes a primary function, of independent forums is that they provide an ongoing social venue for its members, offering a place to meet and join activities and excursions.

Figure 1: The independent forums model of older citizen engagement



A sub-type of the independent forums model is more closely linked to the council. For example, the Hammersmith and Fulham Better Government (BGOV) Forum is facilitated by a council officer. The Forum was established in 1998 as one of the BGOV pilots and is a partnership among older citizens, the 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 a social venue. The council has helped to organise various special interest groups (e.g., transport, regeneration, health, proof reading) for members to sign up to. Council officers can then draw on the existing structures to involve older citizens when needed. Likewise, there were instances where the older people identified issues for action and used existing communication channels to raise awareness amongst council staff. For example,

older people recognised gaps in the frequency and accessibility of public transport services. These issues were raised with the various local and London wide transport departments who subsequently adjusted routes, subcontracted services and added physical aids to buses.

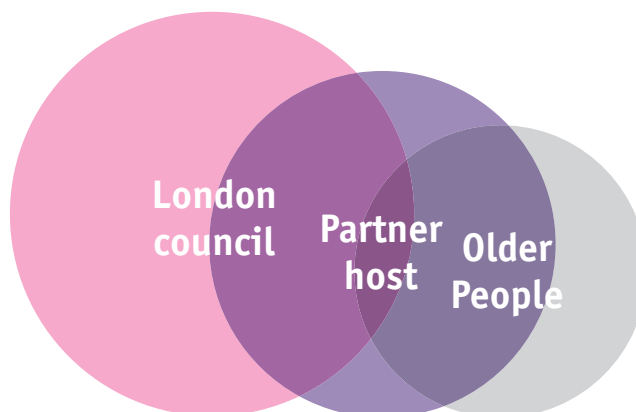
Supported group model

The supported group model, as depicted in Figure 2, is characterised by the presence of three key players: the council, older people and a third party partner who acts as both host to the group of older people and intermediary between the older people and the council. 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. This model exists in Sutton where Age Concern has been commissioned to run a User and Carer Involvement Group for older citizens. The group is comprised of 30 older people volunteers and is partly funded by the council and primary care trust but also carries out commissioned work for its numerous functions, e.g., quality monitoring evaluations (homecare, hospital nutrition and hygiene), research surveys, training (age discrimination), proof reading documents. The Group has a peer participatory focus, to enable members to engage with older people:

“So there are two levels. There are the people in the group...and then there are the people who are frailer than that, not necessarily older, just not so able, not so independent, and we’re always trying to work out how we can help them [engage]”

In Sutton, engagement activity following this model is typically initiated by the Local Implementation Group (LIG), a partnership between the council, primary care trust and health agencies. Age Concern then organises the older people who engage in the activity. In some cases, there was little direct interaction between the council and older people participants as a formal report on the outcome of an engagement activity was tabled to the LIG through the Age Concern representative.

Figure 2: The supported group model of older citizen engagement

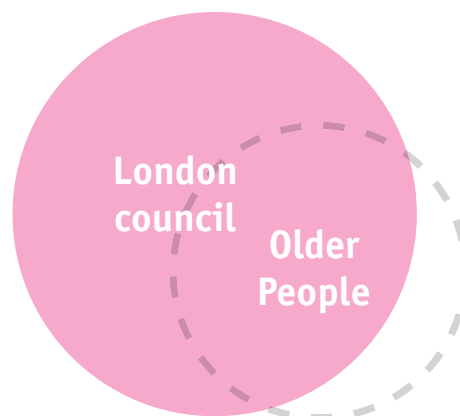


Older citizens' panel model

The older citizens' panel model for older citizen engagement is structured around an active mailing list or data base of older people contact details. These sets of named volunteers provide ready access to potential participants in various engagement initiatives. Typically, older people volunteers specify topics they would prefer to be included in, matching interests and expertise with engagement activities.

The older citizens' panel is not a physical entity and the group of volunteers do not assemble independently of a specific engagement initiative (depicted in Figure 3 by the broken circle). Rather, sub-groups of older people become active when they are called upon to participate in an engagement activity.

Figure 3: The older citizens' panel model of older citizen engagement



This model was used in all three case study areas but formed the primary engagement structure for Islington. The council supports the I-Opener database (Islington Older People Empowerment Network) which was constructed initially from a mail-out based on GP and Freedom Pass lists.

“What we sent was a signpost leaflet that we thought people would find useful. Then we sent them an ‘Islington Needs You’ poster, Kitchener style. What we said is, ‘We need your involvement to make this work’ and we gave people a list of options to tick that they may be interested in volunteering from. We sent that out and we got 600 replies, which is pretty good”

The database comprises around 3,000 older volunteers and recruitment is ongoing. It is maintained by the primary care trust and made available to council and any partners who wish to initiate engagement. Listed volunteers have identified which topics they wish to be involved in. To date, names have been pulled from the database to access volunteers for consultations on social benefits, taking part in a mystery shopper exercise to assess minibus and electric scooter transport schemes, and drafted a letter informing other older people about the flu jab.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT



Older people delivering engagement

An example of active engagement entails older people managing or facilitating engagement activities. This could be initiated by a group of older people or carried out on behalf of the council. It was common for older people forums to survey their membership on a regular basis. Results would then be fed back to the council. For example, the Sutton Seniors' Forum polls its members on an annual basis to find out what concerns they have, logging both local and national issues. A report is then distributed to Forum members, the council and other public agencies.

In Islington, older people took part in a 'mystery shopper' exercise to assess minibus and electric scooter transport schemes. Volunteers, partially sourced from the I-Opener database, had previously identified an interest in transport issues. Participants in this activity approached the services as trial users; tested the transport and the provider's customer services and reported back through structured questionnaires. Their experiences were incorporated into the service evaluation feedback. Participants were paid for their time through store vouchers.

A prime function of the Sutton User and Carer Involvement Group is to engage with older citizens in the community, often on a one-to-one basis. Volunteers have built their capacity to perform peer interviews for research and evaluation exercises. These skills have been used for monitoring services such as private home care provision and hospital health and safety and for face-to-face interviews that contributed to the local older people strategy consultation. Those who take part feel valued for the experience and empathy they can contribute. Older people mentioned how people open up to someone they can relate to, someone in their own age group, for example:

"what is often called the hand on the door knob syndrome, this is not until you're going that somebody suddenly mentions something which is very important indeed"

Comparing the models

Each of the proposed models describes a particular mechanism through which engagement activity is initiated from an ongoing, critical mass of older people. The models represent different underlying structures of engagement and, to some extent, delineate relationships between older citizens and local government. Analysis of these structures operating in the case study areas reveals both strengths and weaknesses in the engagement partnerships that can form. These are summarised in Table 4.

The independent forums model provides the greatest opportunity for older people led initiatives, provided that a group is organised and run by older people themselves. However, the evidence shows that a balance needs to be struck so that a forum's efforts at raising awareness do not evolve into a 'them' and 'us' scenario. Study informants stressed the importance of maintaining trust and respect among all parties in the engagement relationship. They acknowledged the need to maintain awareness of local government limitations in terms of what can be achieved and when, as stated by one partner respondent:

"We have to make them understand that we also have our restrictions in fulfilling their desires in a particular service delivery. I always find that the needs are never ending, but these places are always restricted"

Similarly, one older person described how her committee involvement had led to an appreciation of the limits within which councils operated:

"It's nice to have insight into how the council has to work and their restrictiveness. They haven't got magic wands and 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 or can be as we would hope"

An awareness of the limitations on councils to respond and deliver to public input was important for all engagement partnerships described in the models.

Table 4: Strengths and weaknesses of different engagement models

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Independent forums model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an independent group, usually led and administered by older people • opportunity for older people initiated topics for engagement; empowerment • direct contact between paid officials and older people representatives • a sub-type of this model entails the council as facilitator for the forum which contributes to sustainability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sustainability an issue with person turnover and lack of funding but a lesser issue when the group is facilitated by the council • engagement may be limited to a few core members; individual's agendas • forum as lobby group or 'watch dog' can strain engagement relationship • representation limited to its membership.
Supported group model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • funding and administration usually sustainable • third party can act as a facilitator for engagement between older people and the local authority. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • older people engagement can be indirect if filtered through partner host • engagement activity usually initiated by council and/or funding partners; older people as reactive participants • representation limited to its membership.
Older citizens' panel model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a readily accessible group, usually large and with varied interests and expertise • a wide spectrum of people can provide variation in older people representation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • group not a physical entity; therefore lacks continuity for older people • engagement can be ad hoc and reactive • representation limited to its membership.

The older citizens' panel model probably encourages the least autonomy for older people as the group is not a physical entity (providing little opportunity for members to get to know each other) and engagement is primarily a reactive process on the part of the older citizen. In this regard, participation in specific projects could be fragmented and appear ad hoc. On the other hand, an extensive list of volunteers potentially increases the breadth of older people's voices, offering a solution to engaging with 'the same old suspects' who belong to a smaller group:

"That's why we did the database...because up till then, yes, it was the Pensioners Forum. Everyone went to them and asked them because once you'd talked to them you got the views; you've done your consultation. But that's not everyone's view... So what we've tried to do with the database is pull different people out"

Both the supported group model and a forum that is facilitated by the council, can offer the security of funding and administrative help towards sustainability. This provides continuity for older people in the group. Lack of financial resources was an issue for some of the forums where older people struggled to find core funding to cover administrative expenses. Time spent securing financial support diverted attention from other group functions, including council engagement.

To some extent, the supported group model entailed limited direct engagement between older people and paid officials within the council, particularly when communication of the older people perspective was channelled through the partner host.

All models restricted older people representation as engagement was limited to the specific membership of the group. This issue is discussed further under Emergent Issues.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT



Direct council presence

Survey and interview respondents all reported on the importance of whole council buy-in to the engagement process. In particular, it was considered vital that high-ranking officials and especially the chief executive play an active role in engagement. Some case study areas had the advantage of a regular, ongoing council presence within the context of older people meetings. In some instances, paid officials gave topical presentations to a group. These would occur at regularly scheduled forum meetings. In other cases, paid officials attended older people lead meetings as an observer. Council presence was seen to enable direct communication between older people and local government:

"[The] council are listening to us and we can approach them and we can talk to them and they'll talk back to us"

The relationship between the council and older people groups was shown to vary and mature over time. For example the BGOV forum in Hammersmith and Fulham has forged a partnership with the council over 12 years. The forum is included in local decision making which, in the past, has extended to scrutinising council budgets.

Emergent themes

Partnerships

As in the survey of London boroughs, much of the older people engagement in the case studies centred on health and social services. Leadership for engagement within the council was housed in social services with key partners typically the primary care trust, other health agencies and voluntary organisations serving older people. This partnership reflects traditional approaches to older people services which are reinforced by recent initiatives like the National Service Frameworks, Local Public Service Agreement targets and Local Strategic Partnerships. Though social services tended to be the hub for older people engagement activity on behalf of the council, other departments were becoming increasingly aware of their own role in engagement, with encouragement from the more experienced staff. For example, social services staff in one of the councils felt it was their responsibility to mobilise other departments who were gradually taking on the engagement agenda:

“It is starting to filter through the organisation for them to say we’ll identify a particular target group and then engage: ‘Okay, what are your issues in that particular strategy?’ And we’ll try to work together across different departments and share that information”

The development of an older people’s strategy also provided a focus for partnership working across the council, primary care trust and other agencies. It was stressed that while these partnerships were not well resourced they did not need to be since their aim was to ‘shift the mainstream’, to change working practices and ‘the culture of how people work’ so that engagement was part of peoples daily working practice.

The older people forums and, to a lesser extent, the supported group of older people, were also viewed as partners in the engagement process and it was evident that this relationship matured with time:

“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, you know, to give up their free time”

Means of engagement

The research supports the view that the means of engagement can dictate who gets involved. Council staff and partners were aware that some of the more frequently used methods, such as forums, open board meetings, steering group and committee representation excluded certain people who are not comfortable or not interested in formal group settings. Respondents from all quarters noted the monotony of the format. But there was also concern that the meetings present an unfamiliar environment to some older people and one that places them at a disadvantage. This had led to one borough abandoning attempts to get older people to come to steering group meetings and to look for more innovative methods to engage:

“We tried to get older people in on all those theme groups but they just didn’t want to come, it’s too meeting orientated. It’s not relevant to them”

As, one partner noted:

“Some people find it quite difficult to be in big meetings of what they see as really important people talking about really complicated things”

They went on to describe a more informal exchange where older people prefer to relay a personal story to illustrate their point. It was felt that this form of discourse was not always compatible with the committee structure:

“The way they engage with us is to say, ‘Well, this is what it means for me, and this is my experience’, and I think sometimes we can dismiss that and it’s a bit like, ‘Well, actually we’re not talking about that today, this is the project group and we’re commissioning this and we want to talk about that, and we don’t really want to be bothered too much with hearing about your husband for half an hour today’. We’ve got to think about how we structure our meetings and about whether the formal way that we do it, is the best way to allow people to engage with us; the sort of committee set up type of thing, does that allow people to participate and engage, or is there a different way of doing it?”

One solution to this ‘clash of cultures’ was skills training for both staff and older people. This tended to be more a case of building up the capacity of older people to become aware of and able to perform in a formal committee structure. In one council, the Chair of a committee made it a practice to brief older people representatives on the content and order of the meeting prior to meeting start-up. Time was always set aside for older people to voice their concerns. Council staff also attended awareness training on ageism, for example.

An alternative strategy was to acknowledge the restrictions of the meetings format and to ‘de-formalise’ engagement by going out to people in community settings. In Sutton, the User and Carer Involvement Group was viewed as a vehicle for reaching out into the community and deploying older people to engage on behalf of council:

“We actually have a community development worker for users and carers that actually goes out and works in the community and tries to look at different ways he can engage across different groups ... because we can get people to come and sit on groups and be in meetings but they don’t necessarily represent. I think the important thing for me around the user and carer group is the fact that they go out and gain views outside”

Representation

An issue relating to the inclusiveness of different engagement methods was older people representation. Most respondents felt that a mix of older people was represented in their engagement mechanisms. But, when pressed, some identified sectors of the older people population that were underrepresented – noting gender, age and class biases, BAME groups – although this was not uniform across the areas. There was, however, a general concern about accessing the ‘hard to reach’, often those who were housebound and living alone.

Representation was also limited to those older people who volunteer to join in, as some people are drawn to the separate social function of a group and were not interested in getting involved with the local council. It was acknowledged that within one older people forum, only a small number wished to be involved with the local council:

“The majority join because they want companionship but a few join because they want to make an influence, but a very few”

There was a view amongst respondents that people could not be ‘forced’ to be involved in local government and some people opt out by choice. For example, one older person noted:

“I think the answer is that there are some people who are interested in being part of a consultative process and there are some who, for whatever reason and quite properly, don’t see it as something they are very good at or want to be involved in, and that’s not true just of older people that’s true of people generally. Encouragement isn’t going to do it, you know, they’re just not going to turn up. We are self-selecting, I think the important thing for us here is to remember that and never to behave as if we were elected councillors or had any divine right to be there”

Therefore, in some instances, the same individuals repeatedly served on council led committees as ‘the voice’ for older people in the area, as explained by one older person referring to forum members:

“The biggest problem I have got is getting people to sit on these committees. The original gang of eight that we had, two were very good but they have died ... its very difficult because they [meetings] are very boring”

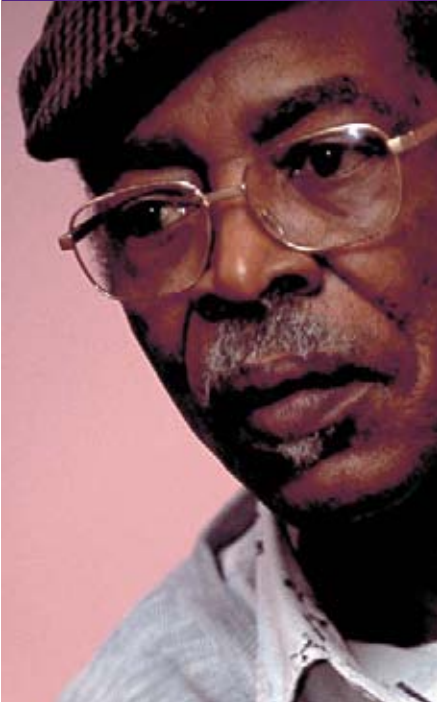
In light of this, and to enhance representation of the wider older community, one respondent recommended that councils ensure they build up a group of ‘open minded’ participants:

“Make sure you develop a diverse and open minded group, rather than a group of people with personal issues. [People] very, very often come into the arena with an issue of their own and they will repeat it until it becomes historic, and it gets other older people nowhere. You want genuinely open minded people”

BAME representation

Some respondents felt that older people engagement included a good representation of different black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups, whilst others felt that some groups were involved more than others. In some cases, the ‘newer’ cultural communities, such as Somalis and some eastern European countries, were reported as underrepresented. Alternatively, those ethnic groups who had a longer history in London and who had established community groups, such as the Asian and Black Caribbean communities, were considered to be more engaged. Tapping into these existing networks was considered to be one successful strategy for expanding engagement.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT



Engaging older BAME citizens

The BeMe initiative in Hammersmith and Fulham was a direct response to low BAME representation in older citizen engagement activity. It was set up to encourage and support older people from African Caribbean and Asian communities to participate in local planning and decision making and ensure their voices are heard. The aim was to build capacity through training on skills that would facilitate engagement, including: public speaking, confidence building, instruction on the conduct of meetings and on government processes. Training took place in local community centres and was facilitated by centre staff. BeMe has contributed to the numbers from these communities who now engage directly with the council and to the mainstreaming of participation of older BAME citizens within public service decision making.

BeMe has been incorporated as a subgroup of the council facilitated older people's forum. The initiative has stimulated continued consultation and discussion of issues amongst older community members:

"The elders that were involved in that piece of work...still do continue to meet as a group where they look at specific issues that might be affecting elders from their community"

For others, the ethnic biases of the engagement process were identified as an area where more efforts were needed to engage with underrepresented groups. Language issues were often discussed in relation to BAME representation. One partner respondent referred to the 80 spoken languages within the borough and asserted that the possibility of engaging with all minority groups, all of the time, was remote. Rather, as a practical solution, they proposed targeting engagement to a different ethnic community each year. Language issues were also resolved through an interpreter or by engaging through a bilingual member in the community, often a younger relative. Advocacy or 'engagement by proxy' was also promoted by some older people. For example, one older person from the Black Caribbean community offered a two-pronged approach to engaging with older BAME citizens. He was happy to hold informal discussions within his community centre and then report back to the council committee he attended.

Older people champions

All three boroughs have an elected member who serves as an older people champion plus staff may serve as champions under the National Service Frameworks. The role was commented on by a limited number of respondents. In one area, the champion was considered to be a qualified success but in all boroughs there was concern expressed about a low profile and general lack of awareness both within the council and across the older people community, for example:

“Those who have been engaged in the [older people] strategy will probably know that we have a champion but whether everybody does, I don’t know. I don’t think it’s been promoted properly”

The champion role seemed to be more effective when it was carried out by council or primary care trust staff with specific responsibility for the wellbeing of older people. These individuals seemed to be better placed as ambassadors for older people.

Individual personalities

Without exception, all respondents were genuine and passionate about the engagement work they did. Older people and individuals from the council and partner agencies relied on their own skills, personal networks, drive and volunteered time to help make engagement happen in their community. In all case study boroughs, single individuals were named as crucial to older people engagement. Sometimes one council officer served as the key personality within the borough. Similarly, as noted above, older people representation can be curtailed when active older members are no longer able to participate.

Engagement is person-centred and as such it may not be possible to avoid the key role played by individuals. However, this raises issues about sustainability and highlights the need to establish an approach that is embedded within the system, ensuring responsibility for public engagement is more widely shared.

Older people’s perspectives

The previous sections describe the structures and forms which engagement can take. This section focuses on older person perspectives on engagement, gleaned from interviews with 12 men and women who have been involved with their local council. Their participation varied, ranging from those who held several positions in different groups and organisations to those who had attended a single engagement event, raising questions about the different drivers and obstacles to older people’s engagement.

Drivers for involvement

A number of themes emerged from the older people’s accounts in relation to why they became involved in voluntary work generally and engagement activities in particular. These themes could be categorised as: work, bereavement, service use, and service to the community. Individuals often cited two or three of these factors when they talked about their motivations and their reasons for continuing their involvement in various activities.

i) Work

This was an important driver for older people particularly those who had held professional, administrative or managerial positions over their working life. For many of the older people interviewed, representation on forums and user groups provided a form of work replacement or simply constituted a new occupational stage in their working life. The activities connected with engagement such as attending meetings, undertaking research and lobbying, gave them a chance to

recreate formal work relations and status positions, and make use of skills they had spent years honing in earlier periods of their career. For some, the move into unpaid work coincided closely with retirement or redundancy in later life and others had different reasons for not being in employment such as caring responsibilities.

For instance, one man set up the older people's forum in his borough after retiring at the age of 70:

"A friend of mine runs the Forum and I phoned him up and I said, what can I do? There isn't one in [borough]...And yes I started it"

Another person was made redundant from his job at 57 and now sits on a plethora of forums and committees, including a tenants association and an ethics committee for a professional group:

"I couldn't get a job because of my age so I went out and started...I worked a whole year in the new day centre, voluntary you know"

ii) Bereavement

For several of the interviewees the death of a spouse, partner or parent(s), had had a dramatic impact on their lives, not only caused by the loss of a loved one but also in several cases the loss of an important role in their life as they were no longer required to care for that person. They had either felt the need to or had been advised by GPs and family to find an activity to fill the gap. Several had become involved in voluntary work and recounted how this had helped them over this difficult period, although the process itself was not always easy. One older person explained about the difficulty she had going back to the day centre she attended with her husband while she was caring for him, despite the encouragement and support from staff:

"I was a little bit depressed, you know...but they managed. They pulled me out of it, they were pretty good...And then they asked me if I'd be Treasurer, so I took that up volunteering which I still do. Nearly eight years I've been doing that"

As with many of the trajectories of the older people interviewed, this voluntary position led to another and to another and this participant quickly found herself involved in a range of activities, from reading in schools to representation on user groups.

iii) Service use

Several of the interviewees had been service users and were eager to promote a particular service where they felt they had really benefited. Often this was couched in terms of giving something back to the organisation that had helped them. This was particularly true for those who had cared for a partner or parent and who had benefited from the support of carers groups. One woman explained how she got involved in the local branch of Carers National Association whilst she was caring for her husband:

“I’m on the management now at the local branch...they said, ‘Come on we want you, you’re an expert now’”

On the other hand, there were those who had found certain services so poor they felt strongly that changes needed to be made and engagement provided a mechanism to raise these issues. One woman described how the experience of caring for her husband had been the trigger for her campaigning role and her involvement with Age Concern:

“I nursed my husband for twelve years after his stroke with dementia. Up to that point...my main interest was education. But I became involved in the battle which we haven’t yet won for decent conditions for older people with dementia in [borough]...and through that became involved with Age Concern as well”

iv) Local community and social service

A small number of older people explained their involvement in terms of service to the community. Often this was an ethos they felt had been passed on from their parents. As one man who was heavily involved in the older people forum explained:

“My own parents did social work in the east end of London in the 20s – people coming from eastern Europe. They worked with a great man who set up boys clubs to try and teach foreigners to become English men. They helped all through their lives”

Others described their involvement in terms of improving the lives of those in their community. This could manifest itself through their participation in formal representation on forums and committees.

“It felt right when I retired, sold my business and so on, that we should start helping to form the society in which we lived and making a contribution to it and having some input to it. And so I became involved. My wife became involved first of all with BGOP and then I started to go and we got more involved with it”

However, similar motivations could result in different ways of getting involved. Another older person with a desire to help her local community was more interested in activities where she could support people on a direct and personal basis. Despite being in her 80s herself, she helped several older people in her local area, visiting them and doing their shopping and other odd jobs. Although she was sometimes contacted by the council to take part in engagement activities such as focus groups, she was quite clear that the only activities that really interested her were those where she could help someone and “put a smile on their face”. These examples highlight an important issue; that the different interests and capabilities of those who take part (in one case a familiarity with committees and in another case, personal/individual help and support) lead to different mechanisms of engagement.

Value of informal engagement

Many of the older people valued the social aspect of their engagement activities, particularly the chance to develop local friendships and social networks. The social aspects may or may not have triggered their initial involvement but, more importantly, they helped to maintain people's interest and commitment to their engagement work. One older person succinctly summed up his involvement with the local council by saying, "I love it!"

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT



Community events

Some boroughs hosted large scale events for older citizens. The remit of these differed by area but essentially they were promoted as fun days out and an opportunity for older people to meet and talk to members of the local authority, primary care trust and other service providers in an informal and relaxed setting. For example, Hammersmith and Fulham holds the Time of Your Life event, a big annual celebration that is led by the Planning Committee and local authority; service partners and other organisations are invited to have stalls. The police, fire service, and the council's social services and environment departments are just some of the organisations who participate. The event also includes taster sessions, information sources, workshops and activities such as aromatherapy and massage as well as entertainment. By involving older people in the organising of the event, it aims to ensure that it is meeting the needs of older people in the area.

The event is free to attend and is advertised in local press and via posters in the main shopping area of the borough. Feedback on the event is collected through a short questionnaire. The advantage of the event has been identified as:

"We tend to find that people come along to 'The Time of Your Life' because it's fun. We see people there that we wouldn't necessarily see anywhere else and we always have, that's the way to get people involved, to make it enjoyable, to make it something they want to go to"

These informal events helped reinforce a reciprocal relationship between older people and the council. The goodwill that these events generated amongst older people was seen to provide a way forward for councils to encourage participation in engagement activities that might be less appealing

Obstacles to involvement

The research did not include the views of older people who had no involvement in local governance or voluntary work but even amongst those who were highly motivated to participate there were a number of barriers operating to limit or curtail their involvement. Most often these were health related such as where illness or a medical appointment coincided with a forum meeting, event or focus group and prevented them attending. One person explained her recent absence:

"I haven't been able to do it for a few months, because I've had all sorts of peculiar things happening to me health wise, and I had to take a back seat. But I've been very frustrated and I'm hoping this month to get back in again"

Some of the more industrious older people found they quickly became over-committed and had to drop roles, or limit themselves to particular organisations so that their weekly commitments were manageable. These issues were magnified when health problems entered the equation. One very active older person, referring to a previous role, explained how he had found it necessary to take a break for a few years:

"It involved rushing around London and my health wasn't good at the time. I used to come home literally exhausted and my wife said to me, "Look...you've got to give it up." So I did after a year"

Some had caring commitments which limited their availability or had particular physical disabilities which made some forms of engagement difficult. This older person was involved in home care monitoring in her community but did not volunteer to represent on committee meetings:

"[Meetings] aren't my thing because of being deaf. If there are too many people in a room and there are 20 people and I am trying to listen to the person at the front...well it's lost on me I'm afraid"

Language was an important barrier to engaging with the council as most channels such as forums, meetings and focus groups were conducted in English. The Chinese association in one borough was well attended by a large number of Chinese older people, a proportion of whom could not speak English. Although this group were very active with regular local walks and exercise classes provided by the centre, the opportunities for engagement and consultation within the structures offered by the council were limited.

Another issue that coloured older people's views on their involvement was a perceived lack of action on the part of the council. This sometimes contributed to cynicism and the perception that engagement was tokenistic. A major contributing factor was the lack of palpable outcomes; the time lag between engagement participation and outcomes and the absence of follow-up and debriefing on engagement outcomes. In some instances, older people felt that the biggest problem was that they were not aware of whether their engagement had made a difference. Referring to feedback from a forum initiated survey, one person observed:

"I report it back to the membership, the council and the police giving them information on what concerns older people...they listen to us but I'm not satisfied that it finishes up, its frustrating from that point of view"

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT



Other activities

There were many 'other' types of activities that did not appear to be engagement in the conventional sense of gatherings and information exchanges nor were they necessarily linked to a specific service or policy exercise. Nonetheless, these activities were valued by all participants and, it can be argued, enhanced quality of life and addressed real areas of concern. These 'other' engagement activities often contained a social element and attracted people who might not ordinarily participate in traditional forms of engagement. These ranged from health or history walks in the local area, to a pub outing and a European exchange.

Islington was particularly innovative in its informal strategies for engaging with older people in the borough. Its European exchange programme gave older people the opportunity to meet other older people and to look at public provision and services in other European counties. At the same time it was seen as a way to cement relationships between the council and older people and to stimulate commitment and buy-in from the older people which, it was acknowledged, was useful when it came to recruiting older people for other activities they may have less interest in. This was also true of the 'pub crawl' which was designed to give older people a chance to reclaim areas and spaces in the community that they felt were no longer accessible to them. These exercises were popular and helped to develop a positive relationship between the council and older people.

Formative advice

Respondents were asked what advice they would give to enhance citizen engagement in their area.

For councils

Communication and trust were seen as central themes in building engagement relationships. Respondents stressed the importance of appropriate communication (both written and spoken), including speaking slowly and clearly, avoiding jargon; listening to older people in their own words and not 'interpreting' the words. Council and partner respondents stressed the need to listen to older people with an open agenda, to respect them as a 'critical friend' and partner and to always provide something (e.g., refreshments, transportation, payment for time, respite care for carers) in exchange for the information received. Both older people and those who organise engagement on behalf of the council felt that staff (especially 'young people') would benefit from training in engagement and communication skills.

It was also felt that councils need to ensure that a range of methods are used, tapping into existing older people networks, venturing out to where older people already assemble in the community (e.g., clubs and day centres, shopping malls, doctor surgeries) and engaging through less formal means. One person suggested that council access older people at the doctor's surgery when they turn up for their annual flu jabs.

Leadership was identified as crucial to the process. Credibility for engagement could be won through senior official buy-in and through designated staff who served at the interface of the council and the community.

Continuity of engagement was also important. Council and partner respondents acknowledged the need to brief older people on the outcomes of engagement and to ensure there are 'quick wins' to reinforce their continued involvement. Likewise, older people expressed frustration with the speed of change, wishing for more immediate action. For example:

"They are planning for the future but its 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"

For older people

Older people who were already participating in council engagement activities generally saw plenty of opportunities for older people to get involved with their local council. It was common for these people to recommend that someone simply 'get involved' or 'join a group'. As one older person stated, some people need to be encouraged to get involved:

"So if I meet new volunteers, and I go out looking for them everywhere you see, then I'll say to them, 'Come along you'll enjoy it. You're going to be needed...they will welcome you. You will get enormous satisfaction out of it, come and try"

But it was also acknowledged that some people do not feel comfortable becoming a group member or lacked the confidence to speak up in a group setting. Some advocated the need for a buddy system, whereby veteran members accompany or befriend new members to help them settle in.

For central government

As in the survey, the provision of resources for carrying out engagement, especially financial support, was a key issue identified for central government. Funding was viewed as necessary not only for 'kick starting' initiatives but to support continuity of engagement, ongoing financial support was also viewed as important. As one respondent from a partner organisation noted:

"We are encouraged by the Government to engage but we have been given no additional funding to do this"

Additionally, some respondents asserted that national campaigns that promote citizen engagement need to be matched with practical guidance and know-how in order to take shape. It was advocated that central government ought to have a role in facilitating the sharing of good practice and the networking of local councils to achieve this.

4 Conclusions

The completion of this study coincides with an increased UK national momentum to encourage community involvement in decision making about services and policy.

Completed in 2005, the London survey occurred at the forefront of several Government initiatives promoting citizen involvement more generally and prior to the launch of the Mayor of London's Older People Strategy. It therefore provides a baseline for engagement activity between borough councils and older Londoners. More in depth research into specific local engagement practices provides insights into some of the structures that circumscribe engagement activity in London.

The research presents the following key messages regarding council engagement with older citizens:

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.

Glossary of terms

Active citizenship *	Citizens taking opportunities to become actively involved in defining and tackling the problems of their communities and improving their quality of life. One of the three key elements of civil renewal.
BAME	Black, Asian and minority ethnic
BGOP	Better Government for Older People
Civil renewal *	The renewal of civil society through the development of strong, active and empowered communities, in which people are able to do things for themselves, define the problems they face, and tackle them in partnership with public bodies. Civil renewal involves three essential elements: active citizenship, strengthened communities and partnership in meeting public needs. Its practical process is community engagement.
Community organisation or group *	A community organisation or group differs from a voluntary organisation in that the control lies in the hands of the beneficiaries as individual users, members or residents. Community groups or organisations tend to be smaller organisations with limited funding and no or very few staff however they cannot be defined in this way. There are some larger organisations that are community organisations such as some community centres, or residents' organisations by virtue of the fact they are for mutual benefit and are controlled by their members.
CPA	Comprehensive performance assessment. This is a central government assessment of local authorities' performance in delivering services for local people, as a basis for improving services. Authorities are categorised as 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', 'weak', or 'poor' and results are updated annually.
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
LSP *	Local Strategic Partnership. A single non-statutory, multi-agency body, which matches local authority boundaries, and aims to bring together at a local level the different parts of the public, private, community and voluntary sectors. LSPs are key to tackling deep seated, multi-faceted problems, requiring a range of responses from different bodies. Local partners working

through a LSP will be expected to take many of the major decisions about priorities and funding for their local area

LOPSG	London Older People's Strategies Group. An umbrella forum for older people's organisations and individuals that was established in 2000 to engage with the Mayor of London on issues affecting the lives of London's older people. LOPSG is the Mayor's principal forum for consultation with older Londoners.
National Service Framework for Older People	Launched by the Department of Health in 2001, this sets out a programme of action to improve services and service delivery covering the range of care older people might need.
Older People's Champions	Initiated through the Older People's National Service Framework, Older People's Champions are designated individuals who aim to enhance older people's services and to use their position in the community to promote older people's interests.
Older People Forums	An independent group of older citizens, typically attached to one local area, organised and run by older citizens.
Opportunity Age	This is the first cross-government strategy on issues facing Britain as people live longer healthier lives, including strategies to enable people to extend their working life, support for active ageing and more choice and independence in service use.
PSI	Policy Studies Institute
Volunteer *	A person who spends time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or people either individual or groups other than, or in addition to close relatives.

* Terms with an asterisk are sourced from the Together We Can website: www.togetherwecan.info/glossary.html

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Appendix A: Older citizen participation: Survey of UK local authorities

This research study seeks to ascertain the extent to which older people are involved in local policy initiatives across the UK. Specifically, we are interested in describing the variety of older citizen engagement that exists. By **engagement** we mean where the local public sector – ideally the local authority working with partners in a ‘joined up’ approach – has sought to involve local older citizens to actively establish local priorities, devise plans, develop and design services, deliver services, monitor and evaluate processes and outcomes. In this study we are not focusing upon local community involvement nor general volunteering. Rather, the focus is on local strategic approaches to older citizen engagement.

We are particularly interested in hearing about instances whereby a specific group of older citizens are or have been involved throughout all stages of a policy process or local initiative, as outlined above, and to find out how their input made a difference.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETION

- Please answer the questions to the best of your knowledge. Your responses will be treated in strictest confidence.
- Please complete this questionnaire in **BLACK** or **DARK BLUE** ink.
- If a selection is required from a number of alternatives, please consider your answer carefully, then mark the **CENTRE** of the appropriate box with a **NEAT CROSS**, like this ☒.
- If you mark the wrong box, please fill in that box completely like this ■ and make your correct selection with a cross.
- Please return your questionnaire in the self-addressed envelope provided by **17 June 2005**.

QUESTION 1

Does your local authority have a corporate policy or strategy for engaging with local citizens in the policy process? (Please mark ☒ ONE box only.)

Yes No Under development

If yes, does your local authority have a separate policy or strategy for engaging older citizens (both service users and non-users) in the policy process? (Please mark ☒ ONE box only.)

Yes No Under development

Please expand:

QUESTION 2

Does your local authority have plans to develop their engagement with older citizens? (Please mark ☒ ONE box only.)

Yes No Under development

If yes, how?

QUESTION 3

Does your local authority provide training or support to enable older citizens to effectively engage with their community? (Please mark ONE box only.)

Yes

No

Under development

If yes, please briefly describe (e.g., dedicated staff, designated budget, etc.):

QUESTION 4

In your view, what are the benefits of involving older citizens in policy processes and initiatives?

QUESTION 5

As highlighted in the introduction to this research, we are particularly interested in learning more about policy development and initiatives in which older citizens are or have been involved on an ongoing basis.

In your opinion, what would further the engagement of older citizens in the policy process in your organisation?

QUESTION 6

In your opinion, what are the barriers to enabling ongoing older citizen engagement in your organisation?

QUESTION 7

The following table lists common methods for engaging with older citizens. Please:

- i) Indicate those methods your local authority uses. (Please mark EACH applicable box.)
- ii) Rank the top 5 most frequently used methods (where 1 = most and 5 = least).
- iii) Rank the top 5 methods that have been most effective (where 1 = most and 5 = least).

	WE USE THIS	TOP 5 MOST USED	TOP 5 MOST EFFECTIVE
Information newsletters/publications	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Community events and festivals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Open board/general meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
User feedback surveys	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older People's Champions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older People Forums	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Citizen's Panels	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Steering Group representation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Community planning/regeneration representation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Voluntary & Community sector representation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local Strategic Partnership representation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sessions in day / recreational centres	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sessions with cultural / faith groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consulting 'expert' older citizens	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older citizens as service delivery agents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older citizens as peer mentors / inspectors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older citizens as participatory researchers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Timebanks or other forms of co-production	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other 1 (please specify below:)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other 2 (please specify below:)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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+

+

QUESTION 8

While older citizens are sometimes consulted prior to the design or implementation of an initiative, and are often involved in evaluations as service users, it is far less common that they have active and ongoing involvement at more than one stage in the process. We are particularly interested in hearing of examples where older citizens have been involved in this way. Please provide up to 3 examples where a cohort of older people are or have been engaged in initiatives on an ongoing basis over time. (Provide type of initiative, nature of ongoing involvement, outcomes, etc.)

Initiatives	Type(s) of involvement	Outcomes	Comments

+

+

QUESTION 9

Please supply some information about yourself:

What is your job title?

What is your department?

What is your local authority?

QUESTION 10

We are interested in following up a selection of respondents to find out more about their engagement activities with older citizens. Would you be willing to be contacted for an interview? (Please mark ONE box only.)

Yes

No

QUESTION 11

Please write any additional comments about your work to involve older citizens or about this survey.

Thank you very much for your time.

By **Friday 17 June**, please return your questionnaire in the self-addressed envelope to:

Hilary Salter, Policy Studies Institute, 100 Park Village East, London NW1 3SR.

Alternatively, you may FAX your return to Hilary Salter on 020 7388 0914.

For further background information about the study and its association with current policy issues see the PSI www.psi.org.uk and BGOP www.bgop.org.uk websites.

If you have any queries about the study or this questionnaire, please contact Sandra Vegeris at PSI (020 7248 0468; vegeriss@psi.org.uk) or Dave Martin at BGOP (020 7843 1552; David.Martin@bgop.org.uk).

Appendix B: Interview topic guides

Council representative topic guide

I. Background [stay brief]

1. **What is your role with respect to citizen engagement?**
 - past and present
2. **What is your role with respect to older citizen engagement?**
 - scope of your remit, i.e., cross departments, outside gov't
 - what other council staff are important to this process?

II. Corporate input [refer to survey responses]

3. **Would you please briefly describe the history (if aware) of involving older citizens in council initiatives?**
 - when did engagement with older citizens become important?
 - were there any drivers from local or national policies in relation to older people?
4. **If have a formal strategy on citizen engagement, may we have a copy?**
5. **If have a formal strategy on engagement specific to older citizens, may we have a copy?**
6. **What resources committed to older citizen engagement [budget, dedicated staff, staff training, older people training, etc.] are available?**

III. Partnerships

7. **How is older citizen engagement organised within and across council departments?**
8. **Who are your key partners for promoting active involvement of older citizens?**
 - within council/authority
 - other government
 - people/organisations
 - what are the prevalent ethnic/faith communities and what is their age profile
9. **How are initiatives originated?**
(i.e. council/partner/community/combinations)

10. How are the partnerships working?

- What are your views on linkages among departments and partner agencies?
- how are they working with various sectors? (e.g., voluntary sector, OP groups/forums, BME groups, community elders, sheltered housing, etc.)

11. Are there any stakeholders you are aware of that you are not engaging with?

- If so, who are they?

IV. General engagement**12. In your view, what is helping the council to engage with older people in the community?** [refer to survey response]**13. In your view, what is making it difficult** [refer to survey response]

- in the past, how was this overcome? [ask for examples]
- currently, what is being done about it? [ask for examples]

14. What forms of engagement work best?

- Are some forms better suited to types of activity or target groups?

15. What kinds of people typically participate in engagement initiatives?

- Do they differ by type of engagement? (e.g., written vs face-to-face contact (language issues))

16. What more would they like to do? (specific issues that need tackling)

- Why is that?

17. Does the authority have an Older People Champion(s)?

- Who are they, from what sector? (e.g., elected member, council services)
- For how long?
- How does it work?

18. Generally, what have been the impacts of including older citizen engagement in processes like policy planning, implementation, evaluation, etc. ?**V. Specific engagement**

[Go over responses to the survey (Q. 8) that provide specific examples of initiatives that actively involved older citizens. Update on progress.]

ASK FOR REPORTS, LITERATURE

Take each initiative in turn.

- What kinds of partnerships were there?
- What helped make it work?
- Were there any difficulties? If so, how were they overcome?
- Update

19. Are there plans to build on any of these projects?

- any continuity of involvement? i.e., same people, same organisations, maybe in a different initiative?

20. Any new projects not reported in the survey? [ask for details]**VII. Developing active engagement of older citizens****21. What advice would you give to other local authorities who are working to develop active engagement of older citizens?****22. Any advice that would assist central Government?**

Is there anything else you would like to add before I explain the next steps in this research?

Thank you very much for your time.

Partner topic guide**I. Background [stay brief]****23. What is your role in [organisation]?**

- how long in post

24. How does your role relate to the council's work in engaging with older people?**25. How important to your organisation is engagement with older citizens?****II. Partnerships****26. Why do you think your organisation has been named by the council as a key partner in the engagement of local older citizens?****27. How are the partnerships around older citizen engagement working?**

- What are your views on links among council departments and partner agencies for this purpose?

III. Specific engagement

[Connect this section to background information on specific council engagement project(s) the partner has contributed to. E.g., Go over responses to the LA survey (Q. 8) that provide specific examples of initiatives that actively involved older citizens. Update on progress.]

ASK FOR REPORTS, LITERATURE

28. Is there anything in particular that stands out about the engagement activity(ies) you've been performing along with the council?

- What helped make it work?
- Were there any difficulties? If so, how were they overcome?
- What were the outcomes? [for council, older people, own organisation]
- Update on work [future plans]

IV. General engagement

29. From your experience, what kinds of older people typically participate in engagement initiatives?

- Do they differ by type of engagement? (e.g., written vs face-to-face contact (language issues))

30. How is the council engaging with various sectors of the older people population (groups identified by their ethnicity/faith/sexuality; vulnerable groups)?

- Any barriers to engaging with specific groups?
- If yes, any suggested solutions?

31. What forms of engagement work best?

- Are some forms better suited to:
- types of services/activity
- target groups?

V. Developing active engagement of older citizens

32. What advice would you give to other local authorities (and their partner organisations) who are working to develop active engagement of older citizens?

33. Any advice that would assist central Government?

Is there anything else you would like to add ?

Thank you very much for your time.

Older people topic guide

I. Opening [stay brief]

- 34. What is your current involvement with [.....]?**
- When/why became involved [refer to above responses]
- 35. Before we go into details on the [above project] can you tell me, are you currently involved in any other community committees or groups?**

II. Specific engagement

- 3. You said you have been involved with [————] that is connected to the local government: [repeat for other projects]**
- What kinds of things do you do? Is this ongoing?
 - How did you get involved in this particular role? [establish how much choice they had]
 - Anything that makes it hard for you to do this?
 - What do you enjoy the most about it? What do you like the least?
 - What difference do you think you have made? [for yourself, other people like themselves, the council]
 - Were there any difficulties? If so, how were they overcome?
- 4. Is there anything in particular that stands out about the activity(ies) you've been performing?**
- Why is this?

III. General engagement

- 5. Do you have any ideas why the local government (with partners) might be engaging with older people?**
- Have you noticed any changes in engagement activities over recent years?
 - In your view, what impact has engagement with older people had in your community?
- 6. From your experience, what are the typical ways the local government tries to get older people involved in what they do? (e.g., written vs face-to-face contact, one-off meetings vs regular, ongoing meetings)**
- What do you prefer for yourself? Why is this?
 - Can you think of particular groups of older people who might need different ways of engaging? [ask for examples?]
- 7. From your experience, what are the main agencies in your area that promote the involvement of older people?**
- How well are they working together / how effective are they?

- 8. What kinds of people become involved?** [is there a typical ‘involved person’ or a typical ‘non-involved person’?]

IV. Formative advice

- 9. What advice would you give to older people who would like to become more involved in what their local council is doing?**
- 10. How do you think the local council can improve their engagement with older people?** [involving people more effectively, reaching out to those who tend not to get involved at present]
- Ask for examples of what has worked best

V. Background [stay brief]

- 11. Can you tell me a little about yourself?**
- retired/paid work? marital status, family, household composition, caring responsibilities, other interests, etc.
- 12. In the past, were you involved in any community projects/ committees/ groups?**

Is there anything else you would like to add ?

Thank you very much for your time.

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