

Older Citizen Engagement in UK Local Government

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NOT FOR QUOTATION

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Introduction

This paper is based on a study of UK local authority engagement with older citizens that was carried out by the Policy Studies Institute and Better Government for Older People between 2005 and 2006. It reports on findings from a national survey of local authority engagement activity with older citizens and eight case studies depicting different stakeholder perspectives on local engagement.¹

Background

Engaging with people in the community, acting on their concerns and using this knowledge to inform and shape policy and services is increasingly promoted as a means by which 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 governments and communities closer together through citizen engagement in delivering policies. That same year, *Transformational Government* set out the UK Government's vision for a long-term modernisation of public services using technology more effectively and ensuring that a diverse range of people are consulted, included and engaged in the design and the delivery of the services that they use. These ideas have recently been reasserted in the 2006 white paper on *Strong and Prosperous Communities* which calls for greater choices achieved through wider citizen consultation and involvement in developing and running services.²

What is citizen engagement?

Engaging citizens in policy making and service development has tended to be understood and achieved through consultation processes, i.e., 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 are described on 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. It is asserted that to advance more active involvement in policy and services, those in the process of engaging their citizens need to initiate multiple strategies that tap into the more interactive and participative dimensions of engagement.

¹ The authors would like to thank Better Government for Older People and London Councils for funding the research.

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

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 on	
Collaborate/act together	Direct work with the public to make decisions and carry through actions agreed on	
Empower/Support local initiatives	Supporting groups to develop and implement their own solutions	

Source: adapted from <http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/doc.asp?doc=16452&CAT=2195> and Wilcox (1995).

Why engage with older people?

Older people are differentiated as one sector of the population with similar yet unique needs; exhibiting a diversity contained within the 'younger' population yet cast within a later life context. A prime challenge for policy and a major contention for older people is how older age is delineated. No other demographic age grouping is so broadly defined in terms of years. The age criteria for *becoming* an older person varies depending on the services, concessions, state benefits, etc. in question and can easily extend to cover people separated by a 50 year age gap. The challenge for policies and services is to understand the diversity of lifestyle situations (e.g. work, study, volunteering, caring, convalescing) and circumstances (e.g. living alone or with others, health status, income group) in the later years of life and then to respond to these disparate needs. It is argued that engagement with older citizens recognise the diversity of individuals. This means it may be necessary to enlist several engagement strategies, including individual and group approaches, in order to achieve representation (see for examples: Barnes, 2005; Carter & Beresford, 2000; Older People Action Learning Set, 2007; Older People's Steering Group, 2004). 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 will not associate themselves as users or even potential users of services for older people (Darnton, 2005).

At the national level, various government sectors have advanced older citizen engagement in particular. 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 for 2005/06 required that 'excellent' local authorities have a quality of life strategy for older people and area reviews included a criterion for older citizen engagement. A recent Audit Commission / BGOP study (2004) offers a framework for developing comprehensive strategic approaches to older people. This includes an older citizen engagement component for involving people:

- 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.

Study purpose

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

ideally the local authority – working with partners in a “whole system” approach – has sought to involve local older citizens to achieve many of the following: actively establish local priorities, devise plans, develop and design services, deliver services, monitor and evaluate processes and outcomes

The aims of the current research were to:

- Scope the range of ‘whole policy’ participation in local government-older citizen partnerships;
- Identify gaps in partnership building;
- Identify older people’s and local authorities’ 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.

National survey

The survey was administered by post to all 468 local governments in the four UK nations – England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It was addressed to the Chief Executive officer who was asked in a cover letter to pass the questionnaire on to a member of staff who was best suited to respond. A follow-up letter and telephone calls were used to boost the response rate.

Respondents were asked if their local authority 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.

Case studies

Eight English local authorities were selected for case study. Selection was informed by survey responses and discussions with the study reference group. Selection criteria included the following:

- Evidence of citizen engagement mainstreamed within corporate culture not just a one off engagement project;
- Ideally reference to older citizens engaged beyond consultation and meetings;
- Consideration to local older citizen profile and diversity issues;

- Case studies to be useful in terms of insights and learning for different local authority structures (e.g., Counties and Districts - Urban and Rural);
- Evidence of struggle and overcoming issues with the engagement process.

A total of 64 interviews (eight per location) were carried out with council representatives, named partner agencies and engaged older citizens between April and September 2006. Fieldwork in London was facilitated by older people peer interviewers. The case studies documented processes and probed the circumstances that enabled or deterred older citizen engagement, comparing the differing perspectives of older participants and local authority representatives and their partners.

Survey and interview respondents were anonymised through a unique identification code which was used to link interview information with other data sources.

Findings workshops

Early findings workshops were conducted with LA, partner and older citizen informants. These served to disseminate the findings and to help validate the results. Discussions and issues raised at these workshops are incorporated into the findings of this report and were useful for interpreting survey and interview results.

Survey Findings

Completed questionnaires were received from 162 UK local authorities, representing an overall response rate of 34 per cent. Responses varied by nation, with Wales displaying the highest rate at 64 per cent (n=14), followed by England (35 per cent, n=136), Scotland (25 per cent, n=8) and Northern Ireland (15 per cent, n=4). Due to small numbers, it will not be possible to draw comparisons on the results among the four nations.

More than half (55 per cent) of the respondents were associated with social and community care and health, council departments that traditionally provide services to older people. Approximately a third (31 per cent) reported from the corporate level of the council: the office of the Chief Executive or policy divisions. Smaller numbers of respondents identified themselves from housing (9 per cent) or other departments such as communications (5 per cent).

Corporate support of older citizen engagement

Results for the closed questions relating to corporate level engagement are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Corporate level engagement

	<i>Percentages</i>			
	Yes	No	UD	Missing
<i>Local authority has a corporate policy/strategy for engaging citizens</i>	72	11	15	2
<i>Has corporate policy/strategy <u>and</u> a separate policy for older citizens</i>	33	37	28	2
<i>Has plans to develop engagement with older citizens</i>	70	7	19	4
<i>Provides training or support to enable older citizens to engage</i>	44	31	19	6

Note: UD = Under development

Close to three quarters (72 per cent) of respondents reported that their local authority has a corporate policy or strategy for engaging with citizens but only a third of these had a separate engagement policy or strategy that was specific to older people. A further 28 per cent indicated that a separate policy for older citizens was under development. In their written responses, many stated that their council's approach to engagement was a generic one, including older people with the wider community. It was also the case that most of this activity specifically targeted service users, for example:

'Our policy is all enhancing and comprehensive and includes all service users and potential service users.'

Others who indicated their council had a separate engagement policy/strategy specific to older people mentioned partnerships (PCT, BGOP/OPAG, Age Concern) and the establishment of specific groups (older people forums and councils) that served as the key mechanism for engagement activity. Specific approaches to engagement are discussed in the next section.

Furthering engagement with older citizens was a priority for most as 70 per cent of respondents reported that their council had plans to develop engagement activity with older citizens. This finding aligns with the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment which seeks evidence of active engagement towards enhancing the well-being of older citizens locally. The written responses indicated that the direction for developing older citizen engagement would vary according to whether the council wished to pursue plans specific to the older population or adopted a more generic approach to citizen engagement. In the latter approach, respondents referred to strategies aimed at the wider public such as a user participation strategies and a community cohesion agenda. The authorities who planned to target older people specifically divided between those who had already established vehicles and partnerships which they wished to further develop and those who intended to initiate forums, reference groups, councils and parliaments of older citizen representation.

Fewer than half (44 per cent) of the respondents indicated that their local government provides training or support to help older citizens engage with the community. Most respondents referred to a dedicated budget to fund older people groups and volunteers' expenses or to buy in services of outside agencies such as Age Concern's *Voices and Choices* programme and Interlink. Fewer mentioned dedicated staff within the council who were responsible for training (both staff and older people), and out reach activities. A further fifth of the respondents reported their council had plans to supply training or support towards future older citizen engagement.

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 used by their council. They were also asked to rank the methods used according to frequency of use and effectiveness of use (with a rank of 1 being most used/effective and a rank of 5 being least used/effective, among the top 5). The findings are displayed in Table 3 and suggest that although local authorities have tried a variety of means for involving older people some methods are infrequently used.

Among the 18 activities listed, six were used by at least two thirds of the councils while 11 were used by at least half. The average number of different methods used was 9.7, approximately half of the listed options. Authorities used as few as two of the methods and one reported using all 18. As would be expected, authorities with an existing corporate strategy or policy for citizen engagement used slightly more methods of engagement (9.7 types, on average) compared to those without a recognised corporate approach (7.8 types, on average). Those with a separate policy for older people reported the most variety in their engagement activities (11.7 types, on average).

'Information newsletters/publications' and 'user feedback surveys' were the most common method of engagement, used by ninety per cent of the councils. Seven of the activities

were used by fewer than half of the councils. The least frequently used methods for engagement were 'Timebanks' (8 per cent), 'older citizen delivery of services' (16 per cent) and 'older citizens as mentors/ inspectors' (19 per cent).

Older People Forums existed in three quarters of the respondent areas and along with 'information newsletters/publications', they ranked most frequently as one of the top five most used methods. Older People Forums were also chosen as one of the most effective means for engagement with an average ranking of 1.8 out of 5. Similarly, although 'consulting expert older citizens' was used by fewer local authorities, the method was judged to be relatively more effective than other means of engagement, assigned an average ranking of 1.9 out of 5 by those who used it. Interestingly, although 'information newsletters/publications' regularly ranked in the top five most used methods, it received only a moderate average rank (3 out of 5) for effectiveness.

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Table 3: Most commonly used means of citizen engagement

	We use this %	% Chosen in top 5 most used (average rank)	% Chosen in top 5 most effective (average rank)
Information newsletters/publications (n=147)	92	71 (1.6)	57% (3.0)
User feedback surveys (144)	90	58 (2.5)	55% (2.7)
Community events and festivals (132)^	83	47 (3.2)	44% (2.9)
Voluntary & Community sector representation (132)^	83	47 (2.7)	44% (3.1)
Older People Forums (120)	75	74 (2.0)	64% (1.8)
Citizen's Panels (109)	68	49 (2.5)	46% (2.5)
Older People's Champions (101)	63	38 (3.5)	39% (2.9)
Steering Group representation (99)*	62	37 (2.9)	38% (2.8)
Local Strategic Partnership representation (99)*	62	34 (3.4)	34% (3.3)
Open board/general meetings (95)	59	30 (2.9)	24% (3.2)
Sessions in day / recreational centres (87)	54	31 (3.3)	26% (3.2)
Community planning/regeneration representation (70)	44	26 (3.2)	20% (2.6)
Sessions with cultural / faith groups (68)	43	13 (4.0)	15% (3.5)
Consulting 'expert' older citizens (59)	37	27 (2.7)	27% (1.9)
Older citizens as participatory researchers (36)	23	NA	NA
Older citizens as peer mentors / inspectors (31)	19	NA	NA
Older citizens as service delivery agents (25)	16	NA	NA
Timebanks or other forms of co-production (13)	8	NA	NA

* and ^ indicate ties.

Note: Percentages were calculated using all respondents as the base. Average ranks 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.

Value of older citizen engagement

Respondents were asked what they felt were the advantages of involving older citizens in policy processes and initiatives. A variety of benefits were cited both for the council and for older people themselves.

By far the most common response addressed the match between council services and user needs. Engaging and including older citizens in local government processes brought *providers and older people around the same table*. Tapping into older people's knowledge and experience would enhance awareness of service needs, challenge the assumptions of

professionals and help build understanding on the complexities of ageing. The aim was for a more client centred approach leading to more relevant services. For examples:

'Simply any policy or initiative is more likely to succeed in its purpose if the people its meant to help are involved in the design. Older people have a huge amount of direct experience and knowledge we need to tap into.'

'Users' active involvement is an asset which increases the chances of success at each stage of service planning and the care management process. It brings a different perspective on problems and can lead to imaginative and innovative solutions.'

Other benefits to council included the promotion of inclusiveness and social cohesion and ultimately, better informed decision making within the council. Some respondents mentioned the contribution to the 'active citizenship' agenda.

Fewer respondents mentioned benefits to older citizens. These included the promotion of service ownership and empowerment in the local community; enhancing awareness among older people of council procedures and the political process; improving user satisfaction and citizen well being. Active engagement was also promoted for social and psychological reasons, contributing to older citizens' confidence and self worth as a valued part of the community. As one respondent stated:

'Involvement can be an important means of readdressing the power imbalance that service users feel when dealing with council officers. Group forms of involvement can be an important social contact for people who are more isolated. And the simple act of sharing experiences in a safe environment can in itself be an empowering as well as an uplifting experience for people who come to feel that they are not alone in their problems.'

Helps and hindrances in older citizen engagement

Questions 5 and 6 in the survey focused on ongoing engagement of older citizens and asked respondents their views on what would help further engagement and what barriers they were coming up against. The need for resources (funding, staff, time) was cited as both a help and a hindrance. Other factors anticipated to further and reinforce engagement were:

- corporate endorsement to make engagement a statutory requirement across council departments; promotion of engagement as a shared priority and advertising this to the public;
- introduce the monitoring of council engagement activity in order to ensure implementation and regulation;
- share awareness of older citizen engagement activities across council departments (and across local authorities); examples of good practice; national guidance;
- improve partnerships with existing forums and older people groups;
- improve communication and access for reaching out and '*taking engagement to where older people are*';
- a data base of interested participants;
- include mechanisms for feeding back to citizens the results of their involvement, including some 'quick wins' to demonstrate that their involvement made a difference.

In addition to a general lack of resources (funding, staff, time), respondents cited a number of issues that make older citizen engagement difficult for them:

- lack of capacity (both among staff and citizens);
- difficulties reaching older citizens, e.g., diversity in population, social isolation, second language needs, transport needs, carer needs;
- unsupportive attitudes within the council; lack of direction, lack of political will;
- older people lack awareness of engagement activities; poor communication of this;
- poor policy planning and tight timelines.

There was also mention of older people's prejudices 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.'

The lack of older citizen confidence, both with council engagement activities and within themselves as valued contributors to the process was also cited as a barrier to enabling ongoing engagement. This was expressed as older people's '*lack of confidence in their own skills*' and the need to become familiar with council activity '*so that older citizens aren't overwhelmed by the bureaucracy and jargon*'.

Engagement case studies

This chapter reports findings from eight case studies on local government engagement with older citizens. It describes common models for structuring engagement activity, innovative examples of engagement and formative advice to encourage future practices.

Engagement models

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

- Forums model
- Supported group model
- Virtual group model

Most local authorities worked with a hybrid of more than one model for engagement, although it was rare that all three models were applied in one area. It is also acknowledged that engagement can take place one-to-one between the LA and individuals and the models represent access to groups of older people.³

Forums model

The forums model, as depicted in Figure 1, represents engagement that is channelled through a group of older people who exist as a separate entity (for the most part) from the local authority. A generic older people's forum usually operates a formal committee structure led by a Chair who directs a volunteer membership (fee paying and non-fee paying). Some areas had more than one forum to represent local and other interests.

Through the forums model, citizen engagement could be initiated by either the LA or the older people but it was more often the former. The forum serves as an ongoing meeting place for older people and provides the opportunity for members to operate a separate agenda from the LA. Some forums establish separate task groups to address concerns identified by the membership. Local government officials can then draw on the existing structure to involve older citizens when needed. Likewise, there were instances where the older people's forum identified issues for action and used existing communication channels to raise awareness among LA staff.

³ Engagement can also take place one-to-one within any of the models.

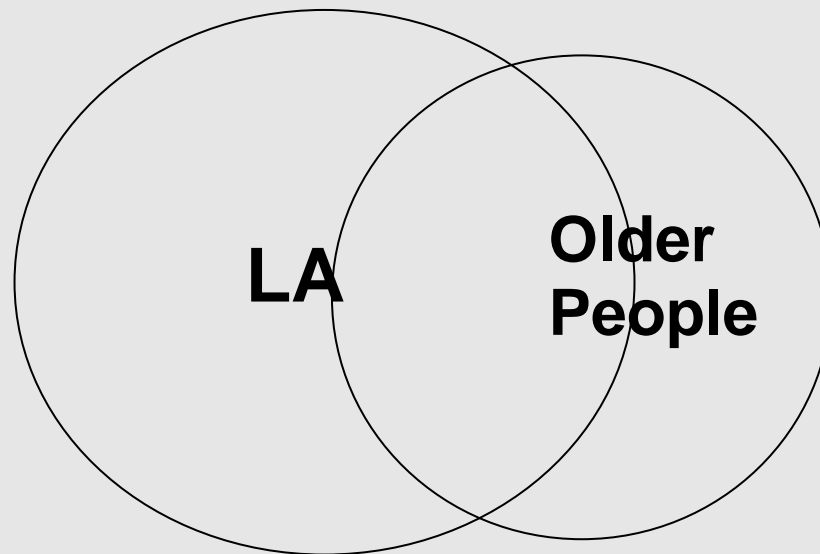
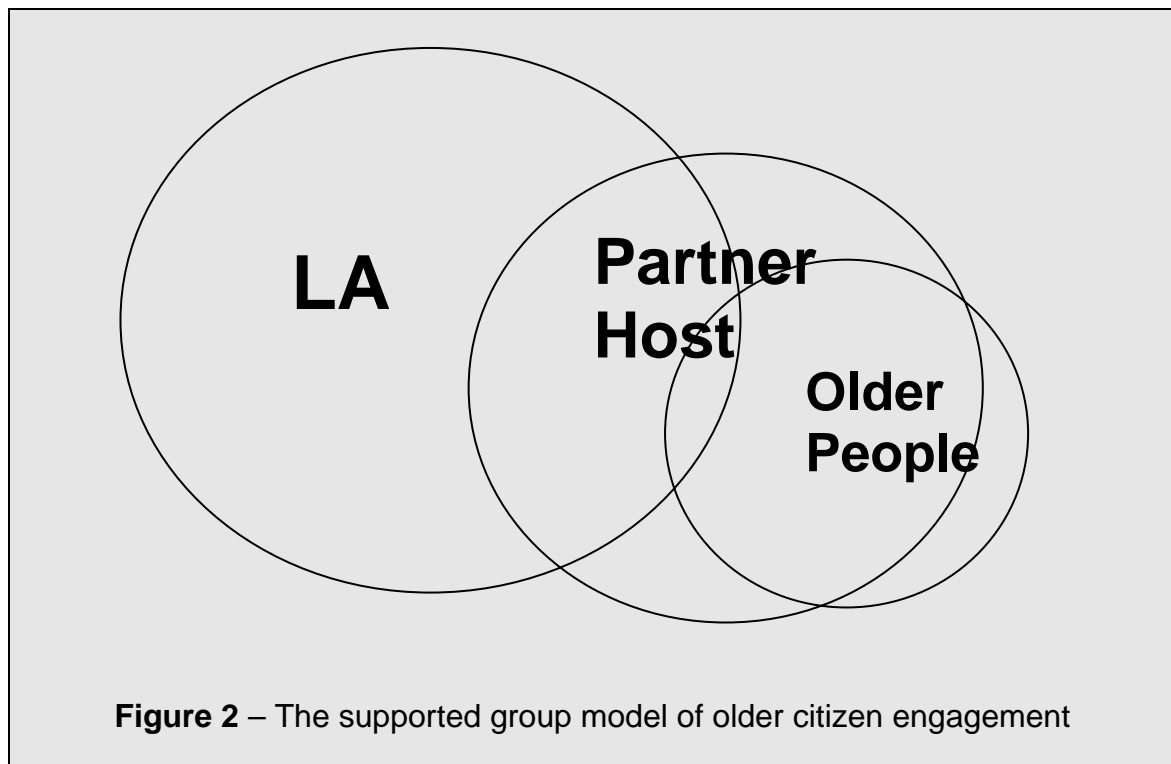


Figure 1 – The forums model of older citizen engagement

Supported group model

The supported group model is characterised with three key players including a third party partner who acts as both host to a group of older people and intermediary between the older people and the LA. 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 LA. In some areas, the older people group was established and maintained solely for the purpose of LA engagement. This model is depicted in Figure 2, showing a smaller, older people circle subsumed within the partner agency circle, with little overlap between the older people and LA circles. Engagement activity following this model was typically initiated by the LA and managed by the partner. In some cases, there was little direct interaction between the LA and older people participants.



Virtual group model

The virtual group 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 for various engagement initiatives. Typically, older people volunteers specify topics they would prefer to be included in, matching interests and expertise with engagement activities. Some of these virtual groups were extensive and numbered into the thousands.

The virtual group of older people is not a physical entity and it is likely that the volunteers do not assemble independently of a specific engagement initiative. (This is depicted in Figure 3 by the broken older people circle.) Rather, sub-groups of older people 'become live' when called upon to participate in an engagement activity.

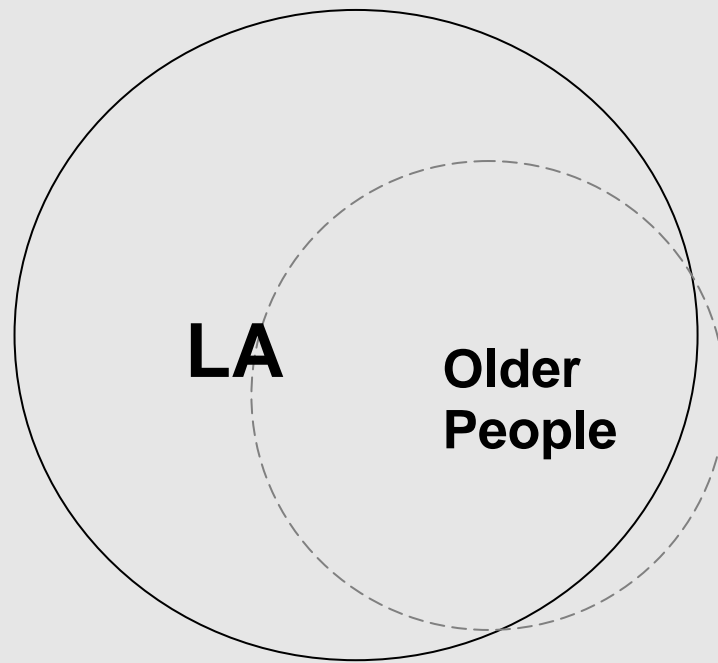


Figure 3 – The virtual group model of older citizen engagement

Comparing the models

Each of the proposed models entail drawing engagement activity 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 governments. 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 forums model provides the greatest opportunity for older people led initiatives, provided that a group is organised and run by older people themselves. However, a balance needs to be struck so that a forum's efforts at raising awareness do not evolve into a 'watchdog' or lobbying role. Study informants stressed the importance of maintaining *trust* among all parties in the engagement relationship. Older people also acknowledged the need to maintain awareness of local government limitations in terms of what can be achieved and when. The virtual group model probably encourages the least autonomy for older people as the group is not a physical entity (providing little opportunity for members to get acquainted) and engagement is primarily a reactive process on the part of the older citizen.
- The supported group model typically offers 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 LA engagement.

Table 4: Strengths and weaknesses of engagement models

	Strengths	Weaknesses
<i>Forums model</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a mostly 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sustainability an issue with person turnover and lack of funding - 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
<i>Supported group model</i>	<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 LA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - older people engagement can be indirect if filtered through partner host - engagement activity usually initiated by LA and/or funding partners; older people as reactive participants - representation limited to its membership
<i>Virtual group model</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a readily identified group, usually large and with varied interests and expertise - group composition can vary according to topic or activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - group not a physical entity; therefore lacks continuity for older people - engagement can be ad hoc with limited follow through for older people - representation limited to its membership

- The virtual group model and, to a lesser extent, the supported group model entailed limited direct engagement between older people and paid officials within the council. Participation could be fragmented and ad hoc, especially if multiple groups are drawn and not linked during an engagement exercise. Similarly, communication of the older people perspective could be entirely channelled through the partner host in the supported group model.
- All models restricted older people representation as engagement was limited to the specific membership of the group. Representation was also limited to those older people who volunteer to join-in, as older people were also drawn to the separate social function some groups offered and were not interested in getting involved with the local council. In some instances, the same individuals repeatedly served on council led committees as 'the voice' for older people in the area. This was particularly noted in the forums model where a small group of people tended to engage on behalf of the other members.

Examples of engagement

Engagement between LAs and older citizens was facilitated by a variety of tools and approaches. This section highlights some of innovative and sustained strategies that were relayed in the research.

Older people led surveys

Questionnaires are a common LA initiated method of surveying the population. But some of these questionnaires were designed and administered by older people. One local area older people's forum ran a regular survey called 'Speaking For Themselves', which was sent to thousands of homes. It consisted of a brief questionnaire with three questions:

- What things are good about your life and the way you live?
- What things cause you problems and difficulties?
- What changes would make your life better?

Questions were left open-ended which permitted respondents to answer in their own words. The results were then managed by the older people and fed back to local government. This means of engagement enabled a regular system of feedback that was driven by older people. As one older person stated:

They are more likely to give us the truth because a lot of older people feel intimidated when they are asked questions by professionals or authorities people who actually have the controlling influences.

Events

Some LAs 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 LA, PCT and other service providers in an informal and relaxed setting. For example, one area holds an annual jamboree hosted together with local services, including the police, fire service, social services and the environment department. The event includes taster sessions, information sources, workshops, activities, food and entertainment. Older people are involved in the organisation of the event to ensure that it meets their needs and interests. In turn, the event enables council officials to consult with a wide mix of older citizens, many of whom are not involved in other engagement activities:

We tend to find that people come along to [the event] 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.

Service evaluation/Capacity building

Service evaluation and capacity building involve older people in the delivery and monitoring of local services. Older people may contribute in either a voluntary or a paid capacity. One area trained older people volunteers to monitor hospital health and safety by carrying out monthly checks. These consisted of unannounced hospital visits to assess the general cleanliness of the premises, disposal of medical waste, quality of food and signs of patient neglect. A report is then submitted to the Health authority for action. Those who take part in the checks feel that they have made a difference to the quality of care:

We are finding that they do take note, we've had one or two replies to the efforts that we've made saying you know thanks for this and that and they are taking note as much as possible.

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.

Other types of engagement activity

This section raises the issue of what is engagement? There were many 'other' types of activities that at face value did not appear to be about engagement in the same way as the more widely used methods. This was because often there was no direct outcome that could be presented in a report or acted upon. However, the events were valued by all participants and, it can be argued, enhanced quality of life. Similar to the 'events' strategy, these 'other' engagement activities contained a social element, attracting people who might not ordinarily participate in more formal forms of engagement. Examples of these types of events included paid officials attending health walks that were organised by older people and informal chats during an older people initiated 'pub crawl'.

Formative advice

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

For local authorities:

Communication and trust were central themes in building an engagement relationship. Respondents stressed the importance of not using jargon but listening to older people in their own words. LA representatives 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 (refreshments, transportation) in exchange for the information received. Those who regularly engaged felt that local authorities need to ensure that a range of methods are used, tapping into existing older people networks and venturing out to where older people already assemble in the community.

For older people:

Most older people who were already participating in LA engagement activities saw plenty of opportunities for older people to get involved with their local government. It was common for these people to recommend that someone simply 'join a group'. 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 national government:

As in the survey, resources for carrying out engagement, and especially financial support, was a key issue concerning the role of the national government. Funding was viewed as necessary for 'kick starting' initiatives but ongoing funding to support continuity of engagement was also viewed as important. 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.

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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 national survey occurred at the forefront of various national policies and campaigns promoting citizen involvement more generally. It therefore provides a baseline for engagement activity between local governments and older citizens across the UK. More in depth research into specific local authority engagement practices has provided insights into the structural models that circumscribe engagement activities, innovative engagement practices and advice for facilitating future engagement initiatives.

- On the whole it appears there is minimum variety in the range and intensity of engagement activity between local governments and their older citizens. This reflects a more formative period in the implementation of an engagement agenda. Close to three quarters of responding local authorities have a corporate strategy or policy for engaging with citizens and only a third of these have a separate policy specific to older citizens. LA staff were aware that more needed to be done in order to drive the policy forward.
- The picture across the UK still tends to reflect the main organisational driver in local authorities as being from a social care perspective. The 'business' 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.
- Much of the engagement activity continues to follow traditional models of relaying and collecting information through literature, surveys, formal and informal meetings, which require more passive rather than active citizen involvement. Therefore the bias of activity is towards consultation and information exchange between service providers and "settings" of older people. Often the main purpose reported for engagement is to help develop a "strategy" or perhaps be seen to comment upon an application, for example for the Partnership for Older People Programme [POPP].
- The ambition of many authorities was to establish settings which provide "a voice" for older people and an opportunity for service providers to enter into debate about issues. Indeed Older People Forums are growing in popularity and these groups were considered to be the most effective means for engaging with older citizens.
- Research with local authorities underscores the need to diversify models of older citizen engagement and vary the tools for engagement. The evidence suggests that all models have strengths and weaknesses and that singularly, one approach cannot achieve the ideal extent of participation nor provide the framework for a modern day interface between the public sector and local older citizens.
- The case studies revealed both creative and sustainable approaches to older citizen engagement. Varying approaches can increase the chances of reaching the diversity of older citizens in the community. Yet there was continued concern

expressed about how to engage the “hard to reach groups”, typically defined as the housebound and the infirm. Some demographic groups were also excluded or were under-represented, e.g., economic status, gender, age and ethnicity. But identification of specific groups varied by area.

- Formative advice from participants in the engagement processes – representatives from LAs and partner agencies and older people themselves – provide guidance on how to engage successfully. Key themes included: maintaining communication links; nurturing trust in the relationship; varying engagement approaches and settings; and ensuring adequate resources and support for engagement.

draft

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