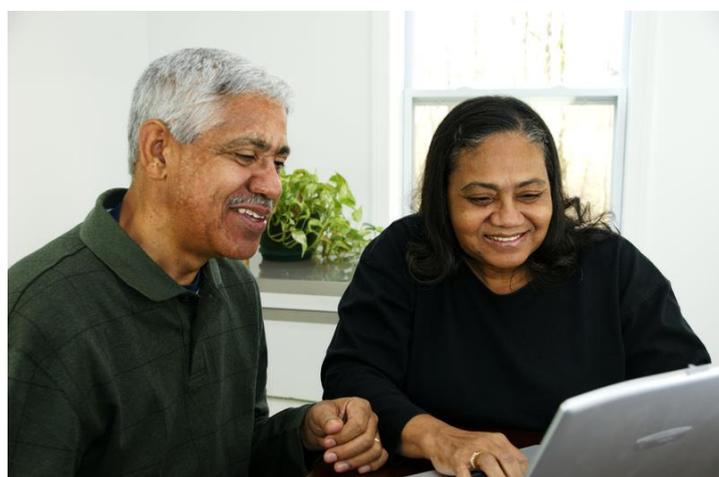# Engaging older people in decision making

(England)

November 2019

All older people should have the opportunity to influence the design, development and implementation of any goods, services, policies and practices that affect their lives or the lives of future generations. This applies across the public, private and voluntary sectors.

"I want to make sure that older people's voices are heard and listened to, especially when it comes to decisions that affect them."

Participant, aged 73
Building older peoples influence in Hackney, Age UK East London

What is engagement?

Engagement is the means by which government and community leaders can empower people to participate in and influence their work. There are different methods, including active on-going involvement; face to face discussion (citizen assemblies, focus groups, interviews); surveys (face to face interviews, telephone or written surveys (paper and online); user-testing and invitations to comment (paper and online).

Engagement should be more than just providing information and inviting comments, but can be along the following spectrum, depending on how much power those participating have in making the final decision:

Key statistics

71%

of people aged over 65 voted in the 2017 General Election[i].

85%

of all non-internet users are people aged 65+[ii].

Policy Position Paper

Engaging Older People in Decision Making (England)
November 2019

- Informing decisions by using surveys, focus groups and participative research methods to collect information on people's experiences and opinions;
- co-production where issues are identified and solutions designed in partnership;
- Leading the process and decisions: where the role of the decision makers is to provide the budget and support those concerned in designing and achieving their solution – for example a sheltered housing organisation delegating part of their budget for a particular purpose to residents to control.

The current landscape

In some areas of civic engagement, older people are more likely to be involved than the rest of the population. For example, in the 2017 general elections 71 per cent of people aged 65 and over voted, compared to only 54 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds[iii]. However, in others older people are less involved, especially where communication relies on access to internet. This is especially relevant among those aged 75 and over who comprise more than half (2.5 million) of the 4 million adults who have never used the internet[iv]. Also participating in large public meetings can be difficult when people have limited mobility and/or limited access to transport[v].

> **Age UK Policy Sounding Board**
>
> Age UK runs a Policy Sounding Board which is made up of older people from a variety of backgrounds. The sounding board gives Age UK the opportunity to ask for older people's diverse perspectives and insight on different policy issues to make sure their views are at the heart of Age UK's policy development.

Public Sector engagement

The Localism Act 2011 shifted some power from central Government to local communities and the individual, giving voluntary and community groups the right to challenge service providers and to submit interest to run services locally.[vi] In many areas of the country there are older people's forums set up to consult on local policy making and to co-ordinate local campaigns.

Many local authorities have had a long history of engaging with their communities. For example, Manchester City Council has a wide array of forums to encourage input from older people over policy developments and the City collaborated in innovative research in deprived areas where older people were trained as researchers.[vii]

In Scotland National Engagement Standards were developed in 2005, demonstrating what best practice should look like for organisations undertaking community engagement.[viii] They were developed by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Community Development Centre and were reviewed in 2015/16 in line with the Community Engagement Act 2015, giving community groups new rights and strengthening their voice in local decision making.[ix]

Engaging Older People in Decision Making (England)
November 2019

The importance of engagement has been recognised in some sectors to ensure older people's voices are heard in debates that have a significant impact on their quality of life. NHS England have set up an engagement panel to discuss the implementation of the Long-Term Plan. On an individual level, the NHS Long-Term Plan aims to make personalised care available across the health and care system. The National Institute of Clinical Excellence[x] has issued guidance covering community engagement approaches to reduce health inequalities. A recent report from Kings Fund on the NHS Healthy New Town's programme also stresses the importance of community engagement.[xi]

Citizen assemblies are a way of getting a group of people to discuss an issue and develop solutions. They are made up of members of the public who are reflective of the population to learn about an issue, deliberate it and discuss what they think should happen and arrive at workable recommendations. A recent citizens' assembly on social care set up jointly by the Parliamentary Select Committees on Health and Social Care and Housing, Communities and Local Government brought together 47 randomly selected individuals over two weekends to take evidence, and consider how adult social care should be funded long-term.[xii]

However, there are also issues hampering community engagement in the public sector. Funding cuts have seen local authorities' income fall, as a result of which many older people's forums (community groups where older people can discuss issues affecting their local community) have seen their funding cut. These ongoing cuts to community services often happen with little consideration of how valuable they may have been for older people's health and wellbeing.

Private sector engagement
In the private sector, practice is very varied. It is all too common for businesses to develop new products or implement policies without consulting their older customers, particularly those who are living with disabilities and other challenges. It would be desirable for more businesses to recognise the opportunities arising from meeting the needs of a wider range of older people, and to reflect this through more effective forms of engagement. This might include involving diverse groups of older people in user testing. For example, the National Institute for Health Research report on assistive technology[xiii] emphasised that involvement of older people in developing digital products was crucial to ensuring they would be useful and useable.

The role of industry bodies
Regulators and other industry-wide organisations can also help set parameters for engagement. For instance, the Financial Conduct Authority conducted an Ageing Populations Project which identified the specific needs and characteristics of older consumers that firms could and should address.[xiv]

Policy Position Paper

Engaging Older People in Decision Making (England)
November 2019

Industry regulators are increasingly encouraging the businesses they regulate to consider how they meet the needs of consumers who are living in 'vulnerable circumstances'. However, firms could do much more to consult directly with a wide range of older or vulnerable people about what they need and want.

Reflecting the diversity of the older population

Although 'age' is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, older people who share another protected characteristic (e.g. disabled people or ethnic minorities) are often under-represented in engagement processes. The public, private and voluntary sectors all need to improve engagement with these groups as they are more likely to have poorer experiences of using services. A wide range of engagement activities is needed to make sure they reach these groups, for example by going out visit these communities rather than expecting them to come to an engagement event. These groups have different lived experiences and hearing a diverse range of perspectives on an issue can change the direction of an organisation's work[xv]. The Equality Act 2010 also places a duty on public bodies to demonstrate how they have engaged with people with protected characteristics in service design and delivery.

Engagement through survey consultation is increasingly taking place online. While this will be welcome for many groups the design of engagement processes needs to take account of the fact that many older people, especially people aged 75 and over, either do not use, or are not comfortable with the internet. Processes should remove other barriers that lead to the exclusion of those with sensory, mobility and cognitive impairments and mental health conditions.

Engagement activities need be adequately funded. This includes reimbursing participants for expenses incurred, such as travel or a contribution towards a replacement carer. Organisations should be open about the level of engagement needed, and recognise the time devoted and insight provided by participants. This includes feeding back the impact of their involvement, e.g. via a published report.

Public Policy Proposals

- Decision makers must ensure that the voices of all older people are fully included in their engagement strategies, including carers, the older old, people living with dementia, older people from Black and Minority Ethnic Groups, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Communities and also those living in different settings, such as care homes.
- As in Scotland, Government should co-produce with the public, private and voluntary sector the development of national standards for engaging older people. This should include giving a voice to those who are harder to reach – for example, those living in poverty or with health conditions – wherever possible.

Policy Position Paper

Engaging Older People in Decision Making (England)
November 2019

- Government should ensure that organisations able to articulate and represent the voice of older people, both nationally and locally, are adequately funded.
- All policy makers in the public, private and voluntary sectors should ensure that they engage with older people when making relevant policy decisions, or when developing relevant goods and services. They should encourage the participation of older people in engagement strategies that aim to reach the whole community.
- The voluntary and community sector should also engage with older people when developing campaigning or lobbying strategies aimed at government, as well as when developing its own policies and services.
- Good quality engagement should be clear about what it is designed to achieve, identify the benefits for both organisation and participants, be fit for purpose, and be inclusive, encouraging communities to have a voice.
- Alternative methods of engagement should be available and must not rely on the internet, to ensure those who are not online are included.
- Engagement must be meaningful and lead to change, decision makers should share outcomes and feedback with participants.

Want to find out more?

Age UK has policy positions on a wide range of public policy issues. Our policies cover money matters, health and wellbeing, care and support, housing and communities. There are also some crosscutting themes, such as age equality and human rights, age-friendly government and information and advice

Further information

You can read our policy positions here;
www.ageuk.org.uk/ our-impact/policy-research/policypositions/
Individuals can contact us for information or advice here;
www.ageuk.org.uk/informationadvice/ or call us on **0800 169 8787**

Policy Position Paper

Engaging Older People in Decision Making (England)
November 2019

References:

[i] Ipsos Mori, How Britain voted in the 2017 election. Available from: https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2017-06/how-britain-voted-in-the-2017-election_2.pdf

[ii] Office for National Statistics, Internet Users, 2019.

[iii] Ipsos Mori, How Britain voted in the 2017 election. Available from: https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2017-06/how-britain-voted-in-the-2017-election_2.pdf

[iv] Office for National Statistics, Internet Users, 2019.

[v] Office for National Statistics, Internet Users, 2019.

[vi] Department of Communities and Local Government, Plain English guide to the Localism Act 2011, 2011.

[vii] Age UK, Researching Age Friendly Communities: stories from older people as co-investigators, 2015. Available from: https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Researching-Age-Friendly-Communities.pdf

[viii] National Standards for Community Engagement. Available from: http://www.voicescotland.org.uk/media/resources/NSfCE%20online_October.pdf

[ix] Community Engagement Act 2015 summary. Available from: https://www.gov.scot/publications/community-empowerment-scotland-act-summary/

[x] National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, Community engagement: improving health and wellbeing and reducing health inequalities, 2016.

[xi] Kings Fund, Putting Health into Place; Principles 1-3, 2019.

[xii] Citizens' assembly on social care, 2018. Available: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/citizens-assembly-report.pdf

[xiii] From National Institute for Health Research, December 2018, Help at Home: Use of assistive technology for older people. Themed Review https://www.dc.nihr.ac.uk/themed-reviews/research-on-assistive-technology.htm

[xiv] Financial Conduct Authority, Ageing Population and Financial Services, 2017.

[xv] Stonewall, How to engage gay people in your work, 2011.