Involving Older People: Lessons for Community Planning

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This research was commissioned by the Scottish Executive:
- to look at how older people are involved in the planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of public services throughout Scotland;
- to look for examples of good practice;
- to identify barriers to involvement;
- to draw some lessons for the future involvement of older people in the Community Planning process.

Main findings

- Within Scotland’s local authorities, there are mechanisms in place for older people to influence aspects of public services in a range of different ways.

- In practice, many of the examples of involvement specifically aimed at older people were undertaken in the context of community care. As a result, the older people who were being involved were often restricted to those using care services and aged 65 and over.

- At the same time, some professionals felt that older people were over represented in “generic” non age specific activities. However it was not always clear who is involved, on what basis and whether there were some groups of older people whose views are not being represented.

- ‘Good involvement’ was characterised as being proactive, a partnership, of relevance to older people’s lives and with clearly defined outcomes and expectations.

- There was limited evidence of a strategic approach to the involvement of older people in shaping public services within and across agencies.

- Barriers to involvement included negative attitudes towards older people, older people’s low expectations of the effectiveness of involvement and a variety of organisational barriers.

- In many areas a mixture of ‘generic’ and ‘older person specific’, ongoing and one-off mechanisms were used to involve older people.

- There did not appear to be any systematic evaluation of outcomes or the process of involvement.
Background

The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 places a duty on Local Authorities to encourage community bodies in the local area to participate in Community Planning. The key principles underlying Community Planning promote the ideals of a shared strategic vision, integrated service delivery and, crucial to the successful implementation of these principles, community participation and involvement. Older people are just one of the communities of interest with which Community Planning partners are expected to engage.

The document reports on qualitative research carried out between August and October 2003.

Effective involvement

A number of key elements of effective involvement with older people emerged including:

- There must be a proactive rather than reactive approach to involvement. This means building long term relationships with organisations in place of one-off involvement activities.

- Involvement must be timely to allow views to have an influence on outcomes. People want to be involved early rather than after decisions have been made, or at implementation stage.

- Successful involvement goes at the pace of those being involved rather than at the agencies’ pace, though this can be difficult because of tight timescales.

- There must be something in it for all the parties involved.

- Community members should be treated well and their contributions valued.

- There must be clarity about the purpose and likely outcomes of involvement as well as expectations of those being involved.

- There must be a commitment at senior management level to real involvement of communities.

- For involvement to be effective, agencies must be willing to give up power and work in partnership with older people. This could mean, for example “a strategic place at the table” or the consideration and allocation of funding applications.

- Involvement must have relevance to the lives of community members.

- Older people should be involved in broad issues; not only be confined to commenting on community care services.

The researchers noted that these key elements for effective involvement are not specific to older people but applicable across all communities of interest.

Barriers to involvement

Many professionals reported frustration that they could not involve older people more in shaping public services. There were high levels of awareness about hard to reach groups and several examples of good practice. However the majority of authorities still faced difficulties accessing some sections of the community.

Professionals and older people identified a number of barriers to involvement. These included:

- negative attitudes towards older people;

- older people's low expectations of the effectiveness of involvement;

- and a variety of organisational barriers.

While older people and professionals were able to give some examples of outcomes that had been influenced by older people’s input, there did not appear to be any systematic evaluation of outcomes or the process of involvement. Both professionals and older people said that at the very least it was essential to give people feedback on what has happened, or if it has not happened, give reasons why.

Despite high levels of awareness about hard to reach groups and several measures being taken to address the barriers faced by these groups, the majority of authorities still faced difficulties reaching certain sections of the community. That said, several examples of good practice were highlighted.
Building capacity for further involvement of older people

Much involvement work relies on a small number of committed activists. These older people are themselves keen to build further links with other older community members, particularly those from hard to reach groups. As well as developing new groups, there is also a need to sustain current groups’ activity.

Older people consider it to be important to be “in the know”. They welcome opportunities for self-development through education and information sessions and more informal approaches such as buddyng and mentoring. They feel it was essential that these opportunities took account of older people’s existing skills and life experiences. Joint development work for older people and professionals was also seen to make a positive contribution to working in partnership.

There was little evidence of any specific educational opportunities for staff in relation to the involvement of older people. Many of the examples given of education for professionals tended to be related to service provision rather than involvement. There was some recognition that more education is needed to support more effective involvement generally.

There was variation in the resources available to agencies to support involvement activities. Professionals said that there are long-term benefits to involvement activities, despite the fact that it can be costly to involve older people effectively, e.g. meeting their accessibility needs and giving enough time for effective involvement.

Research methods

The study was qualitative and used telephone interviews and focus group discussions to capture the experiences of both professionals and older people.
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“Involving Older People: Lessons for Community Planning” the research report which is summarised in this Research Findings, is available on the Scottish Executive website only www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch

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