

Community Engagement with Older People

Australia is rapidly becoming an ageing society and the characteristics now identified by demographers will be reflected in the socio-demographic characteristics of people engaging in community participation processes. The demographic statistics are a challenge to anyone working in community engagement. For example, at the beginning of the past century only 6 percent of the population were aged 60 or older. By 1994, that cohort had increased to 16 percent of the population, and by 2023, one-quarter of the population will be in that age group. Further, life expectancy, currently 74.5 years for men and 80.4 years for women, is expected to rise in the present century. The implications are that many people will spend as much as one-third of their lives in retirement. The older members of this group will be predominantly women, with a higher proportion of women in the 'old' group. There will be more of us and we will live longer.

This group of older people have wielded significant influence in Australian decision making. Unlike the situation a decade ago, these ageing Baby Boomers will expect to be listened to as they have during their younger years. They will expect to be treated with respect and are unlikely to exhibit the qualities of compliance and passivity that have characterised some older people from previous generations. Therefore, the challenge for public engagement is to acknowledge the generic and indisputable factors associated with ageing, while at the same time respecting the needs of this group to engage to their full potential.

This subject is demanding increasingly greater attention in the design of participatory processes. It is critical that factors that could lead to the shrinking of the older person's social world are not replicated with respect to governance and participation. The wisdom and energy that older people can bring to participatory activities need to be acknowledged and worked with. Further, ageing Baby Boomers (such as one of the authors of this book) will expect to be listened to.

Older people are a heterogeneous group whose views vary enormously depending on their life experience. They can offer valuable insights to inform planning and strategies aimed at meeting their and their community's needs. However, as with other target groups, the value of the information gained will depend on the quality of the consultation. Attention to detail is critical here.

Factors influencing older people's participation in consultation processes

Older people's lack of participation may be a response to constraints we create, which may include the following:

1. **Older people may feel undervalued:** Many older people report feeling a loss of independence and personal control as they age and may feel their contributions to the community are unrecognised or undervalued;
2. **Negative attitudes to older people:** Older people may be grouped together as if they are all the same or negatively stereotyped as being mentally or physically dependent;
3. **Inadequate planning for consulting with older people:** Consultation strategies may fail to maximise the input of older people; inadequate financial reimbursements for transport or expenses for support of people with a disability may limit their participation. Timing, formats and safety of consultations are also issues; and
4. **Only older people are representatives of older people:** Sometimes consultation processes rely on representatives of service providers ('gatekeepers') to speak on behalf of older people. While they may have valuable insights, they do not directly represent older people's perspectives and their voices should not be the only ones to be heard.

Ways to involve older people effectively

Involving older people effectively requires attention to some basic principles:

1. Undertake consultations in partnership with older people's organisations, perhaps with processes planned and co-presented by older people and government representatives;
2. Reimburse expenses, such as bus and taxi fares, to people who participate;
3. Offer office support such as minute taking and photocopying, if involving older people's organisations;
4. Use meeting techniques tailored to the needs of older people;
5. Allow adequate time for feedback;
6. Ensure venues are within a 200m level walk of public transport stops and have ramps and accessible facilities;
7. Plan workshop times to coordinate with public transport timetables;
8. Select venues in safe locations, as older people are wary of travelling alone to places they regard as unsafe; and
9. To assist older people's organisations to conduct consultations:
 - Provide information directly to their members or for discussion at an organisation's branch meeting and obtain feedback;
 - Encourage older people to attend with friends and colleagues; and
 - Provide assistance in training people with appropriate skills such as public speaking, or writing reports (see Queensland Government, Office of Ageing, 1994).

Remember that participatory processes using conventional methods may not always reach them. Power differentials, use of jargon, expertise and the intimidating and highly formalised practices of bureaucracies can create major barriers to effective input (Queensland Government, Office of Ageing, 1994).

For further information

Queensland *Government*, Department of Families, Youth and Community Care (1994). *Consulting with Older People*. Brisbane: Department of Families, Youth and Community Care.

Queensland Government, Office of Ageing (1994). *Consulting with Older People: A 'How to' Kit*. Brisbane: Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, November.

Sarkissian Associates Planners Pty Ltd (2000). *The Evergreen Report: Growing a Sustainable Future for Brisbane's Older People*. Brisbane: Sarkissian Associates Planners, November.