

# Age-friendly engagement toolkit:

Involving older  
people in local  
decision-making

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# 1 Introduction

The older population in England is growing and becoming more diverse. Older people are stakeholders in every significant local decision, not only those about ageing.

Yet across the country they are often overlooked and face avoidable barriers to participation. As with all age groups, people can then disengage when they don't see meaningful change.

When that happens, decisions are poorer, services cost more to correct, and trust erodes. This toolkit exists to help local authorities do better.

It is written primarily for local authority officers, though much of the guidance will also be relevant to third-sector organisations that engage with older people independently or on behalf of councils.

It covers the full engagement cycle: understanding where you are starting from, setting a clear purpose, making the case internally, planning and delivering engagement, closing the feedback loop, evaluating impact, embedding engagement across your organisation, and sustaining it over time.

Three things underpin good engagement with older people, and they run through every section of this toolkit.

## Clarity of purpose

Engagement only works when its scope is honest, its purpose is realistic, and decision-makers are genuinely open to being influenced. This toolkit introduces the IAP2 spectrum of participation to help you identify what level of engagement is appropriate and what you are genuinely committing to.

The spectrum is not a hierarchy. A well-run consultation that closes the loop honestly is more valuable than a poorly-resourced attempt at collaboration.

## Reaching the right people

Many older people face real barriers to engaging with local authorities: digital exclusion, language and cultural barriers, geographical isolation, mobility limitations, and caring responsibilities.

These are not barriers created by older people themselves, but features of systems and structures that leave them further from power. Good engagement is designed around these barriers from the outset - through the choice of approach, venue, timing, partners, and recruitment routes, all of which this toolkit addresses in detail.

## Closing the loop

The most consistent message from older people about engagement is simple: tell us what you did with what we told you. Councils that close the feedback loop honestly - by demonstrating how they have acted on what they've heard from residents and explaining anything they aren't able to do - are more likely to sustain participation. Those who don't do this will find it harder to recruit participants and secure meaningful contributions.

Throughout the toolkit, these principles are illustrated with case studies from councils that are already doing this well, supported by practical templates and tools, and anchored by a self-assessment that helps you identify your starting point and focus on the guidance most relevant to where you are now.

## About this toolkit

### Who do you mean by older people?

There is no one definition of 'older people'.

Often, age categories such as over-50 or over-65 are used. This captures a wide range of people with very diverse lives and experiences; someone who is 52 may well be living a very different life from someone who is 92.

Similarly, people experience age differently too, so no two people's experiences of being 60 will be the same. This toolkit uses the phrase 'older people' as a broad description of people who are age 50 and over.<sup>1</sup>

### What does this toolkit include?

This toolkit includes 10 sections of guidance on how to meaningfully engage with older people, plus a series of checklists and templates in the appendices.

This guidance includes a short self-assessment in [Section 2: Understanding your starting point](#), which you can use to start thinking about how ready you are to engage with older people.

How you answer the questions in this self-assessment will guide you to a sensible place to start reading this toolkit.

The rest of the toolkit sections cover key topics for engaging well with older people.

This includes how to plan, make the case for and facilitate age-friendly engagement.

It also includes sections on how to embed engagement with older people across your organisation, how to sustain it over time and how to effectively evaluate and learn from engagement.

The [appendices](#) include an engagement brief template, a venue checklist, a participant support journey template and a facilitation plan example.

### How can this toolkit be used?

This toolkit contains lots of detailed guidance and templates. We do not expect people using this toolkit to read it cover to cover. The toolkit is broken down into sections which you can pick up and use as appropriate.

### How was this toolkit developed?

The Centre for Ageing Better commissioned Involve to write this toolkit. It has been developed based on research which includes a desk review of key literature, interviews with multiple local authorities and third sector organisations, workshops with wider groups of local authorities and workshops with older people to explore their lived experience and how it should inform the toolkit.

These insights were combined with the expertise of Involve and the Centre for Ageing Better. Key sections were then tested and reviewed by multiple local authorities and older people. We reference some of this research and testing at points during the toolkit. For example, quotes included are from older people who participated in workshops, unless otherwise stated.

This toolkit forms part of a series of [tools and guidance](#) produced by the Centre for Ageing Better to support local authorities to improve their work on ageing and with older people.

<sup>1</sup> When engaging with groups of older people, it can be a good idea to allow them to define themselves. Not everyone over the age of 50 will identify as an older person.



## 2 Understanding your starting point for engagement

Before you dive into this toolkit, it is important to take stock of where you are starting from when it comes to engaging older people in decision-making.

The light-touch self-assessment in this section will help you identify where you're currently at and which parts of this toolkit are most relevant to you.

### 2.1 Self-assessment: where are you now?

The questions here are designed to help you navigate this toolkit to suit your needs. It is not designed to discourage you from engaging. There are no wrong answers, just different starting points.

Think of it as a compass, not a checklist.

The toolkit uses three descriptions of where councils tend to be:

1. Laying the Foundations
2. Developing Good Practice
3. Embedding Good Practice and Innovating

As you work through the toolkit, you will find prompts in each section suggesting how to progress from one stage to the next.

### Self-assessment questions

**In the last 12 months, how often have your team, who will be working on this, engaged those aged 50 and over on a specific decision or policy?**

- A** Rarely to never
- B** Sometimes
- C** Often

**When you have engaged older people, who have you tended to reach?**

- A** Mainly those who proactively contact us
- B** A regular group of older people we tend to return to
- C** A wide range of older people through different approaches

**How do you tend to engage with older people?**

- A** We tend to use the same approach each time, such as surveys
- B** We have tried a few different approaches, such as forums, panels, or co-design
- C** We use a range of approaches depending on what is most appropriate

**What organisational commitment exists to engaging older people?**

- A** There is buy-in at officer level
- B** There is senior leadership and/or political buy-in alongside officer buy-in
- C** There is a strategy or policy embedded in the organisation that sets out our commitment to engaging older people and how we will do it. This is meaningfully put into practice.

**How confident is your team in its ability to engage older people well?**

- A** We are relatively new to this, or not yet very confident
- B** We have some experience, but feel we could do more
- C** We are confident engaging in a range of ways

**Do you think you have sufficient resources internally to engage well with older people?**

- A** No / not sure
- B** We have some resource, but it limits what we can do
- C** We have the resource to be more ambitious than we have been so far

### Where should I start in the toolkit?

**Mostly 'A's'** = Laying the Foundations: Continue with this section, then read through the rest of the toolkit in sequence as needed.

**Mostly 'B's'** = Developing Good Practice: You may want to revisit [Section 3](#) to sharpen your purpose and approach, or move to [Section 4](#) (Making the case) if you need to build internal support.

**Mostly 'C's'** = Embedding Good Practice and Innovating: Sections 6-9 are likely to be most relevant. You may also find [Section 9](#) valuable for strengthening existing structures.



## 2.2 Mapping your older people's engagement ecosystem

Before planning new engagement, try to understand who older people in your area are already connected to and what engagement mechanisms already exist.

Other organisations - statutory, voluntary, community, and faith - may already have meaningful relationships with older people that you can learn from or build on, and there may already be a dedicated older people's engagement mechanism.

This can ensure you:

### Draw on what others are already learning

- organisations in regular contact with older people often hold valuable insight about their needs and experiences.

### Learn from engagement already taking place

and be conscious of what has been asked of older people locally in the past.

**Use trusted messengers** - existing relationships can make it easier for older people to engage with your process, particularly those who might not respond to direct local authority outreach.

## Older people's engagement ecosystem mapping exercise

With colleagues, work through the following questions. You can also explore this in more detail using [Appendix 5: Engagement Mapping Tool](#).

1. *Who is relevant to engaging older people locally on the topic you are looking at?*
2. *How are older people involved in shaping your community more generally?*
3. *Which older people can be reached through these partners and mechanisms, and which cannot?*  
Consider factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, disability status, health, language, and geography (including urban/rural differences and ward-level variation).
4. *If there are gaps, how could these groups be heard?*

These questions should also help you identify where engagement is already happening but not joined up. Older people consistently tell us that local authorities ask them the same questions through different teams without connecting the answers, wasting their time and eroding their trust.

It is also worth being historically literate about what older people in your area have already been asked, who was heard (or not) and what came of it. If a previous engagement exercise on a similar topic did not lead to visible change, older people will remember - and a new process on the same ground is likely to be met with scepticism.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Broader guidance for Age-friendly Communities to map stakeholders can be found in the [Age-friendly Communities: Mapping tool](#)

## Is there already an older people's engagement mechanism?

If a dedicated older people's engagement mechanism already exists, then you should answer the following questions:

- When was it established?
- Who takes part in it? (consider demographics and protected characteristics, e.g., race, gender, disability).
- Is it genuinely connected to decision-making? How?
- Is it sustainable and well-functioning?
- Was there previously a mechanism that has lapsed? If so, what can you learn from why it ended?

This should help you learn how it might help you, or could be incorporated into the work which you are doing. The right approach may be to strengthen an existing structure rather than create something new.

## 2.3 Understanding which older people you aren't hearing from

Some older people face particular barriers to engaging with the organisations and channels that local authorities most commonly work through. These include:

**Digital exclusion** - older people without internet access or digital confidence may be missed by online-first approaches.

**Cultural and language barriers** - communities where English is not a first language, or where there is limited trust of statutory organisations, may be less likely to engage through conventional methods.

**Being 'housebound'** - people with significant mobility limitations or health conditions may not be able to attend in-person events.

**Living in isolated rural communities** - geographical distance and limited transport can be significant barriers.

**Work and caring responsibilities** - many older people will be in work and/or have caring responsibilities which take up a lot of their time and prevent them from attending engagement events.

Looking back at any gaps you have identified (question 4 above), consider how you might reach older people who are absent or underrepresented. Often, reaching out to a more diverse network of organisations and community spaces can help you reach people who have not engaged before.

Ask yourself:

1. Who might be in contact with the older people you don't have links to? (refer to question 4 in the [Engagement Mapping Exercise](#))
2. How could you build partnerships with them?

Reviewing what local data you have access to can provide useful insight into the demographics of the older people in your area. See the Centre for Ageing Better's [guidance on how and why to use data](#) to inform the development of your ageing projects and programmes.

For practical guidance on how to recruit and reach older people for engagement, see [Section 5.2: Reaching older people who aren't currently involved](#).

### 3

# Setting your purpose for engagement

This section sets out a framework for understanding different types of engagement, when they might be used and which topics that you might want to engage older people on. It also includes guidance on how to match your approach to your topic or purpose and how to plan for impact.

## 3.1 Topics to engage older people on

Older people will have as much variety and complexity in their experiences as any other age category, so it is always important to avoid making simplistic assumptions about what topics might be of interest to older people.

Older people should be engaged on all important decisions, not only those they have traditionally been engaged on, such as health, care and transport. The World Health Organisation's [eight domains of age-friendly communities](#) provides a helpful framework to consider the range of topics across the built and social environment that make a difference to people's ability to age well in a community.<sup>3</sup>

This engagement could happen within groups of older people or with older people amongst other age groups as well. It is important to remember that more general resident engagement should be inclusive of and accessible to older people.

Excluding them, even unintentionally, can reflect ageist assumptions about what matters to older people.

<sup>3</sup> [Age-friendly Communities: A handbook of principles to guide local policy and action](#)

### Case study: Camden Climate Action Plan

When Camden Council were developing their Climate Action Plan 2026-30<sup>4</sup>, they engaged with a diversity of residents, including older people, as this topic impacts on all residents.

This approach was intergenerational as older people took part in this process alongside all other ages, demonstrating the interest which older people have in climate issues.<sup>5</sup>

This also helped to surface the specific concerns and insights which older people brought to discussions about climate mitigation and adaptation.<sup>6</sup>

The process produced recommendations that worked for everyone precisely because it did not treat older people's interests as separate from the wider community's, but as a key part of them.

## 3.2 The spectrum of engagement

It is important to think about what role you are asking older people to play and what power you are sharing with them. There are a range of approaches, methodologies and types of language around engagement, which need careful navigation.

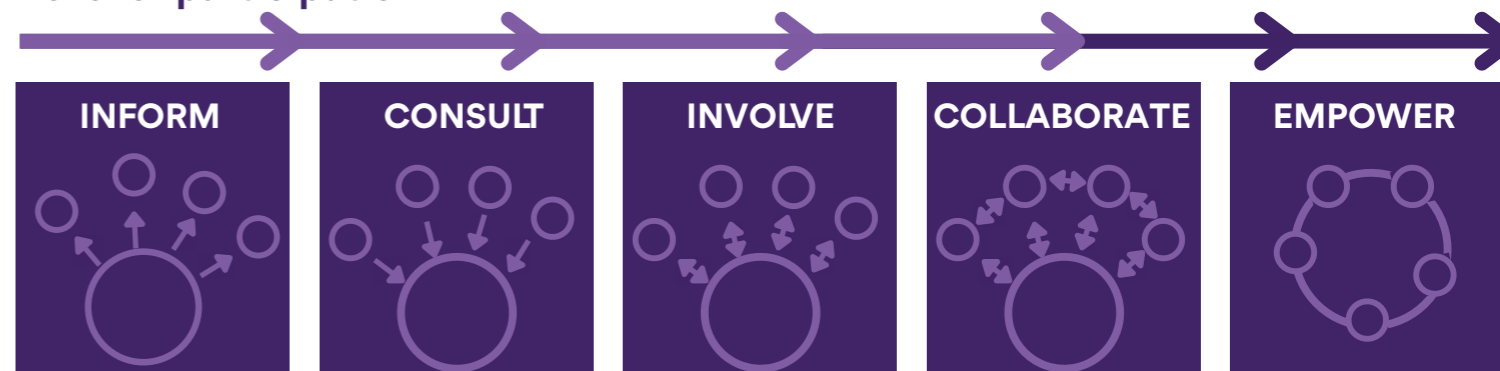
The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) provides a widely used framework for thinking about what kind of role you are asking people to play.

It distinguishes between different levels of power shared with the public, describing five types of activity - each with a distinct purpose and a distinct promise to participants.

This is presented as a spectrum and not a hierarchy. Each activity is valuable in different circumstances, and a positive relationship with older people will often involve different types of engagement for different purposes.

Each of these activities could be done solely with older people, or as part of an intergenerational approach.

### Level of participation



On the next page, you'll see a table using the IAP2 Spectrum of Participation<sup>7</sup> and when it could be appropriate.

<sup>4</sup> [Camden Climate Action Plan](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Most older people view climate change as a serious risk](#)

<sup>6</sup> For further reading on ageing and climate action, see: <https://www.ageandclimate.com/>

<sup>7</sup> The language of participation and engagement can be confusing.

The IAP2 spectrum uses the term participation, whereas in most of the conversations we had with local authorities they used the term engagement, so when referring to the spectrum we will use its proper name, but mostly will use the term engagement for most other purposes.

**Level of participation**

Type of activity	What it is	What could it look like	Resource required
<b>Inform</b>	A one-way flow of information from the council to people. Councils will need to inform older people of many things regularly - for example, how to access services or reduce health risks.	You could inform older people about plans to build a new bus stop to improve access to public transport.	Communications methods that will reach the relevant people e.g., funding for paper copies of materials where appropriate and time for distribution.
<b>Consult</b>	You seek feedback on a decision and commit to listening and responding.  There are statutory obligations to consult in some circumstances, such as planning or service restructuring.	You could consult older people on where to place a new bus stop - for example, through door-knocking or an online form - and commit to closing the feedback loop.	A method for gathering feedback (e.g., a survey).  Closing the feedback loop: a plan for communicating what you did with the feedback
<b>Involve</b>	You work directly with people throughout the process to ensure their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.  The council retains decision-making power but is genuinely influenced by what it hears.	You could host a group discussion about where a bus stop should be and why, analyse the outputs, make a decision, and tell participants what you did and how their input shaped it.	Staff time to plan and deliver. A venue and refreshments. Time and resources to recruit participants. A recognition or thank-you for participants' time. Staff time to analyse feedback. A feedback loop plan.

<b>Collaborate</b>	You partner with people in each aspect of the decision, including developing options and identifying the preferred solution.  Some local authorities use co-design to develop services with residents.	You have funding to make transport more accessible and you work with older people to define what the problem is and how to address it.  You may offer a suggestion of creating a new bus stop, but learn from them that the better outcome would be to use that money to improve existing bus stops by making them physically accessible with improved seating and shelter.	As above, plus staff time to adapt plans in response to what older people tell you.
<b>Empower</b>	You place final decision-making power with the public and commit to implementing what they decide.  This is unusual for councils and is not always appropriate, but it can work where older people are taking ownership of something themselves.  Local authorities might support older people to set up an engagement mechanism, service or peer network and then step back as the people involved take ownership.	You could share resources with a group of older people so that they can determine how best to make transport in their community work well for older people. The council could offer advice but not direct the outcome.  For example, the older people could decide what is most needed is a new community transport offer. The local authority could commission this to a local provider, or provide resources to older people to set up a volunteer-led scheme, depending on what people want.	As above, plus ongoing staff support and sufficient council resources to implement what older people decide.

**Case study: Holywell/Treffynon bus services**

Holywell/ Treffynnon is a rural town in Flintshire, Wales. Flintshire County Council run an Age-friendly Communities programme where they regularly engage with groups of older residents to understand how to make their community a better place to age in.

Residents in Holywell/ Treffynnon shared that local bus routes were not serving their village, meaning they couldn't access other local villages and the town centre via public transport. Following this feedback, the Age-friendly Communities team arranged for these older residents to meet the transport team to share their experiences directly. Following this engagement, local bus operators worked to extend the area of Holywell Fflecsi Bus service to include the previously left out area.<sup>8</sup>

Within this example older residents were both setting the priority of transport, as well as defining the solution for an extended bus route.

**Choosing the right level of engagement**

Sharing more power does not automatically result in better engagement. The right level depends on a range of factors: how much is genuinely open to change, how much time and resource you have, and how central the issue is to older people's lives.

A well-run consultation that is honest about its scope and closes the loop effectively can be more valuable than a poorly resourced attempt at collaboration.

That said, there is often room for local authorities to develop their practice by progressively moving from activities that consult towards those that involve and, where the conditions are right, collaborate.

The more that older people are able to help shape the scope of an engagement, the more likely it is to surface genuine lived experience rather than responses to a narrow question that has already been framed for them.

**When considering which level is appropriate, ask yourself:**

- How much is genuinely open to change?
- Do the older people who are engaged have the expertise and lived experience to genuinely shape this decision?
- What resources do you have to do this well?
- What kinds of impact have you committed to delivering as a result of the engagement (e.g. what sorts of changes have you said will happen after engagement?)
- Is that commitment realistic? (i.e. do you have the powers, resources and authority to make that happen?)

**Case study: Vale of Glamorgan 50+ Forum<sup>9</sup>**

In the Vale of Glamorgan, the local authority set up a 50+ forum to hear older people's perspectives, *'so they were open to change from pressure from the off.'*

They shared real power with older people through the forum and set a clear scope for what was on the table for discussion. Supporting this is the Forum's collaboratively developed Memorandum of Understanding with the Council, which provides "clear definitions of the responsibilities and expectations of the Council and the Forum in working together."<sup>10</sup>

The Memorandum also sets out that it will be reviewed every two years or sooner if there is an agreed need to do so, building in a process for ensuring the collaboration is functioning well.

A key output of this relationship was the Forum's campaign on rural bus services. This led to the council partnering with a bus company to improve access to public transport for older people living in rural areas.<sup>11</sup>

**3.3 Identifying and agreeing purpose and scope**

A clear scope makes the difference between engagement that genuinely informs decisions and engagement that gives only the appearance of doing so.

If older people have a different understanding of the purpose from decision-makers, they may be disappointed in a way that undermines their trust in the council.

If you are engaging on a topic that older people have shared their views on before, acknowledge this explicitly and make clear what is different about what you are doing now and why. You can read more about understanding existing engagement in [Section 2.2](#).

There is also a risk that engagement will not have a meaningful impact if decision-makers do not share a clear understanding of what the engagement has produced and how it is expected to affect policy. [Section 3.4](#) addresses this directly.

You can use the [Engagement Brief Template](#) in the appendices to help you develop this. It will ask you to consider questions such as, but not limited to, the following:

1. What is the internal/external context?
2. What is the scope? E.g. what topic do you want to hear about older people's perspectives and experiences?
3. What is the purpose of the engagement? E.g. what type(s) of inputs would you like from older people?
4. Which older people would you like to reach through your engagement?
5. How will you monitor and evaluate the engagement?

<sup>8</sup> [Flintshire Community Transport](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Vale of Glamorgan Council](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Memorandum of Understanding between the](#)

[Vale 50+ Strategy Forum and the Vale of Glamorgan Council](#)

<sup>11</sup> Testimony from an older person in a workshop and [Greenlinks Community Transport](#)

### Involving older people in setting the scope

Where possible, it is good practice to involve older people in defining the scope of the engagement itself and not just to respond to a scope you have set.

This matters because the questions that feel most important to older people may not be the ones you anticipated. If you are collaborating with older people on public transport, for example, they may tell you that their most pressing concerns are about active travel or safety, not about bus routes.

Some effective ways to involve older people in defining the scope of your engagement could include:

- Discuss the plans for engagement with any groups of older people who you are already engaging with.
- Create enough time in the engagement process to focus an early meeting on agreeing the scope of the engagement with the participants
  - > This relies on you creating enough time after that first session to design the rest of the process based on the scope you have agreed on.

### 3.4 Planning for impact

Engagement is only worthwhile if it is undertaken in good faith with a genuine intention to listen, and a realistic opportunity to act on what you hear.

“You need to feel like you are needed and you need to be able to see your contribution when engaging with something straight away. It also needs to feel relevant to you, and something we can all unite around.”  
- older person in a workshop

Before you begin, it is worth thinking through how that change might happen and who needs to be on board for it to occur.

Consider the following:

#### What kinds of impact are possible?

Impact does not only mean changing a policy or service. Engagement can also:

- Deepen the understanding of the local authority on how their work impacts on older people’s lives, and strengthen the understanding of older people on how the local authority works and how to influence it.
- Build trust between older people and the local authority.
- Build or strengthen networks and relationships among older people themselves.
- Have a direct positive effect on the older people who participate, for example, from them learning about services and support that is available to them.
- Generate learning and good practice that can be shared more widely.

For examples of what impact can look like in practice, see the case studies in [Section 9.3](#) (East Sussex) and [Section 3.2](#) (Vale of Glamorgan).

#### Who holds the power and resources to act?

- Who has the authority to make changes based on what you hear from older people?
- Are those people engaged with and supportive of this process?
- If so, can you invite them to participate or observe the engagement in some way, so they hear older people’s views first-hand?
- What do they need to understand about older people’s views in order to act on them?

#### What role can older people play in achieving impact?

- Could older people themselves be advocates for the changes that emerge from this process?
- Can older people be involved in any governance or policy body which will be responsible for putting the outputs of the engagement into practice?
- Can older people be a part of evaluating the impact of any changes?
- How could you support them to do that?

#### How will insights feed into decisions?

- Where will what you learn from older people sit alongside the other evidence you are gathering?
- What weight will it carry, and how will that be communicated?

Returning to these questions at the end of your engagement in [Section 8.3](#) will help you evaluate whether the engagement achieved what you hoped, and what you would do differently next time.

## 4 Making the case for engagement

This section introduces arguments you can use to persuade colleagues, senior leaders, and local politicians that older people's engagement is worthwhile.

In [Section 4.1](#) we provide the 'big picture' motivation for engaging older people, alongside the specific benefits to local authorities, to older people, and to communities as a whole. In [Section 4.2](#) we talk through ways you can make the case to particular groups, before laying out some practical approaches to building support for engaging older people.

### 4.1 How does engagement benefit local authorities and older people?

Engagement with older people is essential to improving council services and by extension, public health and resident wellbeing. It provides mechanisms through which people can shape decisions that affect their lives, and its importance is only set to grow.<sup>12</sup>

Almost one in five people in England are aged 65+, and older age groups are projected to increase at the fastest rate in the coming decades (something that is already the case in rural and coastal communities).<sup>13</sup> Crucially, this is not a homogenous group: the UK's older population is increasingly diverse when it comes to ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, and disability.<sup>14</sup> This brings a greater variety of needs, experiences, and perspectives.

These developments have implications for the services local authorities provide and the wider decisions they make.

Older people – as residents, workers, community builders, service users, carers and in many more roles – have a stake in shaping these decisions.

#### How local authorities benefit

Some reasons to engage relate directly to pressures on local authorities, such as adult social care demands, which require sustained dialogue with older people, and wider developments like the use of AI and other digital tools.<sup>15</sup>

There are benefits that go beyond addressing these immediate pressures, however:

**Engaging older people leads to more informed decisions** - ones that are genuinely grounded in people's diverse needs, values, and experiences. Practitioner expertise is essential but will always miss things only residents and service users can identify. Engagement also strengthens evidence bases. Outside of financial resources, evidence was the top priority identified by local authorities in a 2025 Centre for Ageing Better survey on what would help them better support older people.

**Engaging older people leads to more efficient decisions** since having better information means local authorities are more likely to get things right the first time.<sup>16</sup> This avoids the financial costs of policies and service designs that require later revision,<sup>17</sup> and avoids the reputational and relational costs of decisions that people feel they had no part in shaping.<sup>18</sup>

**Engaging older people leads to more trusted decisions**, strengthening a local authority's mandate to act. Where people can have an honest conversation with their council about shared challenges, and the context in which decisions are made, it can also support people to come along with things they may partly disagree with.

Recent data suggests those aged 55-75 trust their local council less than other age groups to act in their interests, underlining the value of engagement as a means of rebuilding older people's trust.<sup>19</sup>

**Engaging older people supports local authorities' legal obligations.** The Equality Act 2010 requires public bodies to have due regard to the needs of people with protected characteristics.

Age is one of them. Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) provide a systematic prompt for considering how decisions affect older people, but their value depends on whether older people's perspectives have actually been gathered.

For further details on good practice here, see [Section 7.2](#).

Failure to prioritise older people's engagement is sometimes rooted in ageist assumptions. A manager of an older people's VCSE organisation in the North East of England explained they had found some authorities felt there was "no point" in investing in older people's digital skills, adding to her members' sense of being "left out of the conversation."<sup>20</sup>

More widely, research from Germany found municipal staff tended to attribute barriers to engagement primarily to older people themselves, rather than to the structures and processes that excluded them.<sup>21</sup>

These assumptions hurt older people and encourage authorities to underinvest in a growing proportion of their residents.

This underinvestment has a knock-on harm to others too, since steps to greater inclusivity benefit people beyond the target group.

<sup>12</sup> [Age-friendly Communities](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Our Ageing Population](#)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> [What does the year ahead mean for the future of local government?](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Inclusive Climate Action](#), p12

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. See p.13, p.20. See also: [Involve](#)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. P6. See also: [Involve](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Ipsos UK/LGIU Local Election polling](#)

<sup>20</sup> Interview.

<sup>21</sup> [Shared Responsibility and Civic Engagement in Very Old Age](#)

### How older people benefit

While better decisions as a result of engagement can benefit older people through the services they access and their experience of their local area, there are also more personal benefits:

**Better engagement addresses a desire** since evidence suggests older people want to be involved in local decision-making, but their experience often falls short due to the kinds of barriers explored elsewhere in this toolkit.<sup>22</sup>

**Better engagement empowers older people** as thoughtfully delivered processes can give them a genuine sense of agency and ownership over decisions that affect them.

**Better engagement builds older people's civic skills** and motivation to act, as well as their sense of belonging and connections with others. Engagement processes can also increase older people's understanding of their local authority and how to access services.

### How everyone benefits

Taking steps to improve engagement with older people doesn't just benefit them and local authorities - it can benefit everyone:

**Targeted inclusion supports others** since designing engagement processes in ways that support one group's inclusion can benefit others at the same time.

For example, choosing a venue that is more accessible for an older participant using a mobility aid supports participants of any age who use these.

Importantly too, diversifying information formats, activities, or the means available to express views, can better include those who have not revealed a preference (it may even highlight a preferred way of participating to someone that they had not previously considered).

**Intergenerational engagement enriches participation.** Older people's engagement should not be limited to events which gather older people solely. Their participation in processes that bring together residents from across ages to address common concerns can enrich discussions. In particular, older, long-term residents are able to bring a degree of local historical insight that younger people cannot.

## 4.2 How to communicate the value of older people's engagement

Below we set out what to emphasise when seeking the support of senior leaders, elected members, service managers, frontline staff, and from older people themselves.

To further tailor these arguments, we also recommend you draw on the Understanding Ageing in your Area tool developed by the Centre for Ageing Better and LG Inform.<sup>23</sup>

This provides key demographic indicators for older people in every English local authority.

### Senior leaders

Senior leaders need to understand the strategic value of investing in older people's engagement, and how it contributes to local authority-wide goals.

You might emphasise that:

- Direct learnings from engagement contribute to policy and service development, potentially saving costs through better meeting people's needs and opening up use of local assets and relationships that strengthen services.<sup>24 25 26</sup>
- Engaging older people can support wider council goals, such as supporting the local economy by using local caterers for events, and developing residents' skills and employability through engagement methods like peer research, which provide people with training to do research on topics that concern them.
- High-quality engagement helps manage risk, including the possibility of judicial review where communities later object to decisions they felt excluded from.<sup>27</sup>

### Elected members

Elected members are uniquely placed to promote engagement, as well as ensure it impacts local authority decisions. However, some may be concerned about a potential conflict between participatory processes and their representative role. Here, it is important to underline how:

- In championing older people's engagement, councillors can demonstrate their commitment to their communities in a visible and active way (and among age groups with high voter turnouts).<sup>28</sup>
- Engagement processes strengthen councillors' mandates between elections by increasing opportunities for being in dialogue with residents.<sup>29</sup>

- Although councillors will already engage constituents in a range of ways, not everyone can - or wants to - participate through those routes, and so further engagement processes increase inclusion.<sup>30</sup>

### Service managers and frontline staff

Service managers need to understand how engagement can support service design and staff workloads.

Frontline staff need to understand that it builds on, rather than replaces, their existing expertise and interactions with older people.

Some key things to consider when making the case for older people's engagement with these colleagues are:

- Older people, as service users or as volunteers, can identify gaps and issues that those managing or delivering the service may miss. This complements rather than replaces staff expertise, producing a fuller understanding of user needs, improving uptake and potentially reducing waste.
- Frontline staff have the most frequent contact with residents, so the quality of their interactions has amongst the greatest impact on people's relationship with their council.<sup>31</sup> If staff are supported to listen well, take older people's experiences seriously, and feed what they hear into service improvements, this shifts the dynamic from a transaction to a collaboratively created service — benefiting both staff and the people they work with.

<sup>22</sup> [Community Life Survey 2024/25 annual publication](#)

<sup>23</sup> [See LG Inform](#)

<sup>24</sup> [LCE: Making the case](#)

<sup>25</sup> [Involve](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Involve](#)

<sup>27</sup> [Inclusive Climate Action](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Inclusive Climate Action](#)

<sup>29</sup> [Locating Authority](#)

<sup>30</sup> [A councillor's workbook on neighbourhood and community engagement](#)

<sup>31</sup> [New Conversations 2.0](#)

- Engagement can enable older people to take an active role in improving their own quality of life, rather than being passive recipients of service provision.
- External service providers can gain from being intermediaries in engagement processes. For example, if a day centre engages visitors on a topic the local council is exploring, it may be paid for its role and position itself long-term as able to reach those the council struggles to hear from otherwise, building the case for more work.

### Older people

Older people, particularly those who have had poor experiences of engagement in the past, may need to be persuaded that participating is worth their time.

Here, it is important to consider the following:

- Make sure to frame topics in ways that speak to people’s daily lives rather than abstract policy or service descriptions. It can be particularly powerful if you work with older people to help set the focus of an engagement. They can also then act as promoters of the process; using word-of-mouth endorsements to make others in their communities aware of an opportunity to participate.
- Provide people with a clear ask when inviting them to engage, including what is being asked of them and what they should expect from taking part, as well as key details on timings, venues, and who they can speak with about any concerns or queries. Attention to detail shows thought has been given to the people giving up their time to participate, as does providing invitations that are attentive to accessibility needs, such as visual impairments.

### 4.3 Routes to building support

Guidance	Detail
<b>Connect older people’s engagement to wider work.</b>	<p>Holding a dedicated session with colleagues from across teams early on when planning a process can highlight generative connections to wider work.</p> <p>For instance, Manchester City Council’s Age-friendly team drew links between their work and the Council’s climate change and anti-poverty strategies.<sup>32</sup> Colleagues may also be able to offer resources such as recruitment routes for particular groups, or insights on the engagement subject.</p> <p>Bringing colleagues in early on can also support their buy-in for any engagement outcomes which may affect their work, and better aligns these with their schedules.</p>
<b>Identify influential champions for older people’s engagement.</b>	<p>Leeds’ Age-friendly Board has been chaired by a councillor who advocated for older people’s organisations representatives to be included in its decision-making alongside members from local government.<sup>33</sup></p> <p>Allies do not need to be existing advocates for engagement - advocates for older people’s interests more broadly can be just as valuable.</p>
<b>Spot untapped engagement opportunities.</b>	<p>In Kirklees, the emphasis is on identifying existing work that can double up as a source of engagement, rather than creating new processes.<sup>34</sup></p> <p>Training frontline staff to spot these opportunities and integrate engagement into their interactions with older people can save costs while generating insights.</p> <p>However, this should complement, not substitute, investment in separate engagement where this is necessary.</p> <p>Look for opportunities in colleagues’ engagements to bring older people in where these might be overlooked, for example, when exploring your adult education offer, or services for under-18s which older foster and kinship carers will have insight into.</p>

<sup>32</sup> Interview

<sup>33</sup> [Age Friendly Leeds](#)

<sup>34</sup> Interview

Guidance	Detail
<p><b>Close the loop with quick, visible wins.</b></p>	<p>This sustains motivation and also demonstrates impact to colleagues.</p> <p>Look for activities where the results can be tangible and prompt - such as a campaign that will lead to a visible service change, or an informal engagement that feeds directly into an upcoming decision.</p> <p>For example, in the Vale of Glamorgan, an ESOL group for older people doubles up as a space for influencing services. It does this by arranging for service staff to come and chat to members informally.</p> <p>This helps the former better understand how they can support people, and helps the latter understand local services, convey changes they wish to see directly, and build their vocabulary for services they might access.<sup>35</sup></p>
<p><b>Start small and build.</b></p>	<p>Organic, resource-light activities are a pathway into more sustained engagement.</p> <p>Start with informal activities - walking groups, litter picks, community events - to build relationships and energy that eventually supports more formal engagement. The key is not to treat these as a substitute for substantive engagement, but as a way of creating the conditions for it.</p> <p>For example, Newham's Older People's Reference Group uses litter picks as an entry point for people's participation, since they provide a clear sense of the value of contributing to public life, make people feel needed, and get people striking up conversations.<sup>36</sup></p>

<sup>35</sup> Workshop  
<sup>36</sup> Workshop



## 5 Planning your engagement

This section covers the practical decisions you need to make before engaging with older people - from choosing the right approach and identifying who you want to hear from, to sorting the logistics and building the partnerships that will help you reach people.

If you have not yet agreed a clear purpose for your engagement, return to [Section 3.3](#) before working through this section.

### 5.1 Deciding your approach

The approach you take to engaging with older people should be shaped by your purpose, the resources available to you, and the context you are working in. There is no single best method. Different approaches suit different purposes, and many local authorities use more than one at the same time or in sequence.

The table in this section sets out some common approaches, what each involves, and when each is most appropriate.

Approach	What it is	When it is appropriate
<b>Standing engagement group</b> (e.g. Older People's Forum)	<p>A regular group where older people share their perspectives, often on a recurring basis.</p> <p>Professionals may come in to explore older people's views on a policy which they are working on. It can be run directly by a local authority or commissioned to a VCSE organisation.</p>	<p>Hearing insight and feedback from a group of older people who meet at regular intervals.</p> <p>Exploring topics in depth over multiple sessions. This can include exploring trade-offs and different perspectives. It can provide more detailed outputs and collective conclusions of the group.</p> <p>Building connection and continuity between participants.</p> <p>Suitable for groups of roughly 10 - 100 people.</p>
<b>Strategic board</b> (e.g. Age-friendly Strategic Board)	<p>A decision-making or leadership structure bringing together older people and council officers or other professionals to plan and oversee work which is focused on older people. This will usually be a small group of older people, who may be elected from a wider group.</p>	<p>Planning and governing work with older people who are involved as decision-makers or contributors, whose contributions are treated as equal to those of professionals in attendance.</p> <p>Building accountability for delivery against goals in work to benefit older people.</p> <p>Developing the capacity of some older people to act as critical friends to the council.</p>
<b>Ambassador network</b>	<p>A network of older volunteers who engage with their communities, gather feedback, and promote activity to improve the experiences of older people.</p> <p>See the <a href="#">Sunderland Ageing Well Ambassadors as an example</a>.</p> <p>Ambassadors can be given options to engage with projects and share information in flexible ways, allowing them to participate in topics of interest.</p>	<p>Reaching a wide range of older people through distributed, community-led activity.</p> <p>Enabling engagement in informal settings.</p> <p>Working in areas or on topics that they are already passionate about.</p>

Approach	What it is	When it is appropriate
<b>Service-based engagement</b>	Engagement with older people who use a specific service, either individually or in groups, to gather feedback on that service over time.	<p>Engaging with older people about their experience of a particular service.</p> <p>Gathering consistent insight from the same group of people at multiple stages.</p> <p>Building on existing service relationships.</p> <p>Demonstrating to older people how their input has shaped the service.</p>
<b>One-off consultation / engagement</b>	<p>A single engagement activity to gather feedback on a specific question or policy, or to understand general experiences of ageing in that community. Whilst standalone, it may be that this is repeated infrequently, e.g. an annual engagement on International Day of Older People.</p> <p>See the <a href="#">Age-friendly Community survey as an example</a>.</p>	<p>When you have one issue to engage on and cannot commit to ongoing engagement.</p> <p>When you want to hear from older people you have not previously engaged with and may not be able to sustain ongoing engagement with.</p> <p>When statutory consultation requirements apply.</p>

These approaches can be combined.

A strategic board might identify the need for an ambassador network, and a one-off consultation might be the starting point for a standing group. These approaches also describe how you might specifically engage with older people, however many more intergenerational approaches can be used for these approaches which might engage older people alongside younger people too.

These approaches do not determine what type of engagement you do or how much power you share with older people when you engage with them.

For example:

- You might use a one-off consultation to gather a longlist of new ideas from older people on how to improve a service.
- You might ask a standing engagement group to share a longlist of new ideas on how to improve a service.
- You might also ask a standing engagement group to make a decision about priorities for work in your area that will affect older people.
- You might also ask a strategic board to make that decision for you.

Refer to the IAP2 spectrum of participation in [Section 3](#) to think about what you might do and how much power you might share in any of these approaches.

**Case study: Caerphilly Over 50**

Caerphilly Over 50 is an older people’s forum that has been active since 2003, and has a track record of using the forum to play a role in local government decision-making processes, including as a steering group member for Caerphilly Council’s Age-friendly Communities programme that meets monthly.

The forum has contributed to a range of consultations, including the 2018-22 Welsh Dementia Action Plan, and noted that the published plan had dealt with some of the issues they had raised during the consultation.<sup>37</sup>

The forum puts its success in influencing decision-makers down to its close links forged with different organisations, with its forum’s regular attendees including a councillor who is also an Age-friendly Champion, as well as representatives from local government, third sector, and universities working in adult social care, public health, drug and alcohol services, and hospitals.<sup>38 39</sup>

It is also clear they have taken a deliberate approach to seeking local government support, for example, when it comes to funding. The forum reported in 2021 that they had not sought a set budget from Caerphilly Council, but had instead made “specific request[s] for small amounts of funding” that was “often granted”.<sup>40</sup>

37 [Over 50 Caerphilly: The Dementia Action Plan for Wales](#)

38 [Who we are: Over 50 Caerphilly](#)

39 See: [Strategy for an ageing society: age friendly Wales](#), p 42

40 Ibid. P5

### Who should lead?

Each of these approaches can be led by a local authority, by a VCSE organisation, or by older people themselves. When deciding who should lead, consider the following:

**Purpose** - what is the engagement trying to achieve, and who is best placed to achieve it?

**Decision-making** - who will ultimately act on what the engagement produces?

**Relationships** - who already has trust with the people you want to engage?

**Resource** - who has sufficient capacity and budget to do this well?

**Duration** - is this a one-off or an ongoing commitment?

Where the engagement directly informs a council decision, the council will usually need to lead to ensure the results feed into the right place, and to be accountable for what happens next. They may work with VCSE organisations or contractors where specialist skills and expertise are required.

Where the purpose is to build community-led activity or a self-sustaining network, a VCSE organisation or older people themselves may be better placed to lead, with the council in a supportive role. In these cases it is important to agree clearly what that support will look like and what the council will do with the insight the engagement generates.

### 5.2 Who do you want to engage with?

Before thinking about how to reach older people, it is worth being clear about who you are trying to reach. Your engagement purpose should shape this. If it does not, this is a good prompt to return to [Section 3.3](#) and develop it further.

“Having a connection with the council doesn’t have to be all bells and whistles. Some of this is just about some people being more proactive.”  
- older person in a workshop

The table on the next page sets out four different ways of thinking about groups of older people who you want to engage with.

You can also refer to the [Engagement Mapping Tool](#) to think through who is and is not already being engaged with.

Recruitment may be the first point of contact you have with an older person.

It will be essential to carefully consider the next steps to support older people to actually participate.

You can use the [Participant Journey Planning template](#) to help you plan this.

Group	Description	When appropriate	How to reach them
All/any older people who are interested	People who are keen to engage and have proactively expressed interest.	Recruiting older people who can be ambassadors or volunteers. They will need to be self-motivated.	Through VCSE networks and existing community groups.  You can prepare invite materials, FAQs, printable flyers, a website page, and ways to sign up online and offline. You can clearly articulate why the network, or group, should help you with this, e.g. financial incentives.
A specific group of older people	People with a particular interest, characteristic, or shared experience.	Engaging on a topic that particularly affects a specific community or geographic area.	Through trusted partners in those communities; targeted promotion in relevant spaces; through existing meetings of groups.
A diverse group of older people	People from a range of backgrounds, often defined using demographic criteria such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability status, sexual orientation and geography.	Engaging on a topic affecting many older people and wanting to understand varied impacts. More achievable with smaller groups (under 40).	Sortition or similar approaches; market research companies; VCSE networks.
A reflective group of older people	A group that broadly reflects the population of the area.	Engaging with a larger group (over 40) and wanting outcomes that represent the wider population.	Sortition or similar approaches; market research companies.

### Accessibility

Whoever you are looking to engage with, accessibility needs to be built in from the start. It is a thread that runs through every stage of planning and delivery.

Specific guidance on accessibility can be found throughout this toolkit in:

Reaching out to and recruiting older people - [Section 5.3](#) and [Section 5.4](#)

Supporting older people before, during and after engagement - [Section 6](#)

Designing accessible engagement processes - [Section 6](#)

Accessibility and venue checklist - [Appendix](#)

### 5.3 Considering inequalities

Different groups of older people will be particularly impacted on by certain topics. Below is an illustrative list of topics you might engage on. Next to them are examples of groups of older people which national evidence shows are particularly important to engage with on these topics.<sup>41</sup>

You can use it as a prompt for thinking about which older people to engage with, and to help you avoid generalisations when it comes to considering inequalities in engagement for older people.

It is good practice to understand the inequalities that exist for different groups of older people in your area on the topic you want to engage in.

<b>Financial insecurity</b>	Women Migrants Self-employed people  People paying rent or a mortgage in later life
<b>Health</b>	Older people in the areas of highest deprivation
<b>Employment</b>	Asian women Women experiencing menopause  Part-time workers  People in low-paid poor quality, self-employed or insecure work.
<b>Housing</b>	Private renters Disabled people People living in non-decent housing.
<b>Social connection</b>	Men – especially gay and bisexual men, and male carers  Asian women
<b>Climate change</b>	Disabled people  People with health conditions including cardiovascular and respiratory disease and diabetes

### 5.4 Reaching older people who aren't involved

Being flexible in your approach is essential to recruiting older people for engagement. Ensure older people can find out about your engagement through multiple channels, offer different ways for them to get in touch, and be clear about how you will support them to take part.

“The Council did engagement in a library, but some people were dominating the space. However, I was able to email the facilitators/organisers afterwards to convey issues with the way space was run, and to contribute my own views which they were receptive to.”  
- older person in a workshop

Some barriers particularly affect older people's ability to engage and need to be actively addressed.

These are not barriers created by older people themselves, but features of systems and structures that can leave them further from power.

The table seen on the next page sets out the most common, with suggested mitigations and examples.



<sup>41</sup> Centre for Ageing Better analysis

Barriers to reaching older people			
Barrier	Why it matters	How to mitigate it	Example
Digital exclusion	<p>Online-only or digital-first approaches exclude older people without internet access, devices, or digital confidence. Research shows material barriers, such as access and affordability, matter more than skills or motivation.<sup>42</sup> Digital engagement also tends to reach more affluent older people, compounding inequality.</p> <p><i>“Not all older people use information technology, lots of links become difficult for older people.” - older person in a workshop</i></p>	<p>Plan online and offline engagement. Consider if it is skills, motivation or access to technology which is digitally excluding older people</p> <p>If skills or access to technology are a barrier, then consider how you can support older people with that. If it is motivation, then explore other avenues for people to engage. Digital is not for everyone and so no engagement with older people should be digital only.</p> <p><i>“Ensuring outreach is across different means to be accessible, pop ins, leaflets, local papers, radio stations etc, including follow up.” - older person in a workshop</i></p>	<p>Age-friendly Hertfordshire ran a survey to understand residents’ experiences of ageing in the county. They received almost 3,000 responses, approximately 20% of which were from paper copies.</p>
Cultural and language barriers	<p>Communities where English is not a first language, or where there is limited trust of statutory organisations, may not engage through conventional routes.</p>	<p>Build up meaningful two-way relationships with people or organisations who share a cultural affinity with the community you want to reach. Earning trust over time is key. Go to where people gather, such as places of worship or cultural centres. Explore conversational ESOL classes as a route in. Consider intergenerational translation.</p>	<p>Engagement through mosques in Manchester - “Big Somali community in North Manchester - no point knocking on doors - instead Muslim councillors went to mosque to connect through cultural and language barriers to highlight what [their] needs are and what support is [needed]” - older person in a workshop</p>
Being housebound	<p>People with significant mobility limitations or health conditions may not be able to attend in-person activities and may be missed by standard outreach. These factors may mean individuals may feel their community is not accessible to them and therefore the engagement isn’t relevant, providing additional barriers to overcome in designing the engagement.</p>	<p>Postal engagement; digital engagement where accessible; reaching out through services already supporting housebound people, such as home care providers or telephone befriending services; door-knocking with care and appropriate support.</p>	<p>In Greater Manchester, the Ageing in Place Pathfinder coordinated by Greater Manchester Combined Authority worked with councils, community organisations and housing providers to make changes to neighbourhoods based on resident feedback. This included meetings between residents and home maintenance staff to discuss their homes, and community conversations in communal areas.</p>

<sup>42</sup> [Lloyds Digital Consumer Index 2025](#)

**Barriers to reaching older people**

Barrier	Why it matters	How to mitigate it	Example
Rural isolation	Geographical distance, infrequent public transport, and the loss of community infrastructure (libraries, mobile libraries, community centres) make in-person engagement difficult for many older people in rural areas. Rural postal services can also be so infrequent that consultations close before post arrives.	<p>Offer digital and postal options. Meet communities in places where they already gather.</p> <p>Consider how people will travel to any in-person activity. Set consultation deadlines to account for postal delays.</p> <p>Consider offering transport as part of in-person engagement activities.</p>	In Anglesey, 4 forums were being run centrally, but to make it more easily accessible, they shifted to running 8 smaller meetings in towns and villages. <sup>43</sup>
Work or caring responsibilities	Many older people will have demanding schedules filled with work and/or caring responsibilities. These might exclude them from either finding out about opportunities to engage or prevent them from easily being able to engage.	<p>Thinking about where information and adverts about opportunities to engage are placed can make a difference. Place them in workplaces or places where you know carers might go regularly.</p> <p>Consider deviating from normal good practice to host engagement in daylight hours to evening events if specifically looking to engage those working.</p> <p>Asynchronous engagement can also help address this barrier.</p>	The People Bank set up by East Sussex County Council allows people to submit ideas and suggestions at a time that suits them. <sup>44</sup>

Whilst these barriers can impact older people, they are not exclusive to older people. Many different protected characteristics, life circumstances and identities can make these more likely to be barriers for people to engage.

Age is not the only protected characteristic which can mean issues particularly impact them too. The intersections of age, socio-economic status, disability, educational attainment, employment status and ethnicity can all affect how people are impacted on by policies and services.

These kinds of intersecting experiences and identities can also mean that older people are particularly negatively affected by issues too.<sup>45</sup>

This means that it is often important to think about the diversity of older people who you want to engage with, and what their differing backgrounds and lived-experiences might be.

These barriers noted above are commonly cited, but they are not exhaustive. Use them as prompts for thinking about your specific context, and be honest about who your current approach is and is not likely to reach.

Finally, it is also worth considering that people may feel uncomfortable being described as an older person. It is often worth asking people how they identify and would like to be described.

<sup>43</sup> [Age-friendly Communities Impact Report](#), p 67

<sup>44</sup> [The People Bank](#)

<sup>45</sup> [State of Ageing](#)

## 5.5 Practical logistics

Logistics can determine whether older people can participate and there are several barriers.

The following considerations should be built into your planning from the outset.

### Location

Where you choose to run any in-person engagement will impact how accessible it is to different groups of older people. Often events will be hosted in places convenient for the local authority which is organising them, however this may not work for many older people. It may be that one location for a single event is not workable and you need to re-think how you reach people.

“[Local authorities] focus in on the city not the suburbs, no strategies for people [with] multiple barriers.”  
- older person in a workshop

### Case study: Age-friendly Hertfordshire

When setting up their Older People’s Forums, Hertfordshire decided to run their first forum in a sheltered housing scheme within the part of the county they wanted to engage.<sup>46</sup>

This was to ensure they went directly to the residents they most wanted to hear from - those who were over 75 and were more likely to have barriers accessing engagement events at a central location.

### Promotional materials

You will want to create materials such as flyers, FAQs, posters, websites and more that advertise the engagement that is taking place. There are a number of simple steps you can take to help ensure these materials are accessible to older people.

This can include clear font types, offering multiple methods of communication (e.g., not solely relying on QR codes), and using images which represent the diversity of older people.

Think about how you describe the people you want to hear from - do they identify as ‘older people,’ or do you need to describe a more specific age range or life experience which is relevant? The Good Practice Mentor Programme offers useful tips on this.<sup>47</sup>

### Transport and timing

Venues need to be accessible by a range of transport modes. Check public transport links, accessible car parking, and taxi access. Timing matters too: many older people rely on concessionary travel passes that are only valid at certain hours (for example, bus passes are valid from 9:30am in most areas of England). Evening activities may exclude people who are not comfortable or safe travelling after dark.

As a rule, schedule engagement activities during the day, finish before dark, and check which travel options will be available to participants when they need to get home.

“I’m in a service group and all meetings start at 7pm in the middle of town and finish at 9pm. It feels unsafe in town at that time. This is the time that works for the working age, so it is hard. A lot of things you cannot do because of the timetable and things being too late.”  
- older person in a workshop

It is good practice to offer to reimburse people participating in engagement for their travel expenses to and from the event.

This will take time to do as part of the participant onboarding process and may also include buying travel tickets for people in advance or booking them taxis if necessary. These same considerations can be made for covering caring expenses which older people may incur when participating.

### Case study: Anglesey Older People Forums

In Anglesey they found that hosting older people’s forums at central locations was not working for older people after the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>48</sup>

After listening to feedback from older people they decided to split into eight smaller meetings in towns and villages across the island, to make the forum more accessible.

### Case study: Knowsley’s Older People’s Voice Roadshows

Healthwatch Knowsley is responsible for the facilitation of Knowsley Older People’s Voice, which is a membership organisation with over 550 members.

Twice a year they run member roadshows through which they run engagements and promote local opportunities/ services. They fund the travel for all attendees of the roadshow, mainly through taxis, which they attribute to their large number of regular attendees (100-200 attendees).

Funding for these transport costs was built into their commissioning arrangement from the start.

<sup>46</sup> Interview

<sup>47</sup> [Addressing barriers to participation through outreach communications](#)

<sup>48</sup> Interview

### Venue considerations

A venue that works well for some people may not work well in practice for older people. As well as step-free access and toilet facilities, consider acoustics (echoey rooms are difficult for people with hearing loss), the availability of hearing loops, natural light, comfortable seating, and whether the space feels welcoming and familiar.

A venue that feels institutional or unfamiliar to some communities may put people off attending.

See the [Age-friendly Quick Guide to public and community buildings<sup>49</sup>](#) as well as the [venue and timing checklist](#) for a full set of considerations.

### Promotion and lead times

Rushed invitations are one of the most common avoidable barriers to participation.

Older people may need more time to plan and arrange travel, caring responsibilities, or support.

As a guideline, aim for at least four weeks' lead time for promoted events, and longer for rural or postal outreach. Think carefully about how invitations will reach people and not just whether they have been sent.

### Caring responsibilities

Many older people have caring responsibilities for partners, family members, pets or others. If no support is offered, they may be unable to attend. Good practice is to offer to cover caring costs incurred when people attend.

Where this is not feasible, ask participants directly what would help them engage.

### Recognising contributions

Older people's time and knowledge have value, and that value should be acknowledged. Ageist assumptions can lead to older people being treated as

though they are always available and do not need to be paid for their time. Good practice includes thank-you gifts, honoraria, expense payments, and providing food and drinks. See our [payment guidance](#) for more detail.

The mitigations above will often benefit other groups of people too, not just older people. There is no single formula for accessible engagement but planning well ahead and offering more than one way to participate is the most reliable approach. You can use tools like the [Participant Journey Template](#) and the [Venue and Accessibility Checklist](#) to help you think this through.

## 5.6 Working with partners

[Section 2.2](#) set out how to identify which organisations are already in contact with older people in your area. This section offers guidance on how to work with those partner organisations actively, to extend your reach and strengthen your engagement.

### Engaging older people directly through partner organisations

In many cases you can support existing groups, organisations and networks to hold engagement on your behalf.

You could share questions, conversation prompts or learning materials that inform a discussion hosted by the partner and fed back to the council.

The benefits of this approach include:

- It can be a relatively quick way to reach older people who are already connected to a trusted organisation.
- Older people may be more open and honest in a familiar setting with people they trust.
- Working with multiple partners at once can extend your reach.

Bear in mind that engagement will not be the primary purpose of most of these organisations. They may exist primarily to deliver services or provide social activities. It is also important to be aware of the asks already being made of these groups and networks. Those who bring together marginalised voices, e.g., people from ethnic minority backgrounds, may be asked by many organisations to help with engagement, placing a significant burden on those organisations and networks.

Here it is important to build up two-way relationships to help you understand this and to be open-minded when approaching those organisations so you can adapt to what they are able to offer at that time.

Build your engagement activities around what the group is already doing, and think carefully about who they are, when and where they gather, and how that relates to your topic.

See 'Recognising contributions' in [Section 5.4](#).

### Inviting older people to your engagement through partner organisations

Partners can also help you recruit older people to a separate engagement event by sharing invitations through their networks. Prepare materials that make this as easy as possible for the partner - an invitation letter, FAQs, a webpage, contact details - and think about what the partner organisation needs from you in return, particularly if it is a voluntary organisation with limited capacity.

### Taking the partnership further

The most effective partnerships go beyond recruitment. Consider how a partner organisation might help you achieve impact beyond the engagement itself, for example, by capturing ongoing feedback about how something is working on the ground.

### Key partner types

**VCSE organisations:** Often the most trusted intermediaries for older people, particularly for communities who are less likely to engage directly with the council. They can act as delivery partners for sustained engagement mechanisms, not just as recruitment routes.

**Health partners and social prescribing:** GP surgeries are a significant touchpoint for older people. Social prescribing link workers, whose role already involves connecting people to community support, could also connect people to decision-making forums, not just services.

**Faith groups and cultural organisations:** These offer valuable routes into communities with cultural or language barriers. Note that faith buildings work well for engaging people who are part of that faith community, but secular venues should always be available for those who are not. The University of Manchester found that older people play a key role in sustaining faith groups and cultural organisations and developed guidance on how to create stronger links between faith communities and the work of public health and age-friendly initiatives.<sup>50</sup>

**Fire and rescue services and other local public sector partners:** This may be less obvious but potentially valuable as trusted organisations who are in contact with older people and interested in supporting them.

They could share information about opportunities to engage with older people or be a delivery partner for engagement on some related topics.

<sup>50</sup> [Age-friendly Quick Guide](#)

<sup>50</sup> [The role of faith-based organisations in developing age-friendly communities](#)

## 6 Facilitating engagement

Good facilitation is what turns an engagement activity from a meeting into a genuine conversation.

Having someone act as a facilitator for discussions significantly improves the quality of what you hear.

A chair will often have a position of authority within the group which people are deferential to, and similarly an expert speaker may be deferred to due to their technical knowledge.

### 6.1 Facilitation principles

A facilitator's role is to create the conditions for a good conversation.

More specifically, a facilitator:

- Ensures everyone taking part is able to contribute in the way that works for them.
- Helps the group stay focused on the questions being explored.
- Makes sure quieter voices are heard alongside louder ones.
- Keeps a record of what the group produces.

#### Creating the conditions for the discussion

Before the discussion begins, it helps to work with participants to agree on a set of shared guidelines for how the group will work together.

These might be referred to as conversation guidelines or a group agreement, and cover things like listening without interrupting, respecting different views, and keeping what is shared confidential where appropriate. Having these agreed upfront gives the facilitator and the group something to refer back to if the discussion becomes difficult.

#### Creating conditions for diverse voices

In any group, some people will naturally speak more than others. When engaging older people, there are particular dynamics to be aware of:

- Participants with hearing difficulties may struggle to follow fast-moving group discussion. Consider seating arrangements, the use of hearing loops, and speaking clearly and at a measured pace.
- People who are less confident speaking in groups may contribute more readily in pairs or small groups before sharing with the whole room.
- The presence of local authority officers or other professionals in the same session can inhibit older people from speaking honestly. See [Section 6.2](#) for guidance on managing this.
- People who have had negative experiences of engagement in the past may be more guarded. Acknowledge this openly if it is likely to be relevant.

Not everyone communicates best through group discussion. Some common alternatives you can offer are:

#### For those attending an engagement

- Sharing materials in advance for people to reflect on and prepare their views if they are attending.

#### For those not attending an engagement

- Written responses to open questions.
- Post-event emails.
- Online forums that people can contribute to.

#### Intervening

One of the key roles of a facilitator is to intervene at appropriate times. Intervention may look like steering the discussion back when it goes off topic or out of scope of the engagement. It may also look like addressing someone who is unduly dominating the discussion, or causing harm to others through their language or behaviour.

#### Facilitation is a skill and roles need to be clear

Facilitation looks different in different contexts. Often a facilitator will be impartial on the topic being discussed - focused on process, not content. They will not share their own perspectives or insights, instead prioritising the space for participants to share theirs. In these instances they are not expected to provide expert analysis of the topic.

It is not always possible or necessary to have external facilitation for every engagement with older people. Sometimes people need to play multiple roles such as facilitator and expert.

For example:

- A local authority officer might bring a policy question to an older people's forum and, if they have the relevant skills, also facilitate the discussion
- The facilitator might come from a VCSE organisation that coordinates engagement and provides services for older people in the area.

What matters most is that everyone in the room is clear about what role each person is playing.

Unclear or undisclosed roles undermine trust in the engagement.

#### Useful prompts for facilitators

##### Try to:

- Make sure everyone understands the task - what they are being asked to do.
- Help the group get through the task in the time available.
- Hear from everyone as far as possible.
- Ask open questions that move the conversation forward.
- Check back with participants to confirm you have understood them correctly.
- Keep a clear record of the group's work.

##### Try not to:

- Share your own views on the topic unless your role specifically requires it.
- Ask leading questions.
- Argue with or correct participants.
- Draw conclusions on the group's behalf.
- Make assumptions about what people might think.

## 6.2 Facilitation in local authority contexts

Different engagement scenarios call for different facilitation approaches. In all cases, refer back to your purpose ([Section 3.3](#)) before planning the session, particularly what is genuinely in scope for change. This will guide the questions you ask and help ensure that older people's time produces usable outputs.

The scenarios below cover three common engagement contexts you are likely to encounter in a local authority setting.

For each, we suggest a facilitation approach, the kinds of questions that tend to work well, and what you can expect to get out of the session.

A template [facilitation plan](#) is available to help you structure any session in practice.

Scenario	Questions you might ask	Outputs	Facilitation considerations
Workshop to develop a vision for an age-friendly area	What would an age-friendly neighbourhood look like? What should the main priorities be?	A set of priorities for age-friendly action, grounded in lived experience, that can directly inform an action plan.	If the aim is to reach a shared conclusion (rather than in follow up activities) it will take extra time to weigh-up key trade-offs.
Gathering feedback on a service or digital tool	How are you using the service/tool? What is working well? What could be improved?	An honest picture of what is and is not working, with specific suggestions for improvement.	It can be tempting to 'defend' a service in the face of feedback. Impartial facilitation can be useful here.
Session with local authority officers and older people (e.g., older people's forum, ambassadors) present to agree priorities on a certain topic	How does this issue affect your life? What do you value most about this area/service? What are your concerns about the proposals? What would make them better? How could residents and the council work together?	Older people's priorities and concerns on the record; shared understanding between officers and participants; agreed next steps for working together.	Think about how you will manage the power dynamic between people who are there in their professional role and those there to share lived experience.



# 7 Embedding engagement across your organisation

Engaging older people well on a single occasion is valuable. Embedding engagement to make it a consistent, intentional feature of how your council works, is transformative.

Here we set out what this looks like in practice: how to approach embedding at governance level, within services, and across your local authority.

## What does embedding engagement mean?

A council has embedded engagement when it is done repeatedly, is meaningfully connected to decision-making, and is joined up with the work of local partners.<sup>51</sup>

This is made possible by a combination of formal factors, like policies and governance structures, and informal ones, like organisational culture and staff attitudes.<sup>52</sup>

Importantly, this is not about creating a single process that every team must follow. The aim is to embed an intentional approach to engagement.

This requires building conviction in the value of engagement so that staff, as a matter of course, consider what kind of engagement is appropriate and follow through on it.

## 7.1 Integration with governance

To build older people's engagement into the formal structures your council makes decisions through, focus on three things: mechanisms for engaging older people, buy-in, and engagement strategy.

### Mechanisms

If embedding engagement with older people is in part about making this a recurring practice, creating dedicated older people's engagement mechanisms, such as forums and boards (see [Section 5.1](#) for further detail), is a major component. A forum can be integrated into council decision-making through adding explicit commitments from the council to engage with it in its terms of reference.

For example, East Sussex's Older People's Forum secured a shift from their council, from merely having decisions communicated to the forum to starting decision-making there.<sup>53</sup> See the terms of reference template in the appendices for further guidance.

<sup>51</sup> [Embedding participatory governance](#)

<sup>52</sup> [Embedding participatory governance](#)

<sup>53</sup> Workshop

## Political and operational buy-in

Embedding engagement requires both political and operational support. At the political level, if your councillors champion engagement this can shift organisational culture by signalling that it is valued from the top. At the operational level, if your senior officers are publicly supportive of engagement this can encourage staff to value older people's input in turn. If you are working to build this buy-in, see [Section 4](#).

## Engagement strategies

Speak with colleagues to understand where council-wide and service-specific public engagement strategies could include consideration of older people. For example, strategies could include:

- Requirements on teams to demonstrate that older people have been consulted before key decisions are brought forward.
- Alignment of older people's engagement with council priorities and decision-making cycles.
- Coordination of engagement across teams to reduce duplication and participation fatigue.
- Making improvements to infrastructure that engagement processes rely on, even if these are used for other purposes too. For example, council communications and payment systems that are used to recruit, and remunerate, people who participate.

<sup>54</sup> [Planning Older Peoples Services](#)

<sup>55</sup> [Involve: Co-Production](#)

<sup>56</sup> For a step-by-step guide developed by Involve, see: [here](#).

For resources for different experience levels, see the [Co-Production Network for Wales' resource library](#).

For links to resources and case studies of co-production with older people specifically, see the Centre for [Ageing Better's co-production toolkit](#).

<sup>57</sup> The developing alternative is to cultivate more 'relational' services, such as that focused on at [Camden Council's Centre for Relational Practice](#).

When adding a focus on older people's engagement to strategies, this is also an opportunity to hear from the public themselves. For example, the East Lothian Health and Social Care Partnership addressed engagement as part of its wider plan for older people's services (and in the process created a new, ongoing panel mechanism).<sup>54</sup>

## 7.2 Embedding engagement in services

Embedding engagement also means making it part of how services are run.

One way to think about this is the idea of co-production. This is about "service providers and users work[ing] together to reach a collective outcome."<sup>55</sup> Any stage of a service can potentially be co-produced, from commissioning and procurement, to design, delivery and evaluation.

We'll focus on some key considerations for co-production, but if you are interested in exploring this further, explore the resources cited below.<sup>56</sup>

### Understanding personal histories

Listen to older people early on to understand what their experiences of a service have been over time. This is important because they may have had harmful experiences that need to be acknowledged, and because they may have become accustomed to a more 'transactional' relationship between themselves and council staff.<sup>57</sup>

Consider how you can support older people to share their personal history with a service; how you will make them feel comfortable engaging on potentially sensitive topics, and

avoid reproducing experiences of harm or marginalisation.

To help you think through these, consult [Section 6](#) on facilitation and [Section 8](#) on closing the feedback loop.

### Meet people where they are

An effective principle for service-level engagement is bringing engagement to where older people already are, rather than expecting them to come to it. This is particularly important for addressing inequalities in who can participate.

Examples include:

**Settings-based engagement:** This means using places like sheltered housing, libraries, and community centres to engage older people who may not be able to, or would prefer not to, travel elsewhere.<sup>58</sup> Using multiple locations for the same process also helps support a greater diversity of older people to participate.

**Co-location sites:** Co-located service sites are a great way for you to meet a variety of people where they are. For example, Gorton's multipurpose community hub has been used for public consultation drop-ins alongside the services it hosts.<sup>59</sup>

**Going mobile:** This can look like walking audits that involve older people in planning decisions, such as that carried out at Leeds train station,<sup>60</sup> Bolton town centre,<sup>61</sup> and as part of Hounslow's walking and wheeling action plan development.<sup>62</sup>

Hounslow uses these as part of its wider 'engagement infrastructure' for community development officers, which includes area forums, VCSE partnership working, and community insight reports.<sup>63</sup>

### Frontline staff conversations as engagement

Frontline staff are in regular contact with older people, and their interactions are a source of insight. Rather than creating additional engagement activities, your council can train and support staff to use these interactions as engagement opportunities.

For example, in Kirklees, adult social care staff are given the autonomy and flexibility to focus on having conversations with older people in casual settings they prefer, and use these as sites for engagement. This is supported by a wider adoption of a community-led outcome based accountability framework.

This means the outcomes that older people highlight in these conversations can more directly shape what staff then work towards.<sup>64</sup>

This approach works best when staff are given genuine ownership over how they embed engagement in their context, rather than having a standardised process imposed from above.

### Building on standards in services

Co-producing service standards with older people is a natural basis for their continued engagement, including through inviting them to support services to then implement and monitor standards.

In Manchester, leisure services developed standards with older residents, and centres are annually reviewed with older people to assess whether these are being met. Standards and engagement can reinforce each other: the former provides the commitment, and the latter provides the means to check that commitment is being met.<sup>65</sup>

### Equality Impact Assessments

Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) provide a systematic prompt for considering how decisions affect older people as a group who have a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

However, the value of EIAs depends on whether older people's perspectives are gathered. Embedding engagement with older people into council processes is a practical way to ensure EIAs reflect real experience rather than officer assumptions.

For example, at Manchester City Council, the age-friendly team co-produced guidance which encourages officers to host discussions on what the impacts of the change in question might be with older people, and directs them to contacts in the Age Friendly Manchester (AFM) team, the AFM Older People's Board, and the AFM Older People's Assembly to facilitate this.<sup>66</sup>

### Case study: Building co-production into ways of working in Northamptonshire

West Northamptonshire Council has brought co-production into how it delivers adult social care, for example in its commissioning for dementia and carer support.<sup>67</sup>

In 2024 it created a Co-Production board which sets priorities on these areas and monitors the council's progress. The Board is run by Voluntary Impact Northamptonshire (VIN) on behalf of the Council, and is chaired by an expert by experience who is supported by VIN to take on the role.<sup>68</sup>

The Board, which includes other experts by experience, VIN, and Council staff meets every two months online.<sup>69</sup>

Beyond West Northamptonshire, the county as a whole also has a Co-Production Community of Practice for council, ICB, provider and voluntary sector practitioners. This meets to align approaches to co-production, and is hosted by the lived experience lead for Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, the work of [Age Better Sheffield](#).

<sup>59</sup> [Age-friendly Communitites, p7](#)

<sup>60</sup> See [Age-friendly Communitites](#) and [Walking and Wheeling Action Plan](#)

<sup>61</sup> [Age-friendly case study](#)

<sup>62</sup> See [Age-friendly Communitites](#) and [Walking and Wheeling Action Plan](#)

<sup>63</sup> [Building engagement infrastructure: Hounslow's community development approach](#)

<sup>64</sup> Interview

<sup>65</sup> [Manchester launches new Age Friendly leisure standards to honour commitment to older people](#)

<sup>66</sup> See: [Age Friendly Manchester EIA Guidance](#)

<sup>67</sup> See: [Carer strategy 2024-2029](#)

<sup>68</sup> [Co-Production Framework](#)

<sup>69</sup> [Experts by Experience](#)

<sup>70</sup> [West Northamptonshire Narrative Plan](#)

### 7.3 Joining up across the organisation

Embedding is also about how engagement is coordinated across your council as a whole. Older people tell us that councils ask them the same questions through different teams without connecting the answers.

This wastes their time, erodes trust, and represents a missed opportunity to build a cumulative picture of their needs and priorities.

In addition to building older people's engagement into strategies, some practical steps to join things up include:

**Mapping engagement and spotting opportunities:** Identify what is already happening across teams, with which older people, and on what topics. Make it a standard that when planning engagement with any age group, staff consider if a topic is also relevant to older people.

**Sharing intelligence:** Establish ways for insights from engagements in one part of the council to be accessible to others. This might be a shared archive of outputs, or through regular cross-departmental meetings.

**Avoiding duplication:** Support staff to be historically literate about what has been asked before and to consider how new engagement can build on previous ones. Where similar questions are being explored across teams, consider if a joint engagement activity would serve everyone better (and save costs).

**Building shared language and understanding:** A minimal level of shared terminology and knowledge about engagement across the organisation can support cross-departmental monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

### 7.4 Building organisational capacity

Sustaining embedded engagement over time requires the right conditions in your council. Some of this is about skills and resources, and some of it is about culture.

#### Skills and resourcing

If you are a senior leader, consider investing in staff training on how to plan, run, and use the outputs of engagement with older people. You should also consider how your engagement capacity is best organised: as a centralised team that advises and supports other services, as staff distributed across departments, or some combination of both. The choice should be deliberate and reviewed over time.

If you are an officer, you can better direct training investment through identifying skills gaps; use [Sections 4, 5, and 6](#) of this toolkit to identify where you feel you need particular support when it comes to older people's engagement. Beyond external training, you can look for an engagement practitioner network to find opportunities to shadow peers, or collaborate with others to set up a network for this.

You can also reach out to experienced practitioners elsewhere who may be able to offer you advice. Finally, there are a range of free resources from practitioner organisations, such as those from [Involve](#)<sup>71</sup> and [MosaicLab](#)<sup>72</sup>, and free method libraries like [Participedia](#)<sup>73</sup> and [SessionLab](#)<sup>74</sup>.

#### Culture change

Embedding engagement also depends on staff beliefs and behaviours. Negative assumptions about the value of older people's input - whether rooted in ageism, in a preference for top-down decision-making, or in defensive relationships with the public - keeps engagement at the surface of how a council functions rather than embedded within it.<sup>75</sup>

Addressing this means challenging ageist assumptions in your council, investing in staff development, and creating space for staff to experience for themselves the value that genuine engagement with older people can produce.

“In the basement of a library [they held a] consultation about a model of a memorial. The planning officer said ‘I don't have to be here you know.’ [It was such an] attitude of rudeness. It would be useful if [the] council had a department to train staff to engage with people [better]:“  
- older person in a workshop.

Culture change also means remaining open to new methods and creative approaches. An over-rigid commitment to established engagement procedures can be as much of a barrier to good practice as a lack of commitment to engagement altogether.

Creating lasting room for culture change requires buy-in from peers and senior leaders, and so officers should focus on making the case for this, as we set out in [Section 4](#).

Without the appropriate culture, the ability to set up high-quality, impactful engagement will be undermined, and risks eroding the trust of older people.

If you are faced with this situation, you should focus on making the case before pursuing your engagement process.

Reaching out to peers and networks that can support you to do this can be an empowering first step.

<sup>71</sup> [Involve](#)

<sup>72</sup> [Mosaic Lab](#)

<sup>73</sup> [Participedia](#)

<sup>74</sup> [SessionLab](#)

<sup>75</sup> [Locating Authority](#), pp11-12

8

# Closing the loop, learning and evaluating engagement

Older people’s trust in engagement depends not just on how it is run, but on what happens afterwards.

This section covers two things that follow every engagement activity: closing the feedback loop with participants, and evaluating what the engagement achieved. Both matter, and both are often underdone.

## 8.1 Why closing the loop matters

The most consistent message we heard from older people about engagement is simple. Tell us what you did with what we told you. Without this, engagement feels extractive, something done to older people rather than with them.

Councils that are honest with older people about what their input did and did not change, and that do so consistently over time, build the kind of trust that sustains participation.

**Closing the loop** and **evaluation** are connected but distinct activities. Closing the loop is about communicating back to participants. Evaluation is about learning what worked, what did not, and what difference the engagement made.

## 8.2 How to close the loop

Closing the feedback loop should be built into your plans from the start, not added as an afterthought once the engagement is over. Commit early to when and how you will report back to participants, communicate that timeline clearly, and stick to it.

There will be multiple opportunities to close the loop, not just at the end.

When	What you can do
During engagement	Let older people know how their input is being used in real time, giving concrete examples where you can.
After engagement	Report what was said, how it influenced decisions and what decisions were made. Be honest about limitations.
As actions are implemented (or not)	Provide updates on progress and share resulting changes or outcomes. Be transparent when ideas cannot be implemented and explain clearly why.

**You said, we did:** This is a simple and effective way to structure feedback. This is widely used across organisations and gives older people a clear, direct account of what happened as a result of their engagement.

East Sussex County Council’s adoption of this approach was specifically cited by older people as making their forum feel effective and worth continuing to participate in.

**Share the bad news as well as the good:** Older people want to know when their engagement has had an impact, when it has not, and why. Sharing only positive outcomes can feel patronising and erode trust over time. A ‘You Said, We Did’ report that honestly explains why certain suggestions could not be acted on is more valuable than one that presents only successes.

**Create quick, visible wins where you can:** One of the most effective ways to sustain older people’s motivation to engage is to ensure they can see the effect of their participation quickly. This does not always mean a major policy change. Sometimes a small, visible outcome early in a process is enough to demonstrate that engagement is real.

See our [‘You Said, We Did’ reporting template](#) as a starting point.



### 8.3 Evaluating your engagement

Evaluation is the process of collecting, analysing, and reporting information about the engagement you did, covering how it was designed and delivered, what outcomes it achieved, and what impact it had.

It can be light-touch or in-depth depending on your goals and capacity, but some form of evaluation should follow every engagement.

Effective evaluation supports four things:

- Creating **accountability** to participants, partners, funders, and the public.
- Supporting **learning**, helping you and your organisation improve future engagement.
- Demonstrating **impact** by showing how older people's input influenced decisions.
- Building the **evidence** base for what approaches are worth investing in.

#### Check back against your original purpose and scope

The starting point for any evaluation should be the purpose and scope agreed before the engagement began, as set out in [Section 3.3](#) of this toolkit. If you did not agree on a clear purpose at the outset, evaluation becomes much harder.

#### A simple evaluation framework

The following five questions provide a practical framework for evaluating any engagement with older people. They are prompts for reflection, not a scoring system. Asking 'why' in response to each one is what shifts this from a tick-box exercise to something genuinely useful.

1. Did the engagement meet its original purpose and stay within the intended scope?
2. Did the older people you wanted to reach actually participate?
3. What was the experience of the older people who engaged? Did they feel heard?
4. What changed as a result of the engagement?
5. What would you do differently next time?

The scale of the engagement will determine how formally and extensively you work through these questions.

A large public consultation warrants a thorough written evaluation.

A small service feedback session might be a quick team debrief.

What matters is that the questions are asked, and that the answers inform what you do next. You can use these questions in [Appendix 9: Evaluation framework](#).

#### Involve older people in the evaluation

Evaluation does not have to be something you do alone.

Involving older people in reflecting on how the engagement went, what worked, what did not, and whether they felt genuinely heard can produce insights that an internal review will miss. It also signals that you value their perspective on the process, not just the content. In some cases, older people can be involved in analysing outputs and helping to identify what should happen next as a result.

This could look like sharing raw data from engagement with older people and working with them to identify key themes from it, or asking them to sense-check the analysis which you do of the engagement work to ensure you don't miss key perspectives or nuance.



## 9 Sustaining engagement over time

This section introduces the idea of sustained engagement processes with older people, when they are appropriate, what they require, and how to support older people to take an active role within them.

### 9.1 What is sustained engagement and when is it appropriate?

By 'sustained engagement' we mean a single mechanism, such as a panel, or a set of different but connected mechanisms, such as workshops and surveys, that engage older people over time.<sup>76</sup>

This could mean regularly engaging people, but the process still has an end date.

Alternatively, it could mean creating a permanent, ongoing mechanism, like an older people's forum.

Sustained engagement might be appropriate, for example, if:

- You want to continue to understand over time how older people's views and experiences of a service change.
- You want to hear the views and experiences of the same group of older people but about a range of different topics.

<sup>76</sup> For further information on panels, see: [Involve](#)

- You want to support people to be familiarised with a range of information and perspectives on a topic over repeated engagements.

If you are thinking about setting up a sustained process, the prompts below are designed to help you avoid the risk of setting up a process that cannot deliver meaningful engagement over time:

- Does the purpose of your engagement lend itself to a sustained process, or is a one-off process more appropriate? If you are unsure, go to [Section 3](#) to help think through your purpose further.
- Do you have the staff capacity, funds, and other resources in place to establish and maintain this process long-term?
- Do you have the buy-in from councillors, council teams, and external partners to keep the process going and to keep it impactful?
- Have you spoken to older people who might participate to gauge their interest in an ongoing process?

If your answer to any of these is 'no,' then it is best to first consult [Sections 5](#) and [4](#), to look at your engagement planning and how you can build further buy-in, respectively. Councils that have already embedded engagement into their work will be better placed to sustain ongoing processes. Consult [Section 7](#) to learn more about this.

### 9.2 What needs to be considered when doing sustained engagement?

Compared with one-off or short-term engagement, what sustained engagement adds is not new ingredients, but a different kind of relationship with participants.

Some important considerations include:

- **Managing membership:** sustained processes require developing policies on how long people can participate, how to handle attrition - for example, due to health issues - and how to onboard and integrate new members. This is particularly important to counteract the possibility for the initial diversity of perspectives in a group to reduce over time as views begin to converge.
- **Group cohesion and cliques:** over time, participants in a sustained process will build relationships and develop a strong sense of group identity. This supports trust, continuity, and commitment, but it can also make a group more insular and resistant to new voices. Managing the balance between group cohesion and openness is one of the key facilitation challenges in sustained engagement. See [Section 6](#) for guidance on facilitation approaches that can help.
- **Sustaining motivation:** ongoing processes may not have a definitive endpoint that can help motivate people in the same way to participate, or provide a clear sense of closure. This means feedback loops, in particular, need to adapt to people's ongoing involvement.
- **Changing context:** long-term processes need to adapt to wider change beyond participants, including staff churn, council developments, different stages of decision-making and wider societal events.
- **Governance:** where members have more control over the running of a process itself, this introduces questions around governance - we'll return to this on the next page.



### 9.3 Supporting groups to lead their own participation

Sustained engagement can be led by a greater or lesser degree by participants.

Below are some ways you can support older people to take the lead in their participation:

- **Integrating participant-led activities:** at a minimum, you can introduce activities that give older people the lead at particular stages. For example, you might want to give your participants an agenda-setting role, using a method like Open Space Technology<sup>77</sup>, or an evaluation role, using a method like community scorecards.<sup>78</sup> Be transparent about how people's input will interact with any other stages of the process that are not being led by them, and whether any participant-led components will continue long-term.
- **Giving participants specific roles:** older people can be given specific roles in an engagement mechanism. For example, the Greater Manchester Older People's Network (GMOPN) recruits members to sit on, or chair, its steering and working groups, as well as to be media spokespeople, all supported by the GMOPN staff team.<sup>79</sup>
- **Supporting Age-friendly ambassadors:** these are older volunteers who engage with their communities and promote activity to make their areas good places for older people to live. You can create ambassador roles for members in your engagement process, for example, to gain wider feedback on an issue being considered.

- Being an ambassador gives people the opportunity to build their confidence in planning and leading participatory processes in contexts that may feel more comfortable for them.<sup>80</sup>
- **Be a secretariat for older people's groups:** you can support older people to take the lead on their participation by holding the administrative and logistical tasks so they can focus on the group's activities. For example, Age UK East London employs a coordinator for its Older People's Reference Groups for Newham, Hackney, and Tower Hamlets, but the Group itself is chaired by members who direct meeting agendas.<sup>81</sup>
- **Supporting existing local self-organisation:** people may be members of local civil society organisations, such as park friends, residents' associations, or conversation clubs, which would benefit from council support, such as venues, small grants, and promotion. Furthermore, people may be interested in starting a local group, but need guidance on how to do this which you signpost to.<sup>82</sup> Corsham Town Council's social prescribing team supported an older person to set up a local chronic illness support group, then stepped away once the group was confident to continue themselves. Such groups have gone on to be avenues through which the Council shares information. While these groups will not have public engagement as a focus, they can still contribute as sites for people to convene and feed into a wider engagement process.

<sup>77</sup> See: [Involve](#)

<sup>78</sup> See: [Participedia](#)

<sup>79</sup> [Greater Manchester: Older People's Network](#)

<sup>80</sup> For further guidance on supporting Age-friendly ambassadors, see: [here](#)

<sup>81</sup> [The Power of the OPRG](#)

<sup>82</sup> See [Horsham District Council](#), and [Good Practice Mentors How to Grow Sustainable Groups](#)

#### Case study: The People Bank in East Sussex

A well-functioning mechanism does more than meet regularly. It creates an ongoing engagement cycle that builds trust and provides a willing pool of volunteers to draw on across a variety of activities and topics.

In East Sussex, a group of volunteers working with East Sussex County Council developed 'The People Bank', where people of all ages share knowledge and lived experience to influence how adult social care is provided.

People can join if they have experience of receiving social care or of caring for someone who does, which includes plenty of older people. Membership is flexible, allowing people to take part in activities that interest them in a way that suits their needs. Members also have the opportunity to join the Citizens' Panel: a smaller group of volunteers that meets four times a year to share views on services and policies.

The People Bank is a good example of how flexible engagement can continue as an opportunity for all age groups and take account of different support needs. Whatever members take part in, the local authority provides them with a report summarising the feedback and insight they provided, as well as the Council's responses and the outcomes of their contributions. East Sussex County Council reported that they had learned from members that, even if their suggestions and input result in no change, they value having the reasons for this explained to them. Many of these impact reports are publicly available on the People Bank webpage.<sup>83</sup>

This kind of visible connection between what older people say and what the local authority does is one of the most effective ways to sustain trust and participation over time.

<sup>83</sup> [East Sussex People Bank](#)

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## Templates, tools and further resources

We have developed a series of templates, tools and checklists which you can download and use for planning your engagement with older people.

These have been developed based on expertise from Involve and Ageing Better. There are hyperlinks to these throughout the toolkit. In some instances, these templates expand the guidance which was shared in the toolkit, or goes into further detail.

You can adapt these materials to your context and needs, which is why they are in editable formats.

### List of templates, tools and further resources:

[Engagement brief](#)

[Venue and timing checklist](#)

[Participant onboarding plan](#)

[Facilitation plan template and online facilitation plan template](#)

[Engagement mapping tool](#)

[Terms of reference template](#)

[Thank you gift/expenses guidance](#)

[You said, we did template](#)

[Evaluation template](#)



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The Centre for Ageing Better is pioneering ways to make ageing better a reality for everyone, including challenging ageism and building an Age-friendly Movement, creating Age-friendly Employment and Age-friendly Homes. It is a charitable foundation funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and part of the government's What Works Network.