

Expert Elders

More than a tick box

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Sheffield's population is getting older. It is anticipated that the 65+ population will grow by 25% over the next 25 years – from 83,000 to 103,000. The Expert Elders network is concerned with the empowerment of older people to ensure they have a strong voice in how services are shaped to meet their needs.

The network is made up of over 200 people from across the city drawn from all social backgrounds and representing the diversity of the city. 18% are from BME communities, 25% are carers or are cared for and over 60% are women. They volunteer their time and use their experience and views to improve services and the quality of life for older people in the city.

"We are a variety of people. We are activists, we are not passive. We realised that together we could have a stronger voice. We could challenge as well as respond"
(Expert Elder)

The aims of the Expert Elders Network are to:

- » Communicate the aims, developments and progress of the project with older people
- » Ensure that older people are well informed and have the skills, understanding and confidence to participate
- » Record the views of older people and make sure that they are effectively presented to a range of services.

"Would you deny the value of 1,000 years of experience sitting round this table?"

(Expert Elder)



Expert Elders came into being as part of the Partnerships for Older People Projects (POPPS) programme in Sheffield¹. The network was set up following consultation with older people and was created by a partnership of older people, carers, the City Council, the NHS and the voluntary sector.

The project was welcomed and supported at the highest level within the City Council. The Director of Adult Services has worked closely with the network and has established a relationship of trust.

"Our voice was heard and it was acted upon. We always got a response even if it wasn't the one we wanted."

(Expert Elder)

¹ Sheffield POPPS was one of a number of pilot projects across the country to promote independence, health and well being for older people and to try out new ways of doing things.

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What does the network look like?

The 200 Expert Elders are supported by a small staffed project team to volunteer their time to advise the NHS, the Local Authority and other agencies on the planning, design and delivery of local services. Project coordinators had responsibility for building the network - identifying older people who are willing to become Expert Elders and encouraging involvement from traditionally under represented groups (though there is still less representation than hoped from the Chinese community and women from Asian communities, and a gap around the open representation of the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender communities).

Expert Elders have participated in more than 130 projects and the level of interest is increasing. These have included the recruitment of staff, training of social workers and the monitoring and evaluation of a range of services from care homes to libraries.

“We are all working hard on behalf of our customers but few of us experience what it is like to be a recipient. Expert Elders tell you how it is!”

(Service Provider)



The rules of engagement

A steering group of older people, working with the project coordinators have designed a service that enables older people to register their specific interests and type of involvement ranging from commenting on draft policies, to sitting on service modernisation boards, to helping write job descriptions. The coordinators then promote the availability of this ‘well’ of knowledge and encourage organisations to register requests for older people’s participation. They act as brokers, ensuring that there is a match between levels of interest, knowledge and time required.

The details of this service have been drawn up into an operational framework. This sets out the practical issues that need to be taken into account when seeking the involvement of older people – the rules of engagement. This means that all parties – both Expert Elders and service providers - are clear about expectations as they engage with each other.

“When Expert Elders are asked to do things we say you must consider that we are giving our time – we may need meetings during hours when we can use our bus passes; we may need time at the start of the day to take our medication. You must consider our needs. Sometimes it feels like they think you’re sitting at home with your diary waiting for them to come along.”

(Expert Elder)

The framework also documents:

- » Recognition of the contribution that Expert Elders bring to the network and what support they can expect
- » A code of conduct on the roles and responsibilities around representation, involvement and participation
- » Valuing Equality and Diversity policy
- » Reward and Recognition Policy to ensure that Expert Elders are not out of pocket because of their involvement and to measure the real cost of their involvement including transport, caring arrangements and interpretation

Evaluation forms have been included for both the Expert Elders and the services using the network.

Expert Elders receive support and training to help them develop their skills and confidence, so they can influence the development and planning of services. All Expert Elders are offered training on how Sheffield’s statutory and voluntary agencies work. In addition, a modular training programme has been developed with the full engagement of older people which enables them to develop their skills depending on their need or interest. The menu includes Committee Skills, Communication Skills, Consultation, Community Leadership, Performance Management, Recruitment and Selection. The exception is the Equality and Diversity training which is compulsory for all.

The Operational Framework contains a detailed set of protocols for the delivery of training which covers points older people have raised when events are organised.

The network meets every 6 weeks. This is where Expert Elders communicate with each other about the range of activities that they have participated in. This helps to keep a sense of the network as a whole. Service providers attend and give direct feedback on the work they have been doing, highlighting the impact that Expert Elders have made on their service planning and delivery. The Communications group produce a regular newsletter which keeps people informed about the work of the Expert Elders.

The Art and Design Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University has worked with the Expert Elders on a project investigating the design of the home for older people.

“As designers we continually strive to ensure the products we develop meet the real needs of the people who use them. Moreover, as researchers we need real world evidence to support our investigations. Sheffield’s Expert Elders have been invaluable in this respect. They have offered an articulate, detailed and passionate insight into the lives of older people.”

(Simon Bowen, Sheffield Hallam University)

What has happened as a result:

- » Older people have been brought in touch with each other. They’ve learned from each other, made friends, been active and stimulated by their involvement. *“I have made friends, become more involved in my local community and have a new purpose in life”*
- » Awareness has been raised regarding the needs of older people from minority ethnic communities
- » Women from generations that have traditionally been more passive are getting involved and finding a voice, many for the first time.
- » Expert Elders are better informed and engaged with council services:

“Council departments are now really involving us in projects that they want help with. If I wasn’t an Expert Elder or involved in POPPS it’s a right merry go round trying to find where to go and how to find things; but through POPPS we know where to go because we meet the people along the way now and who actually ask to see us now.”

Services have changed as a result of participation from Expert Elders:

- » Generic care workers are now being trained in hand and toe nail cutting after a network member complained that his home carer could not cut his toe nails. This initiative is known as ‘Joe’s Toes’.
- » The job descriptions for Rapid Response nurses were changed to include mental health skills as older people felt that ‘ordinary’ intermediate care services did not recognise the number of older people with mental health needs.
- » The Council’s Private Sector Housing team used Expert Elders to help draw up the eligibility criteria for the Minor Works Assistance Grant (to help financially vulnerable older owner occupiers).
- » Expert Elders have worked with the City Council and Brunel University on the DIADEM project (Delivering Inclusive Access for Disabled or Elderly Members of the community) which aims to make online forms easier to fill in.

- » Older people are conducting the research for the Simplified Access project using questionnaires with their friends and neighbours. They were briefed in the protocols of interviewing and made aware of some of the pitfalls. They anticipate there will be a greater response rate as they will be known to the interviewees. It will also increase social interaction and break down isolation.

What makes it different:

- » Older people were involved in setting up the network from the very early stages of writing the bid for the POPPs programme and the recruitment of the project workers. This established the voice of older people at the heart of the programme right from the start, as demonstrated by the principle of 50:50 representation – older people and agency workers – on the partnership board.
- » The project coordinators, working with a steering group of older people, have designed and produced an operational framework for the involvement and engagement of older people in Sheffield. This means that all parties – both Expert Elders and service providers - are clear what is expected from them as they engage with each other.
- » The network has enabled genuine involvement in decisions such as staff recruitment and inputting to important areas of policy and planning. The input is at the right stage eg the design of buildings and of bathrooms and extra care housing. Because Expert Elders are involved in the early stages of design, they can call providers to account further on in the process and ask ‘what happened to what we said?’
- » The project is flexible and listens to and learns from the members of the network. Feedback during a project review indicated that members weren’t aware of the impact their input was having. The staff were learning from the feedback forms submitted by agencies

but not passing this information on to the members. Staff now make a conscious effort to report back on the results of Expert Elders input at the 6-weekly meetings and encourage service providers to do the same.

- » The project considers and responds to older people’s needs and there is always somebody at the end of the phone. Occasionally people get confused as to what they have volunteered for or what they are expected to do. Responding to this requires patience and sometimes a process needs to be changed to accommodate potential confusion.
- » The findings of consultations have been acted upon and this has been feedback to the network.

“This is not just about consultation this is about really listening and acting on what we say.”

(Expert Elder)

- » The network promotes and shares good practice with agencies and service providers:

Golden Rules

When engaging with older people in this way:

- » Time, location and accessibility of meetings;
- » Communication, Communication, Communication;
- » Feedback;
- » Patience and Respect;
- » Refreshments.

Be prepared to hear things you don’t want to hear!

Learning

Empowerment for older people requires:

- » Guidance from a group
- » Understanding of individual issues and how they can combine to build consensus around bigger issues
- » Element of common sense
- » Having a city wide remit (not just linked to an individual project) makes the voice stronger. Where localised (eg around 1 particular hospital) it’s easier for others to control the voice.
- » Voice should be there on a day to day basis; should be working alongside not off and on.

Expert Elder

- » A number of older people are not used to Council meetings and bureaucracy. They come to the network with high expectations and a low understanding of how to get things done in a large organisation. Achievements are not always recognised as it can take so long for things to happen. For officers this means working with people to raise their understanding. For older people this means cultivating persistence and patience.
- » Older people are not a homogenous group. The age range encompasses at least 2 generations with a wide range of views. No one can speak for the network, but all can contribute an opinion as part of a wider mix.

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- » Through their outreach work, the project coordinators have identified that there is extensive common ground between communities regarding the issues that they face as older people; for BME communities these issues are magnified by language and certain cultural barriers.

Sheffield City Council Communications Team recently (Jan 09) asked for Expert Elder input into a recruitment process.

...Through being involved with the older people on the group, (most of whom I would now consider friends), using Expert Elders in recruitment activities and supporting various POPPS events, I have found that my appreciation of what older people can bring to any activity, or decision making process, has grown tremendously. By applying their vast and varied knowledge and experience, they can challenge assumptions, provide alternatives and suggest innovative solutions which may never have occurred to officers or staff...

Expert Elders often question what difference they have made, either by being involved in a specific activity, or generally as a group of older people. I can say that one of the biggest changes they have made may be to have affected the way officers think about, and plan services for older people.

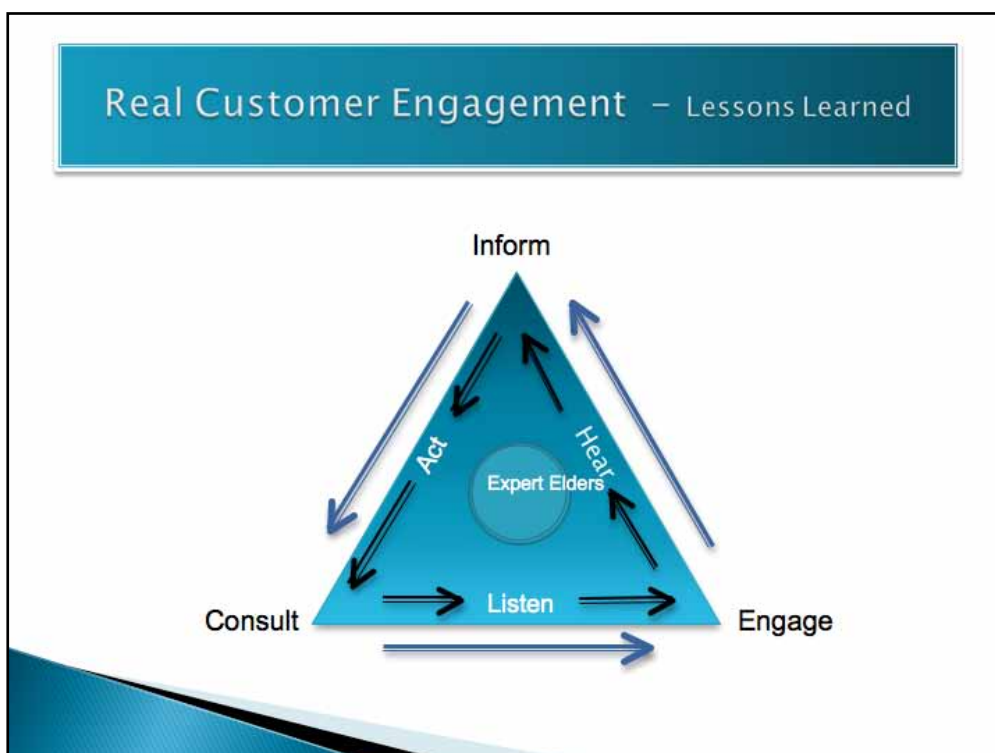
By getting involved with Expert Elders on specific activities, working with them to plan and communicate with other older people, I find their viewpoint has now rubbed off on me! What this means is I now take those experiences forward with me into all sorts of other areas. In meetings, and when taking decisions, I now consider the older person much more than I did. It doesn't mean I make assumptions about what they would like or say. I just anticipate more when they would want to be involved and then plan how that should be done...

*...The biggest change the EE/POPPS program may have made is one that is probably hardest to measure; that now public service providers have a real hunger to involve older people in the planning of their services. We've moved from having to include older people to **needing** to include them. Our services won't become the best they can be without them.*

(Nick Partridge, SCC)

What's next

The network has been developed into a model of engagement that can be promoted and shared with service providers. It can also be adopted for use with other groups such as parents.



Expert Elders - more than a tick box



Expert Elders want to remain as an activist group, and to avoid getting involved and bogged down in administrative issues. They want to maintain their independence from the organisations that they want to change and to act as a 'critical friend'.

"We have a lot of 'nowse' to contribute. We want to help and we want to be used but not be overburdened and bogged down in admin."

(Expert Elder)

The funding for the initial phase of the project has now come to an end. Some transitional funds have been made available until March 2010. Expert Elders are now moving on to a new phase. This requires:

- » Streamlining expectations and getting best use from shrinking resources.
- » Finding a host network/organisation to provide arms length management, in order to make sure the Expert Elders network continues to develop its role as 'critical friend'.
- » Increasing the role of the Expert Elders in building the membership of the network.

» Focusing the role of the network coordinators on marketing the network to services and increasing the number of projects that Expert Elders are involved in.

» Building leadership capacity within the network to organise and facilitate the 6-weekly meetings.

» Ensuring that the lessons learned through the Expert Elders network are taken on by the Adult Services strategic directorate and other Council services such as Libraries.

"This project has let the genie out of the bottle, you can't get it back in now."

(Expert Elder)

"We don't want services for users and carers to carry on like this in to the future. We want better services for those who come after us."

(Expert Elder)

This case study was compiled by Rose Ardron on behalf of NEPYH. Thank you to Joan Hubbard, Lewis Atkins and Lorraine Jubb.

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