



No. 10a: Reaching out to the wider community - Older isolated people

Introduction

Civic society membership should, ideally, be representative of the community in which the society is based. While many societies may find their membership tends to be made up predominantly of older people, it is perhaps a paradox that the special needs and interests of this group can easily be overlooked simply because older members may not be active participants in the life of the society. Equally, the particular problems faced by older people within the wider community may prevent their voice being heard when planning and other matters are being discussed. Civic societies can play a vital part in ensuring that older people are involved but societies will have to work harder to effect this engagement to overcome these problems because older people may be living alone, living with disabilities or in locations with little or no public transport so making it more difficult for them to engage with the things your society does.

The challenge today

The principle focus of most civic societies will be the built environment. Indeed, civic societies have generally been established through a shared concern for the quality of the built environment and its impact on the quality of life people have. In considering planning applications, or working with developers and town planners, societies should be thinking about the impact of new and existing schemes on all sectors of the community. If your society has a very active and involved membership, your job will be made easier. However, if many of your members are passive, giving you their financial and moral support because they share the concerns of the society but taking no direct part in your activities, how do you know gather their thoughts and ideas on what is happening within your area? And how do you go about soliciting views of people who are not members, particularly of older people? Older people are likely to have different concerns and priorities from younger people: they may be more worried about crime; public transport; street lighting; healthcare; social services; housing provision; disabled access to, and location of, local amenities; etc. It is important that you gather these views to help you formulate your society's strategy when responding to planning applications, for example, or campaigning for improved facilities, particularly if you are to champion the issues that matter to older people.

In trying to reach out to older members of the community, whether or not they are already members of your society, there are some points to which you will need to give particular attention. This advice sheet touches on some of these in an attempt to trigger discussion and hopefully to prompt you to take action that you might not previously have considered. While this advice is targeted at helping you to reach out to older people, it should be acknowledged that, as a group, older people will have a wealth of information, local knowledge, experience and skills that would often serve any society well and it is a missed opportunity if your organisation does not try to avail itself of this potential source of new members and ideas.

Challenge

Suggested steps to take/points to consider

i. Does your membership include a representative cross-section of older people? If not, what steps are you taking to increase membership in this area?

Could you work with a local organisation that provides services for older people to make contact, give talks about the work of the society, hold coffee mornings, etc., in residential homes, social clubs, etc., for example? Do you target older people in your mailings and campaigns? Are there any organisations supporting older people in your area who could become members of your society? Do you include such organisations on your mailing list?

Could your existing members put you in touch with people they know who might like to get involved?

ii. Could older people participate in your society's activities?

If your society holds events, think about access arrangements. Could someone on a low income or who has mobility problems actually get to (and then get into) the venue? Are there toilets at ground floor level, or are there lifts?

Remember that older people may be isolated both in the sense that they live away from population centres and in the sense that they do not have family and social networks to offer support and encouragement. Could they cover the cost of travelling to events?

Is there disabled parking available close by? Does the venue have facilities such as hearing loops? Could someone using a wheelchair gain access – and be aware that not only should there be ramps instead of steps into buildings but that door-ways need to be wide enough and there should be toilets designed for disabled people. (An organisation called DisabledGo conducts surveys of town centre buildings with the needs of disabled people in mind. You can see if your town is covered by visiting their website www.DisabledGo.info).

Remember also that older people may have special needs that prevent them from using public transport or that they may be reluctant to venture out alone, or late at night.

What time of day do you run your activities? Could you provide events that take place during the day rather than in the evening, when public transport may be more restricted?

Could you take your activities to centres run for older people, so that you go to them rather than the other way round?

Are you able to arrange car-sharing or other transport to your events to bring in people who might not otherwise be able or willing to attend?

Could you appoint 'buddies' from your membership or committee to make older people especially welcome, particularly on their first visit, and to make sure they are looked after?

Are you able to provide literature in large print?

But don't forget that an increasing proportion of the retired population now have access to the internet and email!

Do you provide e-newsletters and use email to communicate with your membership and others? Do you have a website?

iii. Do you seek out the views of older people within your community on planning and development matters? Do you know what concerns older people in your area?

Because of the issues raised above, you may find it more difficult to engage with older people. This means that you will need to be proactive in soliciting their views – you may need to do the leg work and seek people out rather than waiting for them to come to you: this also applies to people who may already be members!

Consider running a survey – a simple questionnaire that can be given out or posted to people for their views but be prepared to offer help on its completion. You could also book space in a supermarket or shopping centre to obtain people's views (and this, of course, is not just limited to older people).

iv. Do you encourage people to take an interest in the built environment and other matters?

Holding events for your membership is part and parcel of being a civic society but do you open these events to the public at large? If you charge an entry fee, is this affordable by people on low incomes – do you offer concessions, or can you waive the fee? Think about taking events 'on the road' to the far corners of your area or into the places where older people live or congregate. Make the topic interesting and relevant to older people and encourage them to participate by giving them practical exercises (perhaps on a planning matter) or other things to do where appropriate.

Other points to consider

Always, when dealing with people, whether or not they are members, be aware of health and safety issues. Some older people may need particular care and attention. You will, in any event, need to think about your insurance position and all societies are urged to consider taking out public liability insurance (the Civic Trust has negotiated a special, low-cost policy for civic societies). Where you propose to ask you members or committee members to provide transport using their own cars, you will need to ensure they have adequate insurance cover. This is something individual members must sort out with their own insurance companies but the society's committee has a responsibility to make sure this is done.

Some organisations may be prepared to fund projects or the provision of services targeted at older people. Your local authority social services department may be willing to act as a source of information and advice on organisations in your area that cater for older people.

For more information, try the following websites:

RSVP, the retired and senior volunteer programme is a free standing programme within Community Service Volunteers and exists to encourage the growing number of those aged fifty plus to participate in their local area in England, Scotland and Wales. It taps into the wide range of skills and experience of mature people and puts them to work for the benefit of all.

RSVP

www.csv-rsvp.org.uk

DisabledGo

www.DisabledGo.info

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