

HOW WE DID IT...

Borough leads way with engagement of elderly

PROJECT An academic programme to run a summer school that involves older people in the planning process.

BACKGROUND Older people make up an increasingly large percentage of the population but are disconnected from the development process. Their invaluable knowledge and experience is often untapped by planners.

WHO IS BEHIND IT? Age Concern, Goldsmiths College, the London Borough of Lewisham, University College London (UCL) and the University of East London (UEL), with funding from Urban Buzz, a knowledge-sharing project run by UCL and UEL.

PROJECT AIMS To create a good practice tool kit involving older people in consultation processes.

SKILLS INVOLVED Communication, ability to listen, organisational capacity, creativity, presentational skills and diplomacy.

It is a cliché that planners must avoid the urban design mistakes of the 1960s. But the very people who lived through these perceived blunders are often forgotten during contemporary planning consultations.

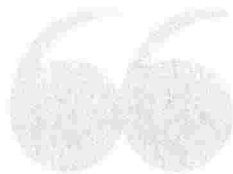
People aged over 65 are as opinionated about their environment and urban change as younger members of society. But a lack of internet access and social contact can make this group difficult to reach. Simply leaving the house to go to a public exhibition can be a struggle, let alone standing up to view display boards in any detail. Some older people find it difficult to read plans or hear speakers at public meetings.

Unless the opinions of such people are heard, planners can often treat them as a homogeneous group. With a view to tackling the problem, a group from Goldsmiths College launched a successful bid for funding for a project to engage with older people. During the summer, the team ran a series of workshops with 22 senior citizens at a summer school held in Lewisham.

Working with Age Exchange and using old photographs of the area, the group shared memories of the changes to the environment they had witnessed during their lifetimes. They met across a two-week period for six day-long sessions at rooms in the college. Equipped with cameras, they toured Deptford to document examples of development that they found significant for both positive and negative reasons.

"The volunteers seemed very pleased that we cared about their views. They said they had felt forgotten," explains project leader Gesche Wuerfel. Mick Kavanagh, an 85-year-old resident from Kirkdale in Lewisham, adds: "We used the past as a jumping-off point to consider what sort of development should take place in the future."

During the sessions, participants described "mental maps" of their neighbourhood as well as suggesting ways in which it could be improved.



"We used the past

as a jumping-off point to consider what development should take place in the future"

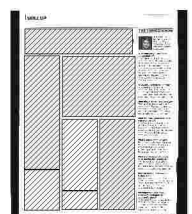
The final session saw local planners and urban design professionals visit the group to discuss their work. At the end of the workshops, the programme organisers collated the conclusions of the discussions.

The main concerns raised by the group centred on housing. One surprising outcome was that older people would prefer their homes to be integrated with those of other age groups rather than being segregated. Other suggestions included better street seating so older people could rest, particularly on hills, and longer crossing times at traffic lights.

One product of the exercise with a wider application is a tool kit to help professionals conduct similar consultations. The recommendations include splitting participants into groups of three to six people to allow more intensive discussions, updating participants by phone, email or post and offering them free lunches and refreshments in return for their time.

Another finding was that older people like to get away in time to avoid the school rush on public transport. While there was some scepticism among group members about whether their views would have any effect on planning policy, they were overwhelmingly happy to be given the chance to have a say. ■

Colin Marrs



Source: Planning {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Friday 23, November 2007
Page: 22
Area: 373 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 22178 Weekly
BRAD info: page rate £2,970.00, scc rate £56.00
Phone: 020 7413 4328
Keyword: Goldsmiths College

> durrants



Summer school: older people voice concerns about local housing policy