



# LEARNING TO LISTEN

Involving Service Users in the Development and Delivery of Home Improvement Agencies and Related Services



Produced by Care and Repair England  
October 2000

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The people who took part in the discussion groups are warmly thanked for their co-operation and ideas. Thanks are also due to the home improvement agency staff who arranged the meetings and to those agency staff who provided information about their own initiatives for involving service users.

Cover photograph courtesy of Bristol Care and Repair

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Published by Care and Repair England, October 2000

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# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1 Background

Much of the current impetus to improve service user involvement has come from central government through its Best Value initiative, and the drive to modernise local government.

Local authorities now have a duty to consult with the community about their plans for local service provision; they have to ensure that they are delivering the services that people want efficiently and effectively. Increasingly, voluntary sector organisations providing front line services have to demonstrate that they

*"Sustained improvements to services are more likely where those who use and pay for them are given a greater say in how they are run"*

'Modernising local government-improving local services through best value' published by DETR 1998

too have effective mechanisms in place for involving service users.

It was against this background that Care and Repair England set up a number of small discussion groups of older people, the chief service users of home improvement agencies (HIAs), as part of its pilot work on Best Value and Accreditation.

The purpose of the discussion groups was twofold. Firstly, to see how far the services that HIAs provide meet the housing aspirations of older people, thereby feeding into the debate on quality standards in agencies, and secondly to ascertain whether such groups could be an appropriate mechanism for agencies seeking to increase effective service user involvement.

## 1.2 Aims of the Report

*Learning to Listen* aims to encourage both HIAs and local authorities to look at how they can take the views of older people into account when planning and evaluating both core agency and related housing services.

The report aims to encourage HIAs to look positively at how they can involve their service users effectively, despite the enormous pressures on their time and resources.

The report highlights the views expressed by the older people taking part in the

*"Promoting opportunities for older people to be involved in defining their own needs, deciding on priorities and taking control over decisions which affect their lives has never been more pertinent".*

"Involving Older People" published by Age Concern England, 2000

discussion groups. It also discusses a number of approaches to involving service users which have been taken by particular local agencies.

*Learning to Listen* is not a definitive guide to all possibilities, but is a starting point. It aims to stimulate thought and debate, leading to a process of change in the practice of HIAs and related services.

A great deal of work is being carried out in other sectors on effective service user involvement. The report ends with reference to a number of publications and web-sites, which may be helpful in putting this work into a broader context.

## 1.3 Key points raised in the discussion groups

The following points stood out from each of the discussions.

- *The people in the groups who had used an agency service were positive about the help provided and thought that there should be such a service available across the country*
- *Participants were critical of the low profile of HIA services both locally and nationally*

- *Even the people who had used an agency service were unclear about the range of help that the agency could provide; there is a problem with the public profile and understanding of the role of HIAs*
- *There was generally felt to be a lack of reliable sources of advice and information for older people*
- *Of the help currently available to home owners, grants were perceived as extremely complex and difficult to access and loans were considered unlikely to be used by people with low incomes and low equity homes*

*"Bodies trying to encourage and facilitate involvement of older people have a responsibility to be clear about the purposes and about what people can expect as a result".*

Older People Speaking Out by P.Thornton published Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2000

- *In order to live independently in their own homes, the participants thought that decent public transport was essential*

- *Gardening was one of the biggest worries to people and was felt to impact on their ability to stay put*
- *Most participants welcomed the opportunity to put forward their views and expressed a willingness to be more involved in the development of local services given the opportunity.*

## 1.4 Conclusions

The results of the discussion groups and the experience of people working in agencies show that there is great potential for increasing the effective involvement of service users in the development and running of home improvement agencies and related services.

However, as the amount of work involved in setting up the pilot discussion groups demonstrated, any such initiative has significant resource implications for HIAs which need to be taken into consideration by local and central government and the national co-ordinating body for HIAs.

Some HIAs have successfully accessed extra local resources to enable them to increase service user involvement and money is being made available to the voluntary sector for capacity building in some areas via SRB, community



development units or voluntary sector umbrella organisations. Any future

*"I'm not sure older people like being 'organised'. That's why it's important to have the whole spectrum of involvement... Having control over your life matters, even if you don't want to organise things on a larger scale".*

Steering group of the Older People's Programme quoted in 'Age and Change' by T.Carter and P Beresford. Published Joseph Rowntree 2000

funding framework for agencies will need to take into account the cost of effective consultation with service users.

An alternative approach where resources are a major problem, is for HIAs to work in closer partnership with both the voluntary and statutory sector bodies who are

carrying out work on service user involvement. Working jointly with Age Concern or the local authority on innovative consultation projects may be a possibility for some HIAs. However, there are still implications for use of agency worker time when the pressure is often on meeting basic output targets.

Support from those managing and evaluating agency services would need to be sought in discussions about giving priority to such work.

## 1.5 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to;

### Local Authorities

- If there is already an HIA, assess the scope and capacity of its services and consider whether this can meet local needs. Work with the agency and service users to develop plans for future provision
- If there is currently no HIA in the area consider the need for such a service, ensuring that local older and disabled people are consulted and involved in planning and development
- Include the views of service users in any local monitoring, evaluation or quality assessment of an HIA. Work in partnership with the agency to ensure that resource implications for effective participation of service users are adequately addressed.
- Where there are already discussion forums looking at services for older people in the area, ensure that housing issues are adequately addressed

and that owner occupiers and HIA clients are adequately involved in such debates.

## Central Government

- Ensure that older people are adequately consulted about their housing aspirations and needs in setting future policies
- In considering the mechanisms available for funding building work in the homes of older people, ensuring that any changes to the renovation grant system are consistent with the aims of enhancing independence and improving quality of life. It is particularly important that grants are available and accessible where appropriate, and that the introduction of loans should be realistically assessed, given the low income and house equity levels of many older people.
- Work with the national co-ordinating body for HIAs to promote the development of agencies in all areas.
- Include the involvement of service users when setting targets and quality standards for HIAs
- Ensure that any future funding mechanism for HIAs enables local authorities to fund an adequate level of agency service provision to meet local needs.

## The National Co-ordinating Body for Home Improvement Agencies

- Address the concerns of older people that HIAs are not widely known about nationally, and consider effective ways of stimulating national publicity.
- Use the expressed views of older people in this report to encourage the development of agencies in areas that do not have them at present.
- Demonstrate the level of funding required to match potential demand for HIAs, so that individual agencies have the ability to publicise their services in the knowledge that they can meet consequent demand.
- Ensure that local agencies have information about the national body to inform local people of its work and existence.
- Consider setting up regional forums of people who have used HIAs and invite representatives to join the national advisory committee.
- Help agencies to share good practice ideas via a national database, meetings, and other networking opportunities.

- Help agencies to identify and access the additional resources required to enable them to effectively involve service users.
- Ensure that any future performance monitoring, evaluation or accreditation schemes include consideration of the ways in which older people view agency services and participate in them.

## Home Improvement Agencies

- Look closely at current practices and decide in which area action should be taken to ensure that the users of the agency service have every opportunity to comment or participate, should they choose to.
- Discuss the findings of this report with your local authority contact officers and consider ways of incorporating discussion groups or similar forums into the evaluation and monitoring of agency performance. Involving officers responsible for Best Value may be helpful. The need for additional resources to meet the cost of consultation could also be raised with the local authority.
- Consider the possibilities for service user involvement outlined in the report and raise the issue with the advisory/management committee.
- Raise the issue for discussion at meetings with other home improvement agencies in order to share concerns and good practice ideas eg. pooling resources and running a countywide meeting
- Find out what is going on in the area regarding forums and groups of older people, and ensure that housing issues are fed into these.
- Look carefully at your publicity strategy and rethink how effective it is and whether it is well targeted.
- Consider raising local funding for particular projects that enable older people to participate or provide mutual support.
- Take a fresh look at client satisfaction forms and consider whether they give people the opportunity to make suggestions without feeling that they are criticising the service.

## National Voluntary Organisations Working with Older People

- Ensure that housing issues are adequately addressed at policy forums and discussion meetings of older people.
- Where appropriate, disseminate information about the help available on housing matters from organisations such as local home improvement agencies.
- Identify and pursue opportunities for joint working with the home improvement agency movement in order to address housing problems, particularly in the owner occupied and private rented sector.
- Further develop and promote ideas and good practice on user participation in service delivery.

*"[Older People] are no longer prepared to put up with "one size fits all" services. Flexibility, choice, independence, information and involvement are the key issues raised by older people in relation to the accommodation and services they receive"*

Chris Mullin MP speaking at the HOPE (Housing for Older People in Europe) conference in March 2000.

## 2. The Context

### 2.1 The Emergence of Home Improvement Agencies

The first Home Improvement Agencies (HIAs) developed over twenty years ago as a direct response to the housing needs of older homeowners.

For the first years they were very different from each other. Some, such as the Ferndale scheme in the Rhondda Valley, concentrated on small repairs, responding to the needs of people in extremely poor housing for warmth and safety. Others, such as the first Anchor Housing Trust Staying Put schemes, concentrated on large building jobs in order to give people in their own homes the higher quality of housing experienced by their tenants.

As time went by a broader approach was taken as agency services increasingly provided help with the whole range of repair and adaptation work required by their clients.

In 1986 the movement expanded significantly due to the work of Care and Repair Ltd and government action. A steady rise in the number of agencies has continued and there are now over 200 agencies in England alone.

### 2.2 Best Value

The importance of involving service users in setting the agenda for local provision has been recognised to varying degrees by both the statutory and voluntary sectors. However, with the publication of 'Modernising Local Government - improving local service through best value' [DETR 1998] a new agenda was set which placed greater emphasis on local accountability.

Local authorities had to demonstrate that not only were they getting good value for their money when purchasing or commissioning services but they also had to make sure that they were providing people with the services that they wanted.

Increasingly, service providers have to show that they are in touch with the people they are helping. Quality assurance schemes are being applied to a growing number of service sectors and the opinion of the service user is often an important part of quality assessment. Groundbreaking work is being undertaken by national organisations such as Better Government for Older People and Age Concern England on how to involve older people in decision making.

## 2.3 Older service users

Whilst the large expansion in HIA service provision has gone together with attempts to reach a wider age group, older people are still the main users of agency services; 90% of service users are over retirement age and 43% are seventy-five years of age and over.

The 'experts' on the benefits and shortcomings of agency services are these older service users. Having helped to decide what work should be done to their homes, lived through the experience of having the work undertaken and paid for and then lived with the consequences, they will hold many strong views and opinions of what help was valuable and what else was needed. Yet this valuable resource has been underused in monitoring and developing agency services.

Agencies are founded on the housing circumstances of older people, but they did not arise as a grass roots movement. There is no national forum of service users, and only a minority of individual agencies actively involve service users in the development of services.

The majority of agencies have some way of monitoring the responses of people to their own building work through client satisfaction forms, but more could be done to find effective and meaningful ways of ensuring that users are active participants in service provision and development.

The considerable pressure on agencies to focus on building outputs (value of work, number of jobs) has mitigated against agencies devoting the not insignificant level of time and resources required to increase service user participation. The issue of resources will have to be addressed if more agencies are to be enabled to meet the expectations of funders with regard to user participation.

Although HIAs work for a wider age range, this report focuses on the particular needs of older people. This is because that is the age group from which agencies have the most experience on which to draw. This is not in anyway to undervalue the need for a similar approach to other groups, such as younger disabled people.

## 2.4 Discussion groups

In the context of all of the above developments, Care and Repair England set up small discussion groups of older people in 1999. Their purpose was to talk through such topics as: -

- what are the main housing issues for older owner occupiers,
- what was most liked about the agency services,
- how agency services could be improved,
- what people with no agency felt was most needed from future services,
- how older people could become involved in planning for future service development.

These discussion groups were looked upon as helpful in their own right in taking into account people's views when developing an accreditation scheme for HIAs. They were also seen as a pilot project to look at the possibility of the wider use of such discussion groups by service providers. Could the idea of user groups become a regular feature of agency work?

The results exceeded expectations. Five groups were formed; three of service users from a range of agencies in an area or county and two of older people without an agency in their area, including one group of older people from the Asian community. In addition to the five groups, the results of a previous discussion group of agency service users in a wider exercise in a London Borough have been added to the findings.

The participants were extremely positive about having the opportunity to express their views and keen that their ideas should go forward to influence the future of the HIA services.

This report reflects the desire of those people participating in the groups to have their voices heard. It is all too easy to pay lip service to consultation or treat consultation as an end in itself. It is in fact only the beginning. By feeding back the concerns of people in the core groups and similar forums, we are starting a debate on the ways in which agency services can best be presented and improved. This is the beginning of a serious discussion on how agencies can both answer the concerns of users and potential users, and set up mechanisms to enable those concerns to have a voice, making participation a reality.

## 3. The Discussions

Below are highlighted some of the main points arising from the discussion groups. Details on the organisation of the groups, structuring of discussions and good practice ideas are included in Appendixes A & B.

### 3.1 Making decisions

For almost all participants, decisions about housing had come to a head in recent years, often as the result of a crisis such as ill health or enforced early retirement or bereavement. It was generally agreed that good, impartial, individual advice had been very difficult to come by. Although there were exceptions, the absence of a reliable source of advice and information was a key factor in putting off decisions. The provision of one-stop shops or of special advisors for people when they retire or at life crises was mooted.

Although a lack of advice was keenly felt, it was the lack of information that was seen as the real barrier to receiving help when it was most needed. It was generally felt that information was available but had never come their way until a crisis sent them into the hospital system or by sheer chance they came across a knowledgeable and caring person.

*'If I hadn't gone into hospital I'd never have known about help with the house'*

Age Concern and the CAB were the organisations most looked to for information, but experience of these varied from area to area. It was felt that local authorities should be responsible for disseminating information as they were in touch with everyone. An idea that came up at all the meetings was that a list of useful phone numbers should be included in community charge notices.

### 3.2 Current housing problems

In general, housing was seen as an ongoing worry, not one where an HIA provided a once and for all solution. Indeed many people were unaware of the range of help that their HIAs could give, being aware only of the kind of help they themselves had received. In general, women living alone worried about small repair jobs, while men and couples were more anxious about larger repair works.



*'It's terrible, living in a house that's falling down, there's nothing worse'*

-Although most people expected to stay put, many were philosophical about the possibility that they would have to move if they became too old and frail to manage. The two conditions that would drive them to move were seen to be poor transport, especially in rural areas, and an unmanageable garden.

There were exceptions, but long term routine housing maintenance was not seen as the major concern.

### 3.3 Repairs and Maintenance.

It is by no means the case that people needed more help the older they became. Many of the older men in the groups did small jobs for their neighbours and enjoyed routine household maintenance jobs. However small jobs became a major source of worry in the face of ill health or, in the case of many widows, bereavement.

*'The question is, who do I turn to when the tap washer needs changing'*

A good deal of thought was given as to how services could be arranged; the ready availability of people who could do small jobs for the cost of materials or at low hourly rates was very popular. Fixing ballcocks, changing washers, easing doors, changing electrical plugs and checking flexes, and putting up shelves were the most frequently mentioned jobs.

Bad experiences with builders clearly stayed with people for a long time and often provided a focus for discussion. Just having a list of accredited builders would have improved the quality of life for many over the years and encouraged them to have had work done when it was first needed.

The two groups without an agency in their District had very different perceptions from each other as to what was needed. The participants of one of the groups were older people from the Asian community, the majority of whom lived in very poor housing. Many were frustrated and angry at the difficulties they had had in accessing grants. However, the other group in the same District thought that a small repairs service was the most pressing need in the area.

### 3.4 Grants and loans

Local authority grants had been a source of much anxiety and difficulty for people without HIA help, or before they received it.

*'It took three years [for work being done with a disabled facilities grant] and it's a miracle my husband lived to reap the benefit'*

The experience of these groups would suggest that it is unrealistic to expect many older people to make use of grants without an agency; those that had tried on their own had had considerable problems with the rules, waits and building work and the outcome often did not seem worth the effort. However

the waiting itself was not the main problem as people seemed prepared to accept a long wait if they trusted that the work would eventually be done to their satisfaction.

Loans were regarded very cautiously. This was not a knee-jerk reaction to the very idea – indeed many people had tried and failed to get them. The problems seemed in the main to be the low equity value of their housing and their very low incomes. Only one of the people at these discussion groups had taken out a loan, and she wished that she hadn't.

### 3.5 Aids and adaptations

Attitudes to social services varied considerably in different areas. One of the disconcerting results of the discussions was to discover that the more disabled people were and the more experience they had had of trying to get aids and adaptations, the more cynical they were about the ability of social services to help them.

*'It's horrible being ill and dependent and needing adaptations'*

### 3.6 Affordability

*'Since buying the house off the council I don't like to ask for help'*

People were very open about their financial circumstances, almost all being on Income Support or very low pensions.

The need for financial help with repairs had been the main reason for their seeking help from their local authority, the usual route by which they had come to the HIA. They had very strong views on the low level of the state pension, which they felt should be raised in order to promote independence and prevent people coming 'cap in hand' for help with repairs.

### 3.7 Using Home Improvement Agency Services

Those who had received help from an HIA were almost without exception very pleased with the work that had been done. The three strongest reasons for valuing the service were:

- The helpful and unpatronising approach of the workers.
- The staff's ability to get the best out of builders.
- Taking the work right through from start to finish.

*'They [HIA staff] treat us like real people. It's not that usual. Maybe it's gratitude for that that stops us expecting more from them'*

Less encouraging was the general experience that those who had used the service had no concept of what a HIA could do beyond their own experience. Many also felt that they could not return to the scheme once they had used it once.

People who had used a handyperson service were often amazed to meet people who had had larger works done, and vice versa. It was thought that the reason for this was that workers were too busy to give a proper explanation of the service and that leaflets would have been helpful.

*(Talks with people running agencies suggest that this lack of understanding is a very common problem, even when the workers feel they have explained the extent of the service.)*

The greatest criticism of HIAs at every meeting was the lack of publicity. It was very rare indeed for people to have come to the agency as a result of publicity; most appeared to have been referred by the local authority, in which case they were already on the way to making some sort of a decision. They felt strongly that they would have liked to have talked with the agency worker earlier, so that they could have helped them to reach a decision about the work which they wanted in their home.

*'We're the lucky ones. We got there in the end. What about the thousands who don't know what to do'*

*'They should put a list of phone number, ones that are useful, in the council tax letters'*

This subject was raised repeatedly; indeed once it was raised it was often difficult to move on to other issues. Participants did not blame the local agencies, which they felt were overworked. They would have liked more publicity in post offices, doctors' surgeries, local papers and local radio, as well as through leafleting areas, and

from the local authority with community charge notices.

There was strong criticism of the government and the national body for not publicising services through television and the national press. When it was suggested that this might raise false expectations, the response was that more money should be made available to meet this potential demand.

Living in hope and urging for a service that was known to exist were seen to be far preferable to living without any knowledge of what was available. They felt that it was the government that should fund schemes, rather than local sources so that the service was nationwide.

Overall participants showed a high degree of concern for their contemporaries who did not benefit from HIAs. It is not surprising that those people in the two groups that did not have agencies in their areas were not happy about the situation either.

*'You feel you can talk to them [HIA staff] more like friends'*

There was surprise that not all agencies had the same name. Calling agencies different names in different places was seen as absurd and led to confusion when it came to national publicity.

### 3.8 How older people could be further involved

Overall the groups responded enthusiastically to having been asked their opinions about agency services. They stressed that they were rarely asked their opinions about anything and had valued the opportunity. Two of the three main groups asked if they could meet again in a year's time to see if, 'things have improved'.

As publicity had become such an issue they were asked if they would like to be involved in the promotion of their agencies. Two groups were enthusiastic but one was worried about the confidentiality of people using the service if they were promoting it. They were willing to attend more meetings and, if appropriate, go on committees.

They did not have fresh ideas on how to become involved, but were adamant that they would like this if suitable mechanisms could be found.

They did not on the whole regard satisfaction forms as a way of being involved in the service, only on commenting on their own work. These forms were seen as an opportunity to complain. Most people did not like complaining and said that they would prefer to be asked more generally on ways to improve the service.

### 3.9 The future

The meetings ended by each participant naming one factor that would enhance the lives of older people.

Higher pensions were the most frequently mentioned change. Better transport and help with gardening were of great significance; without improvements in these areas it was felt unlikely that people could stay put and live independently even if they wanted to.

National availability and greater publicity for HIAs was widely called for. More government concern for the needs of the very old and frail were also put high on the agenda.

## 4. Examples of Service User Involvement in Home Improvement Agencies

A fresh approach will need to be taken by agencies, local authorities and associated parties if more active participation of service users is to be achieved.

It may well be that, as the current climate of customer involvement becomes stronger, this will gradually grow and evolve. Indeed it is unlikely that clients now in their sixties will have the same attitudes as are traditionally assigned to people in their eighties, as they are part of a culture with higher expectations of services.

There is a level of disagreement within the HIA movement about the capacity or inclination of older people to become more involved. There is general agreement that it is difficult to become a fully participatory organisation if this is not the basis on which the service originally developed.

It must also be recognised that many agencies feel stretched to the limit in terms of their resources and ability to cope with day to day demand for their core service. Help will have to be provided to assist such agencies with capacity building to enable them to take on new work around service user involvement or quality assurance schemes.

It was not possible to undertake a comprehensive survey of the ways in which all HIAs approach user involvement but the following experiences give a snapshot view of the work of some agencies in order to inspire wider thinking and fresh ideas.

### 4.1 Involving older people within existing structures

The most common way in which agencies have attempted to involve older people is by committee membership.

It is of course not difficult to recruit older people onto committees; indeed local Age Concern groups depend heavily on older voluntary members. However in the case of agencies there may be problems of taking people onto committees who are or will be benefiting from the work. Therefore people whose building work is completed are more often recruited, although this begs the question as to whether a house can be regarded as 'finished'.

There have also been worries that this is a form of tokenism, that a person asked onto a committee cannot be expected to represent all service users who will hold a wide variety of views.

One way of addressing this which is being adopted in some agencies, for example **Northampton**, is to encourage the formation of a **user group**, whose views are then taken to the committee through a representative.

## 4.2 User groups

This raises the question of how user groups can be organised and whether they are practicable in all areas – the issue of rural/urban applicability.

General meetings of users formed a dynamic part of the development of the **Kensington and Chelsea Staying Put** scheme in its early days, and their lobbying to change leasehold legislation gave a particular focus. Users of the service met socially, either to talk or to have more formal meetings with speakers.

The fact that most of the participants were private tenants with similar problems may have helped in the development of this approach, though the very active determination of the co-ordinator and committee to achieve full participation was also a leading factor.

Owner-occupiers may be more difficult to bring together as a homogenous group, although the experience of the discussion groups indicated that the opportunity to meet with other people in similar situations was found to be stimulating and rewarding. It was also the experience of the facilitator, that groups of home-owners were particularly willing to discuss broader issues and came prepared for meetings with their own ideas, compared to groups of a similar age range from other forms of housing tenure.

**Portsmouth** has experience of organising coffee mornings for service users to which councillors and advisory committee members come and listen to the issues emerging from small groups. As time has gone by the coffee mornings have become more structured, with speakers often invited.

The strong stance taken by the local authorities in Portsmouth and **Sandwell** have generated an expectation of active participation by older people in the development of local services. Portsmouth's combination of a user group, formed in order to monitor and direct the service, and a social club with similar interests, could be one approach to develop.

A different approach to discussion groups was taken by the Disabled Persons Housing Service in **West Leicestershire**. All service users were invited to a tea meeting to celebrate the first year of the organisation's work.

Some thirty people attended and were divided into groups after being welcomed by the Chair of the committee and the manager. Facilitators led these groups on a similar basis to the Care and Repair groups, discussed in this report. The fact that people were asked to talk over their experiences at such an early stage and the diversity of the groups, with people of all ages and housing circumstances, led to very lively discussion, though perhaps less focused. It did succeed in bringing people to the discussions who may have been put off by a more formal arrangement.

Inviting service users, past and present, to public AGMs and celebrations is common practice in many schemes. A particularly successful example of this was a recent ten year celebration in **Hounslow**, which attracted two hundred older people to a strawberry and bubbly tea, and where one of the most effective speakers was a user of the service in his late eighties.

### 4.3 Mutual Support and Empowering Older People

The experience of **Bristol Care and Repair** is of particular interest because here a good deal of thought, effort and funding has gone into the concept of user empowerment. The motivation behind this was not only the desire for feedback and direction of service development, but also to address the problem of the isolation of some older owner-occupiers.

Once building work has been completed, the withdrawal of the sociability and support experienced through the regular contact with the caseworker and builders can lead to more loneliness than ever. At first Bristol recruited volunteers to befriend clients, but this was felt to lead to dependence rather than independence.

An imaginative approach was then taken by forming a group of clients to meet for a specific task, the task being the making of a quilt into which they would put their experiences and memories, thus sharing a practical task and a life-time's experience. This has led to other similar groups and the creation of very special quilts, which have been widely appreciated. Bristol is going on from here to form groups of other activities such as creative writing.

It is an inspiring response to the realisation that getting involved in house repair is not always primarily about building work, but can involve the whole person finding a new quality of life.

There are other ways of more fully involving people in agency work. **Care and Repair Cymru** was influenced by the work of Moyra Riseborough, published in "From Consumerism to Citizenship".

Care and Repair Cymru decided not to pursue the route of participation through the development and running of services, but of mutual support and knowledge exchange.



It has pioneered a service through which older people can be put in touch with each other by phone and talk over ways in which the building work will affect them. This is particularly helpful where people are disconcerted by the idea of having builders in the house, and can draw support from the experience of their contemporaries.

Similar work was done in **Nottingham Staying Put's** early days, whereby older people were encouraged to meet up and visit each other to be able to work out such vexed questions as whether a new kitchen would work best as an add-on scullery or by transforming the back room.

This agency also had experience of older people who were having building work done borrowing the houses of people who had already had major works completed when they went on holiday. This is not a common occurrence but it worked surprisingly well. It is not suggested as a model, but illustrates that an imaginative approach can be taken to the concept of older people supporting each other.

#### 4.4 Alternative approaches.

**Bournemouth** has a very different approach as it has its roots in the involvement of older people.

The Care and Repair element is only one service provided by **Help and Care**, a large organisation which started from community work in the early eighties and for which participation is the element it moves in, not an added extra. The large open day, attracting some two thousand pensioners every year, expresses the spirit of the organisation.

It is seen as essential that the home improvement agency element of the work is not done only by specialist workers but is a part of a wider agenda. Bournemouth may be a difficult path to follow once an HIA has been established but it does raise the question as to whether services could be developed quite differently, starting from meetings with potential service users and working together with older people rather than for them, with a broader picture in mind than housing.

Very little work has been done in the HIA movement on actively involving older people as volunteers. Whilst this is slightly different from the issue of general user involvement there are links.

One effective way in which former clients have become involved is in making telephone enquiries on completion of work, talking with clients and ensuring that their worries and reactions are sympathetically received by someone who is seen to be objective. This also addresses the problem, touched on in the discussion groups, of depending on written questionnaires for satisfaction surveys; these have also been seen to be unpopular in other studies.



## 4.5 Conclusion

All in all there is limited experience of making agency services participatory, but a good start has been made by some agencies and there is a will to succeed.

A lead from those responsible for the management and funding of agencies is now needed. More work clearly needs to be done.

There is now wide experience amongst other organisations on which to draw. Close co-operation with such organisations as Better Government for Older People and Age Concern would allow HIAs to learn from others and inform internal debate.

**It is beyond the scope of this publication to detail the wider surveys of user participation and discuss in detail the broader context. At the end of this report there is a list of web sites and publications which are helpful in doing this.**

## APPENDIX A

### Suggestions for successful discussion groups

- Choose a facilitator who has a particular understanding of older people's housing problems and provision, but is not directly involved in the running of the local agency.
- In some areas it will be appropriate to organise a specific meeting for people from a particular ethnic group and provide a facilitator with the requisite language skills
- The facilitator should write personally to people coming to the group explaining the purpose of the meeting and who s/he is.
- Lunch could be provided so that the group members get to know each other and feel relaxed and develop a rapport with the facilitator.
- A venue that is pleasant and accessible should be chosen. The common room of a sheltered scheme is one suggestion, as the visit to the scheme adds extra interest to the meeting.
- Transport should be arranged for people who would otherwise have difficulty in attending. Community transport schemes may be able to help.
- The meeting will last about one and a half hours, allowing for time before and after so that there is not a rushed atmosphere.
- It would be unrealistic to assume that the people attending are representative of all agency clients. The purpose of the meeting should be to stimulate thought and discussion, not to make a list of individual views, which may well not be typical.
- Letting people know how their suggestions and ideas will be taken forward and any plans for further consultation is important if participants are to feel that their time has been well spent.

# APPENDIX B

## Discussion Groups

### Bringing people together

Personal letters were sent by each local HIA to a broad sample of clients inviting them to the group meetings, with the aim of finding five to ten people for each meeting. This small number was deliberately chosen, as it was considered helpful in enabling people who would have otherwise felt inhibited in taking part, to express their views.

Participants were not regarded so much as representatives of service users, as people willing to meet as a group in order to stimulate discussion and ideas. All participants of the core groups were of pensionable age, as it was felt that this could be helpful in encouraging each individual to take part and feel they were being listened to.

Lunch was provided and a room chosen with easy access for wheelchairs. Transport was arranged where it was needed. The venues varied, as accessibility was the main factor. The common room of a sheltered housing scheme, a hotel meeting room and a room in a civic centre were used, all successfully. However the room in the sheltered housing scheme had the added advantage that its well designed features, such as easily opened windows, were of interest to the participants who rarely have the chance to inspect such facilities in other types of accommodation.

### Getting started

The person facilitating the group was unknown to them but had written to the people attending to explain who she was and the purpose of the meeting. She talked informally with participants over lunch, before the meeting started. All other practical arrangements, including provision of transport, were made by the local agency staff. The sessions lasted one and a half hours or more.

The meetings started by each person, including the facilitator, outlining their present housing circumstances. This worked well in that all members of each of the groups fully participated in the discussions, although few were used to meetings round a table.

## Structuring the discussions

These are the subject areas that were covered in the five discussion groups described in this report.

**Introductions** – all say something about how we are housed at the moment.

### Making decisions

- Have you had to make any major decisions about your housing in the past five years?
- What kind of decisions?
- Where did you turn to for advice?
- Would you have liked more advice, and who do you think should provide it?
- Discussion on subject

### Current situation

- What worries you most about your present housing situation?
- This brings us to the future – do you think much about your future housing?
- Do you hope to stay put or do you expect to move?
- What would influence you most in making this big decision?
- With whom would you discuss it?
- What would help you most to stay where you are?

### Repairs and maintenance

- How do you cope with day to day maintenance jobs? Do you get help from anyone?
- Which jobs worry you most?
- Have you sought advice? Was it useful?
- What concerns you most at the moment about your home?
- What would be the biggest help to you?
- What about the future maintenance of your home?

### Grants, Loans and Charity

- Did you get a grant from the Council? How easy was this? Tell us about the experience.
- Would you consider borrowing money, for example a mortgage? What might help you to try this option?
- If you do not have savings, how do you feel about charitable grants? (Only ask if seems appropriate)
- What about small repairs? How should they be paid for, do you think? Who should do them?

## Affordability

Is money a key factor in your housing situation e.g.

- Can you afford repairs and maintenance if you own?
- Does the cost of housing determine whether you move or stay put?

## Aids and adaptations

- Do you or any of your friends or neighbours need personal aids (e.g. Zimmer frames) or adaptations to your home, e.g. handrails.
- How easy was it to get the help that was needed?
- How could this service be improved?
- Have you received help from Care and Repair in getting services or equipment to help you move around?

## Home Improvement Agency Services

- Why did you use the service? What did the agency people do to help?
- Was this what you expected?
- Would you use it again? What would you use it for?
- How would you improve the service?
- Do you wish you had had more or less work done?
- How would you let people know about the service? Did you find it easy to find out about it?  
(Probe length of wait, courtesy etc.)

## Involving older people

- We would like to know how older people could be more involved in making decisions about the service, etc. Have you any ideas?
- Probe about committee membership, ways of expressing satisfaction, meetings, if necessary. Publicity and getting the word around.

## Ending

To end on a more cheerful note, if there is one thing that would make a big difference to your life, what would it be?

## APPENDIX C

### Useful publications and web sites.

These publications are particularly useful in providing examples and discussion of the involvement of older service users. The first also has an excellent bibliography for further reading.

- Older People Speaking Out.*** Developing opportunities for influence, by Patricia Thornton. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. £6. (Tel: 01904 629241)
- Age and Change,*** Models of involvement for older people, by Tony Carter and Peter Beresford, Joseph Rowntree Foundation. £6
- From Consumerism to Citizenship,*** New European Perspectives on Independent Living in Older Age, by Moyra Riseborough, HOPE (Housing for Older People in Europe), Anchor Trust. £15. (Tel: 01865 854000).

The following are also recommended: -

- Involving Older People,*** Good Practice Guide. Age Concern England. £5 (Tel: 020 876 57200).
- Older People's Definitions of Quality Services,*** by Hazel Qureshi and Melanie Henwood, Joseph Rowntree Foundation. £6.

The following web sites have useful publications and information and are well worth time browsing:

Joseph Rowntree Foundation: [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

Better Government for Older People

Programme: [www.bettergovernmentforolderpeople.gov.uk](http://www.bettergovernmentforolderpeople.gov.uk)

Age Concern England <http://www.ace.org.uk>

The Housing Corporation [www.open.gov.uk/hcorp](http://www.open.gov.uk/hcorp).

HOPE (Housing for Older People in Europe) [www.hopenetwork.org.uk](http://www.hopenetwork.org.uk)



## MISSION STATEMENT

Care & Repair England's mission is to innovate, develop, promote and support housing policies and initiatives which help older and disabled people live independently in their own homes for as long as they wish.