

Liveable Communities Project Workshop Method

The aim of the project was to find a way to encourage local government personnel to consider the now established concept of 'liveability' in the context of an ageing population. It had been established that yet another checklist or guide, no matter how admirable, would have no greater effect than previously published resources. It became apparent that unless good ideas and best practice are embedded in legally enforceable instruments, they would not be implemented.

During informal discussions with planners and other local government personnel, it became clear that perceptions of older people and their everyday lives were perhaps based on old stereotypes and not current trends. A process of re-thinking the lives and needs of an ageing population in the context of current trends was therefore required. It was assumed that once staff understood the importance of the issues, policies and other documents could be adapted to be more inclusive of older Australians. It was decided that a workshop process using adult learning techniques would be the best approach.

Workshop administration

Each participating council was asked to provide a venue suitable for holding the workshop and to send out invitations to staff, community service providers, and community members. The costs to councils were staff costs in terms of time spent liaising and organising, and the provision of a venue. COTA NSW covered the catering costs, workshop materials and facilitator costs from the funds provided by the NSW Office for Ageing. No registration or attendance fees were charged to participants.

As the council community services workers are in close contact with the target audience, it was considered more appropriate for invitations to be sent by them. An attractive invitation and workshop outline was devised and circulated, mostly by email. Invitees were asked to RSVP to the council staff member, who provided names for name tags, and assisted in assigning people to the individual working groups. Invitations were sent out up to six weeks in advance and reminders 7 – 10 days prior to the workshop.

The next step was to design the workshop content and processes, set the aims, goals and objectives, design the activities, and develop workshop materials.

Workshop outline

The workshop consisted of five main steps which were designed to:

- Step 1: Introduce participants to facts and trends about an ageing population
- Step 2: Heighten awareness of the diversity of the ageing population

- Step 3: Increase understanding of how older people interact with the built environment
- Step 4: Link the issues of an ageing population to the goals in the Community Strategic Plan
- Step 5: Convert ideas into practical outcomes

These five steps were translated to learning outcomes based on adult learning principles. Consistent with such principles, peer learning formed a major part of the workshop process. It was assumed that much of the information and knowledge required was already inherent in the experiences of participants. The process of learning from peers can often be more influential than learning from designated 'experts'. A secondary reason for using peer learning methods is that each local government area has features specific to its location and planning policies which would be unknown to an external 'expert'. The overall approach, therefore, was to maximise the knowledge of workshop participants using techniques to explore and capture this knowledge and experience.

Consideration was given to the four main adult learning styles, one of which is usually preferred by individuals in a learning situation:

- using theory and evidence as a basis for learning (theorists)
- knowing how it can be applied in a practical way (pragmatists)
- using a hands-on activity to test and trial (activists)
- taking time to reflect and synthesise information (reflectors)

Workshop set-up

To ensure every participant had equal opportunity to contribute, participants were seated in small groups of 4-6 around tables, café-style. Prior to the arrival of participants, the tables were set with written instructions for each of the exercises, notepads, pens, coloured felt pens, sheets of coloured stick-on stars, and sticky notes. Setting up tables prior to the arrival of participants indicated from the outset that this was not a seminar or conference, but a day where participants were expected to provide input.

To facilitate the first activity, life size body outlines (male and female) were drawn on large sheets of paper and hung around the room. The number of outlines was equal to the number of working groups. It was expected that having these outlines visible as participants arrived would help generate an atmosphere of anticipation of what was to come.

Where possible, participants were assigned to particular working groups in advance of their arrival to ensure a good mix of council staff and councillors, service providers and community members in each group. Where this was not possible, participants were encouraged to choose a place to sit and were reorganised after the introductory session.

Two methods for forming working groups were considered: one where participants stay together in one group for all exercises; and the other where participants change groups after each exercise so that they work with different people throughout the day. The former was used based on feedback by council staff that the latter method had been

used at other times and had proved unpopular. An example of a workgroup from the Berrigan workshop is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Berrigan workshop groups in session

Workshop opening and welcome

The Mayor of each participating council was invited to give an opening address and in most cases the Mayor or Deputy Mayor was able to do this. In most cases, general managers were also invited to address participants, but this offer was taken up in only two councils. Figure 2 shows the General Manager of Great Lakes Council, Glenn Hanford, addressing workshop participants. The involvement of senior council personnel was thought to provide encouragement to participants, particularly council staff. The workshop facilitator briefly introduced participants to the process for the day before introducing the introductory session.



Figure 2: General Manager Glenn Hanford, Great Lakes Council

Step 1: Introductory session

Context

This session set the scene for the day and directed participants' thinking to the topic. The session covered statistical information about the projected increase in the proportion of older Australians across Australia, and within the participating council's local government area. An overview of the expectations of Australian entering their retirement years was also included.

Process

The fifteen to twenty minute session was delivered in lecture mode using a PowerPoint presentation. The presentation contained material from the Local Government and Ageing Report, statistical information – national and local, and material from research on the expectations of an upcoming older generation.

An overview of the key findings from the Local Government and Ageing Report was provided to participants, which in brief are:

- Across NSW, not a sharp awareness of the issue outside the community services staff, although other staff "get on board" after they are walked through the issues
- The new strategic planning process in NSW is providing opportunities for the issue to be given greater prominence in Council
- Overall, a common concern of Councils is the high level of social isolation amongst older Australians

The study also raised policy implications, which briefly are:

- Better transport is a key issue for many areas
- Better coordination between levels of government and NGOs
- Particular strategies need to be adopted to address social isolation
- More sharing of resources and ideas between councils is needed
- Better data need to be collected so that the impact of ageing can be measured more accurately
- More scientific research is needed rather than relying on anecdotal evidence

The introductory presentation also covered the myths and stereotypes related to older people, such as they are frail and have nothing to offer and that they all need special accommodation, care, and special products.

A list of the five features drawn from the checklists was also presented to participants with a brief explanation. This led participants into the first exercise "Who are we talking about?" in which participants discussed and highlighted the diversity of older Australians.

Step 2: Diversity of the ageing population

Context

The objective of the session was to familiarise participants with the diversity of needs and interests across the forty to fifty year span of people who are considered 'older'. This was the first exercise where participants were required to work in a group. As such, time was allowed for people to become acquainted as well as work on the assigned task. Adding a physical element (moving from sitting to standing as a group) helped to raise the energy level of the group activity. Sufficient time was given to this activity to assist with group formation and to ensure all members of the group had the opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

Process

Each workgroup was assigned a particular age group (55, 65, 75, 85 or 95). Participants were asked to consider where the person lived, who they lived with (people, pets), what type of dwelling they lived in, their activities in a typical day or week, their concerns and their aspirations. In short, to create a 'story' about the life of a person in the age group assigned to the group. Participants were also asked to give their archetype a name.

Each workgroup was asked to leave their seats and move to one of the body outlines hanging around the room. With coloured felt pens in hand they were invited to write words, sentences or pictures that depicted their archetypal person (Figure 3). Participants were encouraged to base their discussion on people they know in their assigned age group.

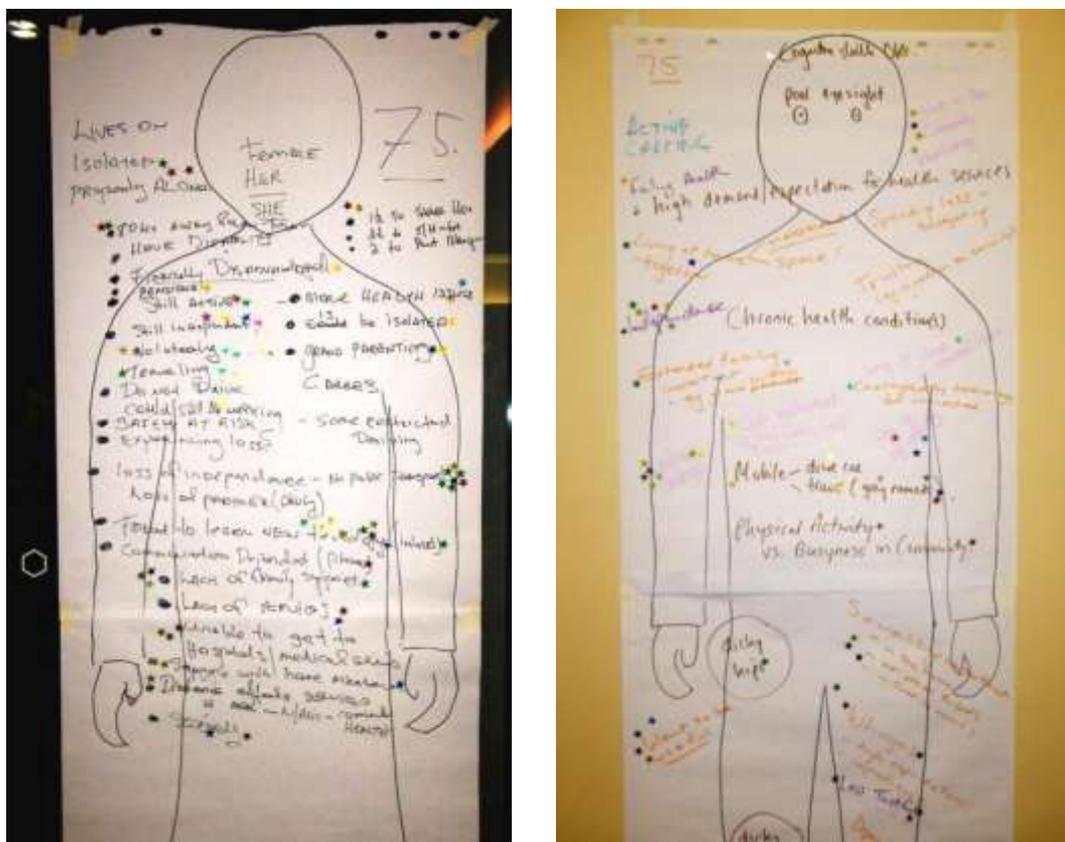


Figure 3: Examples of body outlines with comments

Rather than have each group explain their archetype to the whole group, which could become a lengthy process, participants were asked to take a sheet of stick-on stars from their table and go to each archetype and place stars on comments of interest and/or agreement. Two examples of body outlines showing comments and stars are shown in Figure 3. Towards the end of this activity participants collected morning tea refreshments and brought them back to their table.

Once everyone was seated, the activity was briefly reviewed by the workshop facilitator to bring out the salient points, particularly the diversity across the age groups. It was emphasised that the archetypes would be the reference point for all other activities during the day. The next step was to view the built environment through the eyes of older people, using the archetypes as a reference.

Step 3: Interaction with the built environment

Context

The aim of this activity was to gain a better understanding of the way in which older people interact with the built environment. Prior to the workshop, photographs were taken of the participating council's local area. Familiarity with the locations was considered essential for two reasons. First, some participants would likely have personal experiences interacting with the environment and could fully explain these experiences to others in their workgroup. Second, by identifying with the locations it was more likely that participants would have a greater sense of ownership and connection than when examining pictures of unfamiliar environments. In short, it was more real and practical rather than theoretical.

The pictures were mostly of street scenes, open spaces, shopping centres, toilet blocks, bus stops, street crossings and public buildings. Two or three additional pictures of older people in different settings were added to the mix to help generate discussion about stereotyping. In most workshops, sufficient photographs were taken to ensure a different picture for each participant. Where this was not the case, some pictures were repeated across different workgroups. Photographs were photocopied onto an A4 page with room for comments below (see example in Figure 4).

Process

The session was introduced by the facilitator using PowerPoint slides of two bus stops. Participants were invited to make comments to the whole group about the suitability of their design for older people. This discussion contributed to the explanation for the next part of the exercise.

Each workgroup was given a selection of photographs and were asked to keep in mind the discussion of the archetypes as they analysed the pictures. They were instructed to write their comments in the space below the pictures and advised that these worksheets would be collected and included in a report to their council. Participants worked alone initially, and then discussed their analysis with their workgroup until all pictures had been discussed.



My Comments:

- This is not a dedicated crossing. People are encouraged to go to pedestrian crossing but they don't. No ramp either side here for wheelie walker or wheelchair access.
- Only able bodied person should use this non-dedicated crossing
- Should Australian Standards be changed and re-considered to increase mobility?
- Gardens restrict vision for drivers.
- Wide street to centre for incapacitated who are tempted to cross at non-designated area.

Figure 4: Example of picture handout with comments typed up later

After sufficient time was given for everyone to complete their analyses, each group was asked to nominate a volunteer to take the pictures with the group's comments and discuss these with another workgroup. While discussing the pictures, the volunteers were asked to document any new ideas gained from this workgroup.

If time permitted, the volunteer performed a second rotation to another workgroup. Once the discussions were complete, the volunteer returned to their original group and provided the feedback from their discussions. The picture worksheets were collected for feedback to the participating council with the handwritten comments typed up.

This method of sharing findings was chosen for two reasons. First, the level of peer learning is increased with members of each workgroup being actively involved. Second, the time taken to share each picture with the whole group would likely be lengthy and possibly laborious for people with shorter attention spans.

The next step, which was after a lunch break, was to link the learning and insights of the first two exercises to the key document that drives the work of each council – the council’s community strategic plan.

Step 4: Linking with Community Strategic Plan

Context

Councils in New South Wales are required to meet the conditions of the Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework. In brief, this Framework requires strategic plans, operational plans, timeframes and budgets to be linked so that plans can be fully implemented and success measured. NSW councils are at different stages with the development of their community strategic plans: some started the new process three years ago and others were finalising their plans at the time the workshop was run. Consequently some community strategic plans were more developed and easier to work with than others.

The goals of most local government community strategic plans are necessarily broad and non-specific and most are not targeted to particular groups of residents. As older people (along with many other specific population groups) are rarely mentioned specifically in these plans, the aim was for participants to see how goals could be translated into actions that included the needs of older people.

The objective of this activity was to give participants time to think about ways in which they could apply the learning from the previous two sessions. This activity required a higher level of conceptual thinking than the previous two exercises.

Process

The session was introduced and the purpose explained using two examples from the participating council’s community strategic plan, which were displayed on two PowerPoint slides.

Prior to each workshop, the main goals of the participating council’s community strategic plan were identified. Each individual goal and sub-goals were printed on the top half of an A4 page with space for ideas and comments on the lower half of the page. These became the participant worksheets, an example of which is shown in Figure 5.

Where the number of goals exceeded the number of workgroups, the goals considered the easiest to analyse or most relevant were selected. Where the number of goals was less than the number of workgroups, two workgroups were assigned the same goal.

People Goals

- 1.1 Wingecarribee community has access to a variety of cultural, recreational and sporting opportunities
- 1.2 Wingecarribee people have a healthy lifestyle and inclusive community services and facilities are provided locally to meet the needs of our community
- 1.3 Wingecarribee fosters a diverse, creative and vibrant community

How can these goals include older Australians?

- Choice of concerts for the elderly and provide venue.
- Playhouses, art galleries, theatres, transport, disabled access to buildings, parking. Planning for older peoples' use of exercise equipment in parks etc. for older people.
- Sporting facilities more seating, covered areas.
- We do have a lot of places available for people but sometimes not always accessible to everyone.
- Connecting footpaths, decent width for more safety and sharing with scooters (electric). "Work for dole" people who could put some of these facilities in place

Actions

- Build and maintain performance spaces that are accessible and attractive for older people.
- Support and encourage sporting groups to cater for masters competitions and return to sport.
- Provide low cost easy access events.

Figure 5: Example of a Goal Worksheet with comments typed up

In most cases, each goal included a list of several sub-goals or objectives, so each workgroup was asked to choose two with which to work. Participants were asked to take their learning and insights from the previous two activities and apply this to the two sub-goals they had selected from the list. In applying their learning, participants were asked to work as a group and list actions that Council could take to ensure older people are included, and their needs accommodated at the implementation stage of the plan.

In a similar fashion to the picture analysis activity, each group nominated a volunteer to take their goals and ideas and discuss them with another group. Again, if time allowed, the volunteers moved to a second group before returning to their original workgroup. Similarly, they brought back any additional ideas or comments. These worksheets were collected and the comments typed up for inclusion in the report to Council.

Step 5: Identifying practical outcomes

Context

The aim of this session was threefold: to review the day's work and bring the learning into sharper focus; to provide a practical application to the learning; and to give participants a sense of achievement. The objective was for each participant to identify at least one action they could accomplish within the next few days that would benefit older residents in their local government area.

Process

Using a worksheet with instructions for the activity, each participant was asked to reflect on the previous activities: the diversity of the older population; their interaction with the built environment; and the ideas generated by analysing the goals in the community strategic plan. Participants were asked to identify one thing they could do in their job tomorrow or the following week that would make the community more inclusive for older people and better meet the needs of older residents.

Although this was an individual activity, participants were encouraged to discuss their ideas with their workgroup. The aim of the discussion was to assist those participants experiencing difficulty with this exercise and to build on ideas. Each participant was asked to write their commitment on the worksheet ready for collection and inclusion in the report to Council.

Once sufficient time had passed for everyone to complete the exercise, each person was asked to announce their proposed action to the whole group. The purpose of making the announcement to the whole group was to gain more commitment for the action and for their learning to be acknowledged. Each participant was given a small chocolate treat after announcing their commitment. This exercise brought the workshop to the closing session.

Closing Session

Context

The purpose of this short session was to briefly review the learning from the day, to thank participants for their contributions, and provide an opportunity for participants to reflect and make final comments to the whole group.

Process

The facilitator briefly reviewed the archetypes, the picture analysis, the goals from the community strategic plan, and the commitments made in the last session. Key points were emphasised. Participants were advised that the worksheets would be collated and typed up into a report for their Council. Participants were encouraged to fill out workshop evaluation sheets. In workshops where the Mayor or another Councillor participated in the workshop, they were given an opportunity to make closing remarks.

Participant workshop evaluation

At the end of each workshop, participants were given a one page evaluation sheet which asked them to rank the individual sessions using a Likert Scale (Very Good to Very Poor). Additional questions included:

- Did the workshop help you understand the issues facing Council in relation to an ageing population?
- What could we do to improve the workshop?
- What was the most valuable part of the workshop for you?
- Any other comments?

Reporting back to councils

All the worksheets were collected from each workshop and shaped into an individual report for each council for their particular use. The report provided a brief outline of the process as well as extensive appendices containing:

- a narrative formed from the body outlines depicting archetypal older persons;
- all the pictures that were analysed;
- all the worksheets related to strategic goals;
- all the individual commitments; and
- a summary of the evaluation sheets.

These individual reports were not published in this format by COTA, but the content was used to formulate a full report of the project from which this document is drawn.

Document prepared by
Jane Bringolf
Liveable Communities Project Manager
COTA NSW
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