



The Information Game

A consultation about obtaining information with:

- Older people
- People with learning disabilities
- People with mental health issues
- People with physical disabilities
- Family Carers
- Diverse communities

Summary
Report

Commissioned by Suffolk County Council
from Cultural Intelligence Ltd

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Introduction

In order to live life to the full, we all need information. Information on issues as diverse as leading a healthy life, making a home, getting work or volunteering and how to spend our leisure time. The challenge is to find the information we want, when we need it, in a format that suits our needs.

In December 2009, The Adult and Community Services directorate (ACS) at Suffolk County Council commissioned Cultural Intelligence to conduct a consultation programme which would explore how adults in Suffolk access information and how it can be made easier for them.

The groups involved in the study were from the ACS priority customer groups including: people with learning disabilities or with physical disabilities, people with mental health issues, family carers, older people and people from diverse communities.

The consultation considered:

- Peoples' experience of getting information- what it feels like
- Where, how, and when they use this kind of information
- What makes a positive experience for people seeking information
- What are the barriers to obtaining information in an appropriate form
- Suggestions for change

A creative consultation methodology was adopted in order to help make the subject more engaging for the client groups. The main component in this was called *The Information Game*. This was a board game devised for the project by Artist Caroline Wright www.carolinewright.com .

In addition to the creative workshops, we conducted a number of one-to-one depth interviews. The aim of these was to capture more detail about some individual personal stories. We conducted a total of 17 workshops spread across the county involving 164 people.

Findings

The full report includes over sixty pages of findings, quotes and pictures. A summary can necessarily only cover the main findings.

What, when and how of information

Many of the participants identified times of significant change in their lives as the times when they most needed important information. This included life episodes such as finding a school, retirement and bereavement as well as more routine matters such as travelling abroad, going into and leaving hospital, exploring training and volunteering opportunities and finding reliable tradesmen.

There is a good general awareness of where information is likely to be found. The methods used to access information were diverse and very much determined by skills and abilities.

“I prefer the phone for the personal contact. My husband will use the internet but I will always use the phone”

Family Carer

By far the most frequently used method for obtaining information was ‘People you know’ (78% of participants had used this method in the last 12 months). **Older People**, **People with physical disabilities** and **People with learning disabilities** were often particularly reliant on members of their family, relatives or close friends for finding out information.

Perhaps surprisingly, in discussions about the reliability of information, few people had found information by word of mouth to have been significantly inaccurate.

For many people but particularly **Older People** and **People with physical disabilities** the telephone was the primary means of accessing important information (56% had used telephones to obtain information in the last 12 months). Many favoured the telephone because of the human contact it can provide.

“We can’t get out easily so we are stuck with the phone mostly.”

Older Person

However, there were many frustrations with telephone information services. Automated call routing was universally despised for the amount of time spent hanging-on and for the difficulty of using these services.



Figure 1 Information is passed in the ice breaker exercise ‘Chinese whispers’

‘The Internet’ was the least used method (39%) but was the first choice for some participants who valued its’ convenience and 24hr availability.

“The internet is good when you can communicate with people who have been in a similar situation to you. If you are stuck at home by yourself with your partner it is a window where you can find people. On the telephone you are just speaking to that one particular person where as with the internet you have a broader circle”.

Family Carer

Naturally enough, the devotees of the internet were those who use it regularly and are more competent with it.

“I like the internet – you can find different channels – it can link to related subjects – that’s what I like – one thing might send you off to another”

Person with mental health issues

Participants with links to a specialist agency such as a day service or support group noted that these were very effective sources of information.

Libraries were mentioned by all groups as good sources of information. Even those who do not regularly use a library felt they would use it to get information if they had a need.

Local and national media were identified by many respondents as being important information sources. **Older people** in particular had the expectation that information about local events and the opening times of local public services would be available in their local paper.

People's experience of getting information

The most striking aspect of the participants' experience of accessing information was how much of a battle they find it. In the 'information age' it is a matter of concern that they should find it so.

The battle often starts with finding the right information source. Many people complained of being passed from person to person, often having to repeat their story over and over again.

This unnecessary 'struggle factor' is a matter of particular concern because for many, a quest for information comes on top of an already extremely stressful situation.

The level of frustration was mainly down to several common identifiable issues. These included '*automated call management systems*', '*lack of consistency and continuity in message and service*' and '*the failure of people to do what they say they will*'.



Figure 2 Family Carers need to become experts at the information game

“You always get voicemail, even in working hours . . . and press this, press that.”

Older Person

Information overload was a commonly expressed frustration with many complaining that they can be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information they are expected to digest. Information is often not presented in a manner that provides appropriate levels of detail in a layered format that enables people to quickly identify the items they need to find.

Participants from all groups reported that they sometimes receive a careless or unsympathetic response from people who are in the position of providing information.

Alongside an increasingly complex information landscape has developed the ‘faceless society’ where people are expected to engage with a service by remote means. Whilst one or two participants said they favoured remote services for their accessibility and anonymity, these were considerably outweighed by the desire of many participants, to engage with a friendly face or at least a supportive and compassionate voice.

Many people expressed frustration about a lack of consistency and continuity. This was particularly true of call-centre based services where people complained about never being able to speak to the same person

twice. The need to repeat the history of an issue to different people each time they call is really disheartening.

Barriers to accessing information

Whilst good information seeking skills can make a huge difference in the information game, it was clear from the consultation that most barriers result from inadequacies in 'the system' rather than in the abilities of individual information seekers.

Not knowing what you don't know

Knowing what questions to ask seems to be one of the greatest issues for adults seeking information in Suffolk. Participants frequently complained about the failure of all kinds of services, to address their situation in a wider, or more holistic manner, by volunteering information which anticipates their needs, rather than just responding to issues they raise.

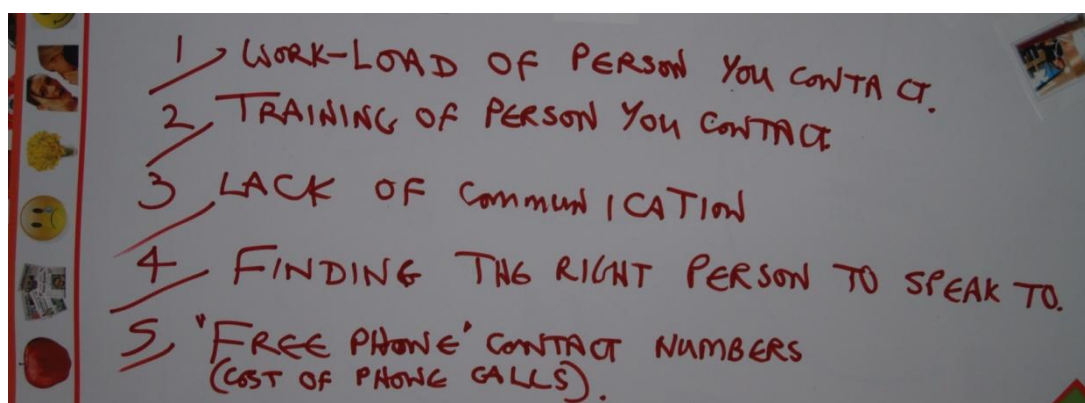


Figure 3 Common barriers

Difficulties with telephones

For many participants, especially **Older people** and **People with physical disabilities**, the telephone is a lifeline without which they would become increasingly isolated. However, many found that their capacity to use the phone becomes increasingly impaired with age.

The lengthy time spent hanging-on for some calls is an issue for **Family Carers** who often have very limited time in which to make calls.

Not knowing where to start

The sheer diversity of third sector and community interest organisations now delivering services has created a very confusing information landscape. There is also, of course, the longstanding confusion over which local authority tiers are responsible for which services.

Difficulty in understanding information

Some people from all groups but particularly **People with learning disabilities** and some **Older people** expressed frustration that information is sometimes presented in an over-complicated format.

“Sometimes they keep going over the same information again and again but you think, well I’m no wiser. You want it more simplified I think. Put it in everyday language”.

Person with physical disability

Difficulty with taking notes

People with a learning disability, People with a physical disability and some **Older people** mentioned the difficulty they have in taking notes when information is provided verbally, especially over the telephone. Supporting type-written material should therefore always be offered.

People will speak too fast – even on a recording machine when you can’t ask them to repeat it.

Older Person

Translated material and large print

A number of people observed that the offer of a translation is often made as a note on the reverse side of a leaflet or publication. Unfortunately, it is often not possible to tell, from the look of the publication, what topic it refers to. It is unclear how a non-English speaker is to know to pick that publication up in the first place.

Even information as everyday as letters home from school, can present a worry for some **People for whom English is a second language**.

Lack of access to the internet

Some non-internet users from a number of different customer groups observed that the increasing reliance on the internet as an information channel excludes them from access to information.

What makes a positive information experience

“When you’ve been treated the same as everyone else.”

Person with physical disability

The information services that seemed to be most beneficial had the following characteristics:

- **Few boundaries** – they focus on the needs of the customer rather than the requirements of the information provider which leads to a more holistic approach
- **Anticipate needs** – they understand that the customer may not know the questions to ask and will therefore have a systematic approach to ensuring that possible needs are anticipated
- **Provide information in multiple channels** – in this way they can meet the needs of the customer in a manner that suits them. This would include large print or translation as appropriate
- **Provide information in a layered form** – that allows information to be accessed at a basic or more detailed level
- **Friendly, supportive and non-judgemental** – although not instrumentally important to the provision of information friendliness is a quality that is highly valued by participants in this consultation
- **Effective fulfilment** – they do what they say they will do without undue delay and if necessary stay with the issue until it is resolved
- **Communicate the alternative formats** in which information is available as a matter of course and not just on request

Solutions and opportunities

“People need to listen so that they can give you the information you need”

Person with learning disabilities

There are a number of learning points which may helpfully inform the development of policy and strategy.

Prioritise multiple formats

Different information channels suit different people. A choice of information channels is therefore as important now as it has ever been. This is particularly so for the disadvantaged and excluded groups, only a minority of whom are regular internet users and by whom personal contact is particularly valued.

Information that anticipates need and promotes entitlement

One of the most important findings arising from this consultation is the need for more systematic approaches to providing information which anticipates people's needs rather than responds to problems at the point where they are reaching a crisis.

Many information needs arise as part of a life-event or life stage so it ought to be possible to identify these and to develop a strategy which specifically addresses them.

Ensure telephone services work really well for the customer

There was considerable criticism of call-centre based services. Many of these criticisms were of a kind that could be overcome with better system design, better staff training and higher staffing levels.

Priority should be given to ensuring effective evaluation and monitoring of Customer First perhaps through the use of mystery shoppers, and maybe, case studies which follow enquiries through from start to finish. It may also be possible for (SCC) to work with its partners to arrive at guidelines for best practice, or minimum standards, for the telephone information services that they offer.

Improve information searching skills

Skills for information seeking vary widely but can make a considerable difference to access to information leading to resources and opportunities.

It may be appropriate to consider using the kind of information searches discussed in this consultation as a context for Citizenship work in secondary schools in Suffolk. It may also be possible for SCC to work with its partners to explore other ways in which information searching skills can be improved for the people they are working with.

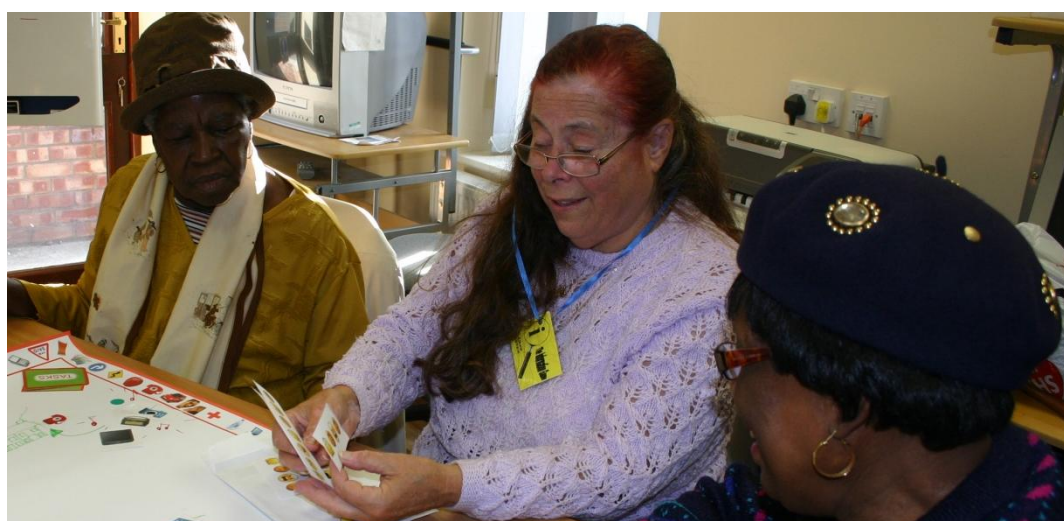


Figure 4 Legal and financial information can be especially difficult to understand

Older People who may have been perfectly competent in the information game for most of their life, struggle to sustain that ability as information systems evolve and their own capacities change. Policy and strategy relating to **Older people** should seek to sustain and reinforce the ability of **Older people** to find the information they need.

Recognise and develop info-hubs

For those engaged with such services, day services and drop-in centres are an effective method of promoting access to information and consideration should be given to ways in which this might be developed as an integrated countywide network

Develop fact sheets and common source information

Plain and simple but well crafted and thoughtfully structured fact sheets could be made available on the internet and also easily printed for manual distribution. This would provide a cheap and easily updateable form of authoritative information for primary consumption or as described above, for promotion by front-line staff including call-centre staff.

The use of a common source would help overcome lack of consistency of message which was an issue identified in this consultation. The provision of translated or large-print material could also be more effectively facilitated in this way.

Promote family and neighbourhood networks

Policy relating to information should recognise and embrace word of mouth as an important channel and should seek ways to strengthen it. For instance, many participants recommended learning from people who had already been through their situation. Maybe a network of volunteers could be developed as community speakers on different issues.

Campaign on mailing and telephone preference

“You get people ring up and they ask you about your bank details.”

Person with learning disability

During this consultation, it became apparent that many **Older People**, **People with a learning disability**, **People with a physical disability** and **People with a mental health issue** are troubled by cold callers on the telephone and to a lesser extent by volumes of junk mail.

Consideration should be given to developing an information campaign which supports disadvantaged communities in making use of the Telephone Preference Service and the Mailing Preference Service.

User-centred web delivery

This consultation suggests that enhancing the human/interactive elements of the web and ensuring a positive experience which feels ‘natural’ to the

customer is the key. This is likely to require the ongoing convergence of web, call-centre and in-person channels. Suffolk County Council is currently conducting a review which will go a long way towards addressing these issues.

Resolve issue of access to ‘what’s on’ information for adults with learning disabilities

Whilst advances have been made on the provision of physical access information for leisure activities, there is little information available to indicate what activities are likely to be appropriate for adults with learning disabilities.

Conclusion

The consultation successfully engaged 165 people from the priority groups in a public consultation about how they access the information they need in order to live life to the full.

It produced a wide ranging set of findings with several dominant themes which could helpfully inform the development of policy and strategy relating to the provision of information for adults in Suffolk.

The struggle factor

The most striking finding to emerge from the consultation was the extent to which people find accessing information to be a struggle. This is a matter of particular concern for the marginalised groups involved in this consultation for whom day to day life can already be quite a struggle.

Whilst good information searching skills can help to overcome the struggle, it was apparent that most of the struggle factor arises from weaknesses in service delivery on the part of organisations, rather than poor capacity on the part of the information consumer.

Effective policy relating to the provision of information would make it a priority to seek to reduce the ‘struggle factor’.



Figure 5 Multiple information channels are as important now as ever

The importance of multiple channels and the human factor

The crucial importance of supplying information through multiple channels e.g. print, web, telephone, media, etc was confirmed. Different individuals use different channels often to the exclusion of other channels and different channels are favoured by different people for different types of information.

Channel-shift offers potential for improved access to information but there is significant danger that the most vulnerable in society could become even more marginalised if human factors are ignored.

Bound to this issue is a continuing need to provide individuals with the skills to use online services and access to the internet.

Whilst some issues require only a factual, information based response, it is evident from the consultation that there are many where this is not enough and human involvement is preferred. Certainly, the participants in this consultation place a very high value on interacting with an individual, rather than an information system. A successful information strategy is likely to acknowledge this factor and to seek to develop interactive information systems which embrace appropriate channels of information provision according to need.

Information provision that anticipates need and crosses institutional boundaries

One of the most significant advances in the provision of information would be to provide information that ignores institutional boundaries and anticipates need based on an individual's circumstances. The consultation showed that information requirements are relatively predictable at particular life stages and when particular life events occur, such as moving house or going to college.

Many participants complained that it is left to them to do battle with a system in order to discover opportunities that would be available to them if they only knew to ask. They were able to identify individuals and services which do take a holistic view and provide information based on the needs of the user rather than the strict terms of reference of the organisation, so this is clearly possible. However, it is likely to require close collaboration from multiple agencies.

Information v Advice

The findings of the consultation serve to illustrate how, in the experience of the public, *information* seamlessly merges into the realm of *advice*. Policy and strategy relating to information will need to take account of this and avoid seeking to construct excessively stark boundaries between the two.

Finally, Suffolk County Council is to be congratulated for commissioning this consultation. Participants were very appreciative of being involved. They certainly felt that this was a valid issue for consultation and were keen that their voices be heard.

Acknowledgements

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- Suffolk Befriending
- Mid-Suffolk Axis
- May Centre for Disabled People, Beccles
- Suffolk MIND
- Crossroad – Caring for Carers, Lowestoft
- Family Action in Lowestoft and Ipswich
- The InsideOut Community
- Whitehouse Enterprises
- CSV Media Centre

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Cultural Intelligence

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