

Information Fairs



A guide to the organisation and running of local information fairs

This guide was produced for the Senior Council for Devon, from the learning experience of the Devon LinkAge Plus programme, run by Devon County Council and funded by the Department for Work and Pensions.

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Introduction

During the LinkAge Programme, which ran between 2006 and 2008, the programme team organised and ran a number of Information Fairs, Listening Events and Conferences. The information fairs were warmly received by both older people attending and the service and information providers exhibiting at the fairs.

The intention of the information fairs was to bring together a variety of agencies across the public, voluntary and community sectors to run stands of information that showed the widest possible range of services and information available for people aged 50 and over.

Each time the team organised an event they learned something new. So this guide has been produced with the intention of making life easier for future organisers of similar events.

Many of the suggestions apply to the organisation of any event, large or small.

Why have a Fair?

The LinkAge Plus project found that Fairs were very effective at:-

- getting information over to people attending, in an enjoyable and unthreatening way;
- helping local organisations “network” - some said that even if no older people attended, the event had been worthwhile for extending their own knowledge and contacts;
- increasing the general level of knowledge among older people, enabling them to network with their own contacts later.

How often should you have a Fair?

This depends on the local area and the numbers of older people around. We found that repeat events, perhaps combined with feedback on local consultations and planning, were appreciated. A one-off Fair with no other context is less useful than one which is clearly part of something broader.

Planning

It takes a surprising length of time to organise an information fair and to bring all the different elements together:

- If you are planning an event in an area you don't know well, you need extra lead in time to be sure you know all the local players and to get them onside.
- Agreeing the date may not be straightforward if you want to be sure of avoiding clashes – you need time to check this.
- You may want to choose a local market day, which can restrict choice.
- Venues may be difficult to find and usually need to be booked 8 -12 weeks in advance.
- Stall holders need plenty of notice, although there are always a few who are able to come at the last minute.
- Inviting and liaison with stall holders can be time consuming.
- Advertising needs to be produced and to be put out in plenty of time.
- Local newsletters may be published at long intervals – and may be the most effective means of telling people about the event.

Ideally one person needs to lead the event planning so that they can bring all the strands together and have an overall view.

If a committee is organising the event it is essential that roles are clearly defined and regular liaison is maintained to ensure that all the different elements are being drawn together:

Do not be put off if there are pressing reasons for organising something more quickly – your event may not be perfect, but still be very useful. The LinkAge Plus Team has, with intensive work, organised fairs in 5-6 weeks and slightly less.

Venue

The **location** is vital.

The venue needs full accessibility for people with disabilities; easy level access without the need for use of an escalator or lift from street level is ideal.

The most successful events were in places with which people were familiar. For example:

- Pannier Markets - covered (and heated in winter)
- a well used theatre in a seaside town
- local volunteer centres
- village halls, etc.

Places that people could drop into because they were passing and were curious about what was going on were the best attended.

Town Halls are attractive venues, however they frequently have upstairs function rooms which are accessible with stairs and a lift (if there's no lift they should not be used). The team found that this can put people off, and reduce attendance.

Toilets should have easy level access, they need to be sufficient for the numbers of visitors and stall holders and there needs to be at least one designated toilet which is accessible for people in wheelchairs with space for a carer to assist if required.

Parking needs to be taken into account. Most exhibitors will arrive in cars and will often have heavy and bulky equipment which they cannot carry for long distances so an area to park whilst they unload is essential, they will then need to have access to longer term parking for the duration of the event.

Visitors may also need to park, although not for such long periods. Easy access to **public transport** is also an important consideration, especially for larger events where a greater catchment area is covered. This may not be so important for a very local venue - a village hall, for example.

If you are going to have any kind of presentations or dialogue alongside the fair, consider the need for a loop system and the general acoustics – noisy places (e.g. with hard floors, ceilings and walls that “bounce” noise around) can be very difficult for many older people.

Useful web address: www.devonvillagehalls.co.uk

Timing

The timing of the event is important. An event for older people will attract the most people around the middle of the day, i.e. later morning to lunchtime, or lunchtime to about 4pm. The LinkAge Plus team were asked to organise events which would be open later in the evening so that people who work could attend, but in practice they found that attendance was very low after about 4pm.

This also makes it easier for stall holders who work regular office hours, and as a result, weekdays will usually attract more stalls from “Professionals” than events held at the weekends.

It is also useful to check out local events diaries to make sure that your event does not clash with another important event as this will reduce both the numbers of exhibitors who can attend and the number of visitors. Don't forget to check the sports pages either. An important game or match on TV can also cut down on numbers!

Depending on the location, the local Market Day can be a good choice if an appropriate venue near the market/public transport hub is available.

Stall numbers – how big should the fair be?

It is useful to work out how many stalls you want and have this in mind when choosing the venue, allowing a bit of lee way either way. Alternatively - if there is no real choice of venue, you should work out how many stalls can be realistically accommodated.

The bigger the venue, the more stalls can be fitted in, but if the venue is too big the event can look lost and insignificant. Conversely, a small space which is slightly overfull does give the impression of a vibrant event - as long as there is circulation space. There must be enough space for people who use wheelchairs to get around!

Health and Safety also needs to be taken into consideration so there does need to be free access and Fire Exits must not be blocked.

Most tables are 6ft long trestles and there needs to be space around them for access and to allow people to put up display boards and banners. It is also important to allow space for at least 2 chairs behind each stall and it is useful if chairs are available to go in front of stalls for people who need to sit down.

Some of the floor standing displays used by organisations can be quite large. If you are planning to put stalls in the middle of the room some of the larger display equipment can act as barriers, cutting off part of the room, which is then less well visited.

Occasionally, stall holders may wish to have access to electric points – be clear if your venue has these and how many and where they are located.

Don't forget to use the event to recruit new members!

Refreshments

Advertised free refreshments are a useful draw. People enjoy the opportunity to have a cup of tea or coffee, with a biscuit or piece of cake, as part of the outing.

LinkAge Plus provided lunch at several events, but unless the Information Fair was part of a bigger, all day event, we found people did not expect it. Although we were able to provide free refreshments - and this was mentioned on our advertising - many people offered to make a donation or to pay. Home made cakes were particularly appreciated.

Outside caterers can help take the burden of organisation over catering, however, they can also be quite expensive.

We found we were able to make good arrangements with local suppliers, especially if the food and drink had a locally produced, ethical or fair-trade association. Being prepared to advertise this helped with arranging a reasonable price.

Volunteers can produce tea/coffee and biscuits on a very reasonable budget, and most older people will appreciate it greatly if it's complimentary.

If providing tea and coffee yourselves, the most important item (other than tea, coffee, milk, sugar and cups – disposable unless you have proper washing up and hand washing facilities) to get hold of is an urn. Local volunteer centres may have one they can lend you, or they can be easily hired.

Finding Organisations to invite

Make an initial list of everyone you can think of.

To find the contacts (email addresses and phone numbers) use:

- “**Google**” (www.google.co.uk)
- the **Devon County Council web site** (www.devon.gov.uk) which lists a lot of organisations and groups along with their contacts.
- The Devon Community Directory is a useful resource:
www.devonline.gov.uk/community
- **Voluntary Organisations** (Local Community Volunteer Schemes, Age Concern, etc) who often have very extensive lists of local and national groups and anyone you feel might have the type of contacts you are interested in inviting.
- Consider health programmes, such as Expert Patient – find information about these on the Devon PCT website:
www.devonpct.nhs.uk
- Consider whether you can find an organisation that can put on, for example, free blood pressure checks, or can provide free low-energy light bulbs.

There is a LinkAge Plus Information Fair Contact List available which was accurate on completion in July 2008.

Inviting exhibitors

Blanket email invitations do not work.

The LinkAge Plus team found that an initial telephone contact followed up by an email was the most effective way of ensuring they had the stalls they required. This is time consuming, but many people will put the event in their diaries following the initial phone call. An email is useful to confirm the purpose of the event and the time and place.

The LinkAge Plus team had a standard email which was altered slightly depending on the outcome of the telephone conversation. Some people are very busy and impossible to reach on the phone. For these, an email was sent, marked as urgent, and usually included more detail about the event. Where necessary they were followed up if not heard from within a week to 10 days, to try and obtain a firm reply.

Be flexible with the list. Quite a lot of stall holders got in touch with the organisers, once word had got out about the event, and several organisations asked if they could come along.

The List

Keep a list of everyone you invite. Make sure that you have a note of:

- The name of the main contact
- Any other contacts within the organisation
- Their phone number
- Their mobile phone number
- The address
- The email address.

It's useful to add a "comments" column to your list to remind you of any extra information you might need, for example:

- that someone might be turning up late
- they might need extra help getting material out of the car
- a disabled parking space is needed
- a stallholder wanting to be beside another exhibitor
- they require an electricity socket

Note whether they are able to come or not, or if they needed to be followed up.

The LinkAge Plus team found that they needed to write everything down as it is very simple to forget important items or not remember who had said what.

Try to find out in advance if stallholders' promotional banners are very large, so that they could then be given locations with the appropriate facilities.

Keep a separate list of people who want to attend the event as visitors. They might, for example contact you about wanting to see a particular exhibitor, or needing specific help. Add to this list people who have been specially invited, such as the local mayor and councillors – with their names and titles.

Catering

If the catering is being **contracted out**, book the caterer well in advance and give them rough ideas of how many people you will need to cater for. Agree the costs in advance. Keeping in touch with the caterer is important as you may have to make alterations right up to the last minute.

Remember that stall holders get thirsty too; they will be doing a lot of talking, and need regular drinks! If you can find someone to take these around, stalls will not be empty while stallholders get their own – and putting on your next event just got easier!

If managing the catering **within the group** make sure that someone knows to buy sufficient supplies of tea and coffee, milk and sugar and consumables. Also check whether the venue has facilities for boiling water and has cups or mugs available with washing up facilities – but remember someone will need to do this!. Urns can be easily hired, if one cannot be borrowed from a volunteer organisation. If there are no cups or washing up facilities then sufficient insulated **polythene** cups will be needed. They are much safer than the thinner plastic cups which can distort and collapse with hot liquid.

It is also useful to arrange in advance for 1-2 people to be in charge of refreshments on the day – and agree on who will clear up!

Publicity

This is possibly one of the most difficult items of the whole event. No matter how much publicity you produce someone will always tell you that there was insufficient or that it was in the wrong places!

LinkAge Plus found that **newspaper advertising** was very expensive (£250.00 per advert for a 4"x6" coloured box) and had limited impact for its cost. Advertising in **local community publications** however did work. Parish magazines, town guides and town websites –all usually free for community events - were effective.

We also used **posters**. A3, A4 and small A5 flyers. On average we used 15 x A3, 20 x A4 and about 50/75 flyers which we left in small bundles in places such as GP surgeries, hospitals, volunteer bureaux, Day Centres, etc for people to pick up.

The most effective advertising was placed by people who knew the community well and who were able to identify, and put up posters, in places visited by the target audience.

We also found that support from the **local media** was very helpful. **Local radio stations** will often mention an event and will on occasion do an interview if they feel that there is sufficient local interest. **Local television** has also expressed an interest but be prepared to be “bumped” if something more notable happens. **Local Newspapers** will sometimes offer editorial on community pages.

Most important of all is word of mouth. Make sure that people know the event is to happen and that they will be missing a great opportunity if they fail to arrive.

Stall holders who are part of the local community, i.e. housing associations and volunteer agencies, are very important, both in sharing the spreading of posters and in getting the word out that an exciting event is happening.

The most effective advertising “window” is two weeks prior to the event. Much earlier than this and it can be forgotten, much later than this and people have other things planned, or are unable to change their arrangements.

Partners / Insurance

Partners

Getting other agencies to be “Partners” in the event reduces the workload, particularly of advertising. It also gives people a commitment to the event which ensures they turn up on the day and bring their friends.

Commercial (independent provider) agencies asked to sponsor some of the LinkAge Plus events, but we were unable to accept. However, if your organisation felt they met your own criteria, then you might get them to sponsor hall hire, advertising or the refreshments at your events.

This can have a significant effect upon your budget, but be aware that the event will no longer be solely “yours”. Sponsors will expect to have their company’s name badged prominently in advertising and at the event itself.

Insurance

Public Liability Insurance is essential for any event the general public are invited to and some venues will ask to see your certificate. Do not assume that the venue has this cover!!

Set up

About a week before the event **revisit the venue**, if possible with the caretaker, to discuss the final layout of the room. By then you will have a pretty accurate idea of the number of stall holders, but always allow for a couple of last minute additions.

Make a sketch of the room or get a copy of the floor plan and note for yourself how the room is to be laid out. It is useful to have smaller tables and chairs set up around the refreshment area so that people can sit down with their refreshments. Remember, that some of your visitors may be in wheelchairs or have mobility difficulties and good access is needed around the room.

Find out when you can gain access for set up on the day. Allow about an hour, which gives everyone plenty of time to get set up, get a drink and be ready.

A couple of days before the event send out an email to all exhibitors detailing the **setting up time**, explaining where to **park** and providing a “**Google Map**” reference so they can find the venue.

Name Badges for supporting staff and exhibitors are very useful.

Labelling the tables for the exhibitors saves a lot of time on the day and ensures a good mix of stalls around the room. The LinkAge Plus team, tried having a list of who was on which table but this was confusing in the rush to set up, so they developed a system of labelling each table with an A4 size sheet, with the organisation name in 65 point type in a bright colour.

Don't Forget

Items to take with you:

- Labels for the tables.
- Exhibitor List with room layout.
- Name Badges
- Comments list for visitors with details of any special requirements
- Names and times of visit for important guests.
- Sellotape
- Scissors
- Bluetac
- Refreshments. Tea, coffee, sugar cakes milk etc.
- Change - for Parking and purchasing last-minute forgotten items.

It is useful to try and be there a little before anyone else, as there are always people who arrive early.

1. Label the tables before you do anything else, but be prepared on the day for some people to want to swap for a variety of reasons.
2. Set up the refreshments area and ensure that the Urn has arrived and is filled with water and switched on. Make sure that the refreshments volunteers have arrived and that there are cups, tea, coffee, sugar and milk.

Once the event starts there is not much more you can do except enjoy the day.

There will be some stall holders who don't arrive and there will be visitors who promised to come and who won't, but the important thing is the people who are there and if you've forgotten something the chances are no one except you will ever notice.

Have a wonderful event: have fun, and make it fun!!