



# A GUIDE TO AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNICATION



## INTRODUCTION

Monaghan Age Friendly alliance is in existence since September 2011. In that time we have aimed to make Monaghan a better place in which to grow old through the delivery of Monaghan Age Friendly strategy. The actions within Monaghan Age Friendly strategy were identified through an in depth consultation process with the older people of county Monaghan. Access to information and services was one of the key issues raised by older people in Monaghan. Many older people highlighted to us the barriers, difficulties and challenges they experience daily when trying to access services or information or supports in their community. Many of these difficulties arise from a lack of awareness of the older customer.

Monaghan Age Friendly Alliance wish to make service providers, businesses, shops and the wider community aware of the needs of the older population when communicating about their services, information and activities. We hope this booklet provides useful information that will help achieve that goal.

***“Just because you know  
what you’re talking about doesn’t  
mean that I do”***

Participant in Monaghan Age Friendly strategy consultation





## THE IMPORTANCE OF AGE FRIENDLY COMMUNICATION

How well you communicate with your customers contributes to how well you meet their needs. Whether you provide services related to health, education, social services

**or**, retail effective communication is vital.

When information is easy to see, easy to hear and easy to understand, everyone benefits. When staff are trained to deal sensitively and respectfully with clients and customers, service improves for everyone.

In Monaghan 2015, people aged 65 and older make up almost 13% of our population. Whether you run a business, a public service serving seniors, a retail outlet or a community organisation you want to serve your clients and customers well. Monaghan Older peoples network welcomes the publication of this booklet. We are keen to bring the concerns of the older people of Monaghan to the wider community in realtion to accessing services and information. We hope the tips and information contained in this booklet will help you

understand a little better the difficulties some people have when trying to access information on services.

While the focus of this booklet is older people the advice is relevant to communicating with audiences of all ages. Plain language, good design and materials that are easy to use and understand are valued by everyone.

**P.J. Harte**

Chairperson

Monaghan Older People's Network



## Section one:

# WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

*“Communication is the act of transferring information from one place or one person to another”*

Information and communication are not the same. Information is **“What”** we share, Communication is **“How”** we share it.

When interacting with older people, it is important to be sensitive to how they prefer to communicate, learn and use information. Remember, the way you communicate and learn may NOT be the same as people from a different generation.

Communication involves sending, receiving, understanding and utilizing information. Attitudes, feelings and behaviours can cause breakdowns in communication between people of different generations. Miscommunication can cause people to respond or react negatively.

# HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE?

There are many mediums we use to communicate with others:

## Spoken or Verbal Communication:

Face-to-face, telephone, radio or television and other media.



For many people the telephone is a lifeline to basic services and information. In a rural county like Monaghan access to services and information is crucial to combating social exclusion and rural isolation. For many services in a rural county the provision of service over the telephone is central to the organization. For older people the telephone can be important means of getting services and information. The manner in which you deliver services on the telephone can greatly improve the accessibility of your service.

### **Non-Verbal Communication:**

Body language, gestures, behaviour.



How we communicate with people can affect whether and how services are used or accessed by people. First and foremost

we should always treat people with dignity and respect. Negative body language tells the customer you are not interested in helping them, for many older people this will prevent them from looking for the assistance they need.

### **Written Communication:**

Letters, e-mails, books, forms, leaflets and the Internet or via other media.



Written communication is one of the most important and useful methods of communicating information to the public. This method of communication used by organisations is often

inaccessible to many older people in the community.

Complicated language, jargon, small print, cluttered application forms all make your service and information very difficult for some people to access.

### **Visualizations:**

Signage, maps, logos and posters communicate messages.

Visualizations help people find services and supports with ease. Clear signage, uncluttered noticeboards and easy to read posters make it easier for your customer to see what services are available to them and where they can find them.





## Section two: AGING AND COMMUNICATION

There are many factors that lead to breakdown in communications; some of these factors arise from changes associated with aging. Many older people experience changes as part of the natural aging process that can affect their capacity to receive and understand information.

Service providers should be aware of these changes and ensure the methods used to communicate with older customers reflect the barriers older people may experience.

**Sensory changes are a normal part of aging.**

Changes in vision and hearing can affect an older person's capacity to absorb information. A person may begin to have difficulty hearing clearly or reading small print.

Physical changes can include decline in flexibility, strength, fine motor control and hand-eye coordination, which can translate into difficulty manipulating controls buttons or touch screens.

**Physical changes**

**Changes in cognitive function**

Changes in cognitive function, including memory, reasoning and abstract thinking can impact on how a person receives or understands information.

Emotional changes, the impact of sensory, physical and social changes on an older person can also impact on their emotional well being. Older people may feel an increased sense of loneliness, isolation, tension or worry, and anxiety.

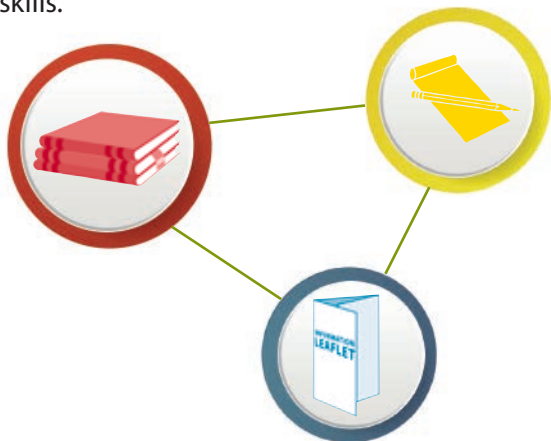
**Emotional changes**

Support and understanding from services providers can help the customer to feel less anxious and worried.



While many older people today have achieved higher levels of education than previous generations, there are still many older people in our communities who experience literacy difficulties.

Limited literacy skills limits can impact on all communication forms that rely on the written word. Tasks such as filling out forms or reading instructions on leaflets, understanding information provided present significant difficulties for older people with limited literacy skills.



## Section three: AGE FRIENDLY COMMUNICATION IN YOUR SERVICE

### HOW CAN SERVICE PROVIDERS COMMUNICATE IN AN AGE FRIENDLY MANNER?

#### Spoken or Verbal Communication:

Face-to-face, telephone, radio or television and other media.





## Age Friendly verbal communication

You can ensure that you are providing information in an accessible manner by being aware of barriers people face in accessing information or services from your organisation. You can use simple techniques to communicate with people in an age friendly way. Dealing face to face with service users involves adopting courtesy and respect as well as taking note of some additional communications needs.

- Listen to the customer.
- Maintain eye contact without staring.
- Make the customer feel comfortable.
- Treat the customer with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- Ask the customer to tell you the best way to help. If unsure, always ask.
- If offering assistance, wait until the person has accepted your offer or has given instructions before you help.
- Deal with unfamiliar situations in a calm, professional manner.
- Allow for extra time if necessary.
- Be relaxed.

## Age friendly Telephone Skills

For many older people the telephone is a lifeline to basic services and information. Poor telephone skills can create enormous difficulty and frustration for people trying to access services and information. For some people making a phone call may be a stressful and frustrating experience. As a service provider you should try to minimize that stress as far as possible.

### You can do this by:

- Speak clearly, and courteously
- Clarify what information/service they are calling about.
- Offer information clearly and check the caller has heard everything.
- Being helpful to the caller even if the subject of the call is not strictly speaking your field of responsibility. This means trying to find someone who can help now, or someone who can ring them back later.
- Don't put the caller on hold and then leave them suspended there indefinitely.





## Non-Verbal Communication:

body language, gestures, behaviour.

### Age Friendly non-verbal communication

There are many different types of nonverbal communication. Together, the following nonverbal signals and cues communicate.

- **FACIAL EXPRESSIONS** - Make eye contact during conversations and take care that your facial expression is one that shows you are listening and willing to help.
- **GESTURES** Although not an actual “facial” expression, head movements such as nodding are also important visual cues that let people know you are listening, processing the information.
- **GENERAL BODY LANGUAGE** Crossing your arms over your chest signifies to a listener that you do not agree with them and you are closed off from what they are saying. Fidgeting while listening also imparts cues that you are not interested in what is going on. Keeping still while listening may not be easy, but it lets the speaker know that you care about what they are saying.

## Written Communication:

letters, e-mails, books, forms, leaflets and the Internet or via other media.

### Age Friendly written communication

- Keep information simple and easy to understand.
- Use familiar language and tone
- Highlight key points and repeat a number of times
- Use pictures to illustrate information
- Avoid jargon
- Avoid complex graphs/charts
- Include contact details for people who may require further information





### **Visualizations:**

Signage, maps, logos and posters communicate messages.

#### **Age Friendly visualizations communication**

- Signage should be clear and easy to understand
- Signage should be located where it can be seen clearly
- Logos should be simple and uncomplicated
- Noticeboards should be clutter free and easy to read

## *Section four:* **GENERAL TIPS AND ADVICE**

### **AGE FRIENDLY COMMUNICATION TIPS AND IMPORTANT POINTS**

1. Consider the needs of the audience to whom you are communicating your message
2. Don't assume the customer has an existing level of knowledge of the service
3. Always offer assistance to the customer
4. Use clear simple language

#### **Simple Language Checklist**

- Use familiar words and a conversational, personal tone.
- Be direct and specific.
- Favour short words and short sentences.
- Use short paragraphs.
- Use pictures or illustrations to make the message easier to understand
- Highlight main ideas and important information
- Offer assistance
- Include contact details where assistance can be accessed.

