

Guidelines for user panels: How to utilize panels of elderly men in the development of museum services

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1. At first

A **user panel** is a participatory and interactive method that allows users to share their views, experiences and development ideas to improve services. The purpose of the panel is to strengthen user-centeredness and ensure that service development takes users' needs and wishes into account.

These guidelines are based on experiences gained in implementing user panels during the [CoMe Stronger project](#) (2024–2026). The project aimed to develop museum services in ways that would attract elderly men to use the services more actively.

The project's user panels operated in Finland at the Naantali Museum and the Mynämäki Museum, and in Estonia at the Estonian National Museum (ERM) and the Estonian Agricultural Museum (EPM). During the project, the museums wanted to understand how to collect insights from a specific customer group using user panels. The partner museums vary in size and therefore have different resources. Thus, it is important to highlight for the members of a user panel the scale of changes they are aiming for. For example, if the desired new museum product is a new exhibition, the user panel members should be aware of how much work is required to put together an exhibition. From the museum's perspective, it is also essential to understand how much effort needs to be allocated to the development work.

In the project, user panels served as a platform for service development, resulting in six museum services (events, exhibitions and workshops) aimed specifically at elderly men. The services brainstormed by the user panels were piloted and feedback was collected. The museums considered it important to test the ideas that were generated by the panels and gather feedback for future development.

These guidelines have been created to support the preparation and implementation of a user panel by anyone interested in implementing such panel with elderly men. In the guidelines, you will find information about the operation of user panels, participation practices and how feedback was used.

Our experiences of implementing user panels have been rewarding for everyone – the panel members participated enthusiastically and felt that their contribution to service development was meaningful, while the staff of the museums were open and eager about users' ideas in the service development. The project staff was particularly pleased with the diversity of ideas and the stories shared by user panel members.

We hope that our experiences and these guidelines will inspire you to use user panels in service development as well!

2. Preparation of user panels in the CoMe Stronger project

The user panels in CoMe Stronger project were assembled using pre-existing men’s groups. These groups had been formed during the earlier *CoMe Strong* project (Central Baltic 2017-2019, [CoMe Strong project](#)). This provided a solid foundation for cooperation between the user panel members and project staff. Project staff visited the men's groups to present the museum service development project and the concept of user panels more than six months before the first panel meeting took place. The future panel members were informed about the project, the purpose of the user panel work, what the goals were, and what would the duties of the panel include. This way, panel members knew what was expected of them before committing to the work. We encourage you to look for panel members in associations or other existing communities, for example.

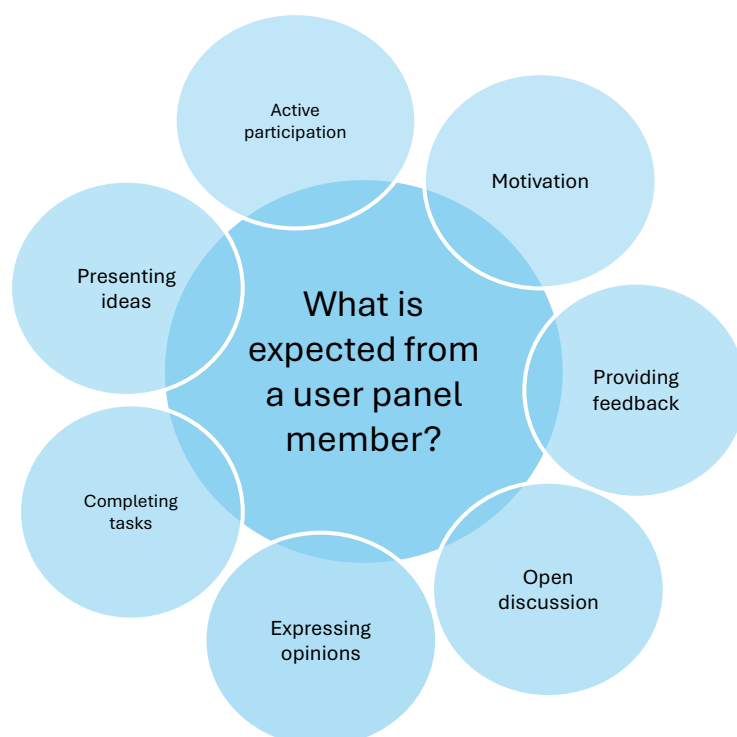
Use existing groups and communities to find user panel members
Tell about the user panel activities and explain in advance what is expected of the members

Project staff and museum personnel prepared the user panels by defining the panel’s goals and drafting a preliminary action plan. Planning included considering the overall schedule: how often should the panel meetings be held and at what stage there should be enough ideas to continue the development of museum service products further. The structure and schedule of each user panel meeting was also considered. The user panel size was set at 5 men + backup members, and the meeting length set at two hours.

Define goals and create a preliminary plan

Being a user panel member does not require any special expertise from the participant – the most important thing is the willingness to share experiences and contribute to joint development. Every member’s voice is valuable, and together we can build better services. However, user panel members are expected to actively participate in the form of both attendance and participation in discussions. They are encouraged to openly express their own thoughts, experiences and opinions, even if they differ from the topic or the original goals of the project.

Participating in a user panel does not require any special expertise, only a willingness to share experiences and contribute to joint development



3. Practical arrangements and the structure of user panel meetings **CoMe Stronger**

The aim of the first user panel meetings was to get to know each other, the museum and reasons why the panels had been established. Another aim was to spark motivation for the joint working process (panel members, museum staff, project staff). The idea of "our shared project" is important for motivation and commitment. The timeline of user panels was presented to the panel members to clarify the task and workload of being a member in a user panel.

Confidentiality, respect and equality were principles used to create an open atmosphere for the user panels. This included transparency about the content of the project and the collection of information, as well as ensuring every panel member had an equal right to be heard.

Introduce panel members to each other, the facilitators and to the museum

Present the user panel, its goals and the timeline

Create the sense of “our shared project”

On the second and third meeting, ideas for service development were collected using various participatory methods. The second meeting focused on experiences from previous museum visits. The third meeting focused on brainstorming museum products. At the start of each meeting, it was important to review what had been done in the previous meeting and what results the project staff had recorded from it. This made the progress of the work visible to the panel members.

Use participatory methods to support ideation

Make progress of the work visible by reviewing previous activities and ideas

Feedback on the user panel activities was gathered through discussions during the meetings. The panel members also gave direct feedback if they felt that the views of the panel were not sufficiently visible in the service product ideas. This reflects the openness of the atmosphere. The last meeting focused on joint evaluation of the entire user panel process and on expressing thanks and appreciation for the work done.

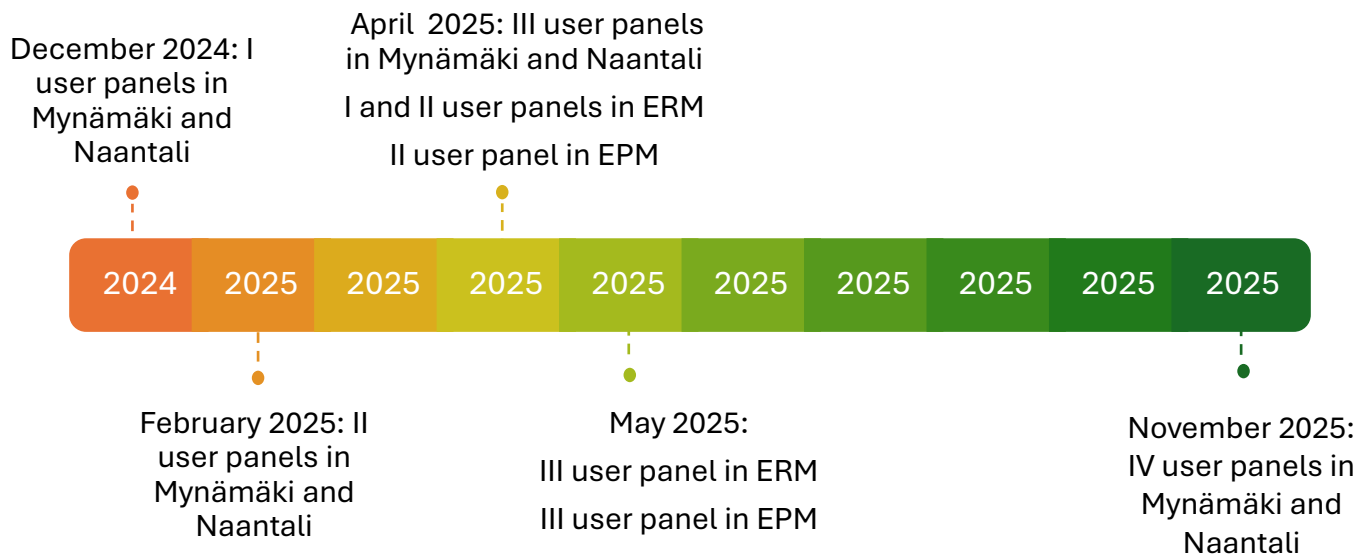
Collect feedback on the work and development ideas (new services, improvements, etc.) formulated based on the ideas of the panels.

Remember to give feedback and thank the panel members

Important:

- The meeting place and space should be quiet enough during the meetings (e.g. meeting room, not a café)
- Face-to-face meetings are important for this customer group
- Being present in a real museum environment is important (difficult to replace with virtual museum tours)
- The ideal group size is 4–6 members to ensure everyone has time to be heard
- Pay attention to accessibility whenever possible: seating, large and clear fonts, sufficient volume, possible assisting devices and memory problems
- A relaxed atmosphere, coffee or lunch at the beginning of meetings and the use of humor create openness
- Communication should be kept clear. The easiest way is to use a common channel: in Finland, WhatsApp and email were used. In Estonia, for some participants, the only suitable way to contact was a phone call.
- Rewards motivate and show appreciation (museum tickets, museum cards, etc.)
- Try to take the schedules of the panel members into account when arranging meetings
- The duration of user panel meetings should be 2–3 hours

User panel meetings on a timeline



The recommended frequency for user panel meetings is at least once a month. As you can see from the figure above, in the project, the user panel meetings were sometimes held less frequently. However, project staff met with the panel members in other project activities (museum visits and pilot sessions) between the official user panel meetings.

Methods used in user panels

Although schedules, the methods to be used and discussion frameworks were prepared in advance for the user panel meetings, the sessions turned out to be quite self-directed and informal. In practice, the structure of the meetings adapted to the situations and participants. Panel members steered the discussion to topics that were meaningful to them. When necessary, the facilitator guided the discussion back to the intended topic.

Service design methods were used in the user panels. It was important to take user panel members' participation into account when selecting methods. In particular, the narrative method, i.e. hearing the participants' stories and extracting the most important points from them, turned out to be the most significant method. Informal group discussions and observations made by the panel members in museums and the discussion based on them, also played an important role. It was also significant to build a strong relationship of trust with the panel members.

Methods used to stimulate discussion and sharing opinions:

- Group discussions and listening rounds
- Museum tours around a chosen theme (e.g. accessibility)
- “My star moment at the museum”
- Photo-based activities
- Choosing the most interesting object in the museum
- Voting (e.g. sticky notes or traffic light system)
- Collecting memories and stories (e.g. bring your own object to the museum)

4. The role and tasks of the facilitator

The role of the facilitator was, above all, to create a safe and open atmosphere where all participants dared to speak freely and were able to participate.

The facilitator acted alongside the group, not above, as a kind of "friend" who understands the dynamics of the group, the ways in which the group members act and reacts flexibly to situations – for example, participating in a joke when one is told. There was no desire to restrict the discussions too much. The facilitator's task was to pick out the essential issues from the often sprawling discussion of the panel members.

The key tasks of the facilitator were listening to the panel members, building motivation and trust, observing the group and guiding the group when necessary (e.g. limiting the speaking turns, returning the discussion to the topic), and documentation. The tasks also included asking questions and taking care of the schedule. In addition, the facilitator's tasks included reflecting on and analyzing the discussions in order to highlight relevant observations. This last one was implemented as a summary at the end of each user panel session, but new observations were also made based on the documentation.

Tips for facilitators

- Create a positive atmosphere
- Keep things informal
- Build trust (allow time for this)
- Foster team spirit
- Be flexible and present in the moment
- Ensure good collaboration
- Take everyone into account
- Strengthen participation, maintain motivation, give feedback
- Choose a clear communication channel
- Impartiality – ensure fairness
- Use humor
- Listen to stories, respond spontaneously, ask questions, show appreciation
- Recognize the social significance of participating in a user panel and nurture it
- Reward – a joint ending session is important!

5. Results of the user panels

Both in Finland and Estonia, the user panels were considered successful because of the genuine ideas produced by the groups. With the help of these insights, it is possible to create and develop new museum services that take into account the needs of the elderly men. The panel members openly shared their views, stories, experiences and ideas within the group. The user panels succeeded in bringing joy and a sense of meaningfulness to the participants. An atmosphere was created in the groups that enabled everyone's active participation and expression of opinions and experiences. The panel members felt they were involved in a process that created meaningfulness: their stories and experiences were something that was wanted to be heard, and they were considered valuable. The men were interested in seeing what their ideas and perspectives would lead to as finished service products.

For the museums' perspective, participation in the development process and gaining experiences about user panels and what it is like to facilitate them for elderly men were considered a success. The developed museum services will remain in use at least in Finnish museums. For example, the *To the museum with Grandpa* event is easily adaptable. Partner museums have expressed gratitude to the facilitators for their natural interaction with the elderly men and constructive collaboration during the project. The staff of the museums are experts in museum services, so without their active contribution, the facilitators' work would not have been possible. The museums also invested a significant effort in implementing the pilot activities.

Museums can adapt their services based on the ideas and opinions of the user panels. For example, the men felt that guidance was important and considered various tasks, such as historical quizzes, dismantling and assembling objects, telling stories and listening to them, to be meaningful ways to engage.

The challenges faced during user panels were similar to those encountered in any group facilitation. The groups included both space-taking and quieter participants. The facilitator's task is to ensure attention is distributed equally so that everyone's views are heard. Discussions in the groups was lively. There was occasional talking over others or chatting with the person they were sitting next to, even when a group discussion was ongoing. This may have been due to hearing difficulties or memory problems, which can make it challenging to follow the conversation. The discussion topics also tended to wander away from the main subject to other interesting things, in which case the facilitator's task was to bring the discussion back to the topic.

It is also good to take into account the challenges of communication. Elderly people may not have email addresses or smartphones with messaging applications.

Results of the user panels

- Museums received valuable information on how to attract new customer segments to the museums
- Concrete information about this customer group's expectations of museum services was gathered, e.g. guidance, accessibility, opportunities to experimentation and hands-on testing, sharing one's own stories, functionality, interesting themes (sea, professions, machinery and equipment, war history, military)
- New ideas: objects to touch and try, objects to disassemble and assemble, quizzes, hands-on activities (e.g. candles, shingles, old medicines), sharing stories
- Methods that allow to share old memories and stories, such as photos, scents, music, old movies, old letters and postcards, old objects, work. Stories do not always need to be recorded – simply telling them in a small group is rewarding and encourages an elderly man to return to the museum.
- Since storytelling is important for elderly men, it is good to offer tours for small groups as well. The size of the group should be kept small (less than 10 people) so that there is time to hear everyone's stories.
- Group dynamics must be considered when implementing user panels. The facilitator should ensure that everyone's opinions are heard and that time is distributed fairly among the participants.
- The elderly men felt that user panel activities were meaningful and socially significant as a form of advocacy. They also valued getting to know new people and having good discussions, arousing interest in museums and the work they do, and the good team spirit among the panel members, museum staff and project staff.

User panel process

Preparation

- **Defining the goals:** Why is the user panel established? (to increase museum visits among elderly men)
- **Selecting the target group:** Elderly men, those who do not visit museums often
- **Partners:** Museums, project staff, researchers



Formation of the user panel

- **Recruitment:** Reaching existing groups of men: pensioners' organizations and other associations, bulletin boards in community centers, providers of services for the elderly
- **Participants:** 5 members + backup members
- **Meeting places:** Museums, quiet space
- **Frequency of meetings:** 3-4 meetings during a year
- **Meeting duration:** 2 hours (including coffee/lunch)
- **Communication:** This customer group may not have a smartphone in use. If they do, a WhatsApp or another group app works well for communication.



Implementation of meetings

Structure

- Museum tour (at least during the first meeting)
- Coffee
- Review of the previous discussion and ideas
- Discussion with a specific target or other chosen method
- Summary and next steps

Methods

- Narrative discussion
- Group discussions
- Photo-based activities
- Collecting memories related to museum objects
- “My star moment at the museum”
- Museum walk with a specific focus (e.g. seats/text size, creating tasks related to museum objects)
- Sharing personal objects and memories related to them
- Observation



The role of the facilitator

- The facilitator is responsible for planning, implementing, documenting and analyzing the results of the user panel meetings
- **Creating the atmosphere:** Building trust, ensuring safety, building a sense of community, creating an encouraging and relaxed atmosphere (e.g. reacting to a joke when one is told), informal conversation
- **Guiding the discussion:** Listening to and taking everyone into account equally, limiting the discussion and making sure everyone has a chance to speak
- Motivating participants, expressing gratitude and creating a sense of meaningfulness
- Observation and taking notes



Collecting and processing feedback

- **Methods:** Verbal feedback, questionnaires, traffic light voting
- **Analysis:** The project team analyzes and documents the feedback, sharing the feedback with the museums
- **The last user panel meeting was dedicated to feedback:** reviewing the entire process, requesting and giving feedback. Special recognition and rewards for panel members were provided during the last session.



Utilizing results

- **Development of museum services:** 6 new museum service products (events, exhibitions, workshops), plus other important ideas and feedback (e.g. related to accessibility and themes of interest to older men)
- **Informing the participants:** Showing concretely what ideas led to and what was recorded from the user panels



Further use and dissemination of the models

- **Museums can:** Adapt service products, use the user panel model in service development/new projects, expand target groups
- Product descriptions are available on the project's website and can be freely used, modified and adapted

