

Policy Review

Age friendly neighbourhoods

March 2013

Summary

Where we live and its immediate environment sets the tone for our daily life and while many older people continue to play an active part in their community, problems with mobility, vision and memory can make neighbourhoods difficult to navigate. In simple terms, the concept of age friendly neighbourhoods means designing an inclusive environment for all ages to lead independent lives.

All neighbourhoods are different and the older people who live in them have diverse priorities and needs. But there are common issues that many older people report need to be improved to make their neighbourhood age friendly. Lack of public transport, or somewhere to sit down, or access to clean public toilets limits how far people are able to move around their neighbourhood and poor quality pavements, poor street lighting or fear of crime can stop people feeling confident enough to go out at all.

While national government can set the framework for age friendly neighbourhoods, it is local government that has the main part to play. To date action has been limited to one or two leading examples. This is despite evidence of the potential benefits to an individual's well-being, community regeneration and the related cost savings to the public sector. Creating and maintaining neighbourhoods that are a great place to grow old needs to be given higher priority.

These are Age UK's headline public policy proposals:

- Every local authority should be working towards achieving age friendly status – communities that offer a good quality of life to all generations, reflecting the priorities of the Dublin Declaration.
- Older people should consider how best to take action to improve neighbourhoods for all ages. Local activists should work with the voluntary sector and community groups to challenge national and local government to listen to older people and invest in age friendly neighbourhoods.

- Local authorities should draw on intergenerational practice to help meet policy objectives such as stronger, safer communities, a robust local economy, environmental sustainability, and also improved adult health and well-being and tackling isolation.
- There is no guarantee that ‘localism’ will mean everyone in a community gets to have their say. National and local government need to involve older people throughout. They should support older people, particularly those that are socially excluded, with funding and advice to design and lead projects to improve their neighbourhoods.
- Local planning, regeneration and street management teams should be aware of the implications of demographic change and the views of older residents in order to design and maintain neighbourhoods for all ages.
- Councillors should understand and act upon the views older people have of how their neighbourhood can improve, challenging the council’s decision making and initiating change that meets the needs of older people in their ward.

Also see papers on social isolation, public transport, engagement and volunteering.

1. Introduction

Since Age UK’s current policy position on age friendly neighbourhoods was last revised in December 2011, there has been the ‘Dublin Declaration’ on age friendly cities (set out in more detail below) and the Greater London Authority has undertaken a research project that will be used to shape the supporting guidance for the relevant part of the London Plan.

Despite this renewed interest in the issue, there remains no single blueprint for an age friendly neighbourhood. However, during this period, there has been a convergence of views on the characteristics and actions that create neighbourhoods for all ages; what is lacking is widespread implementation of this approach and more needs to be done to understand why it is not being adopted by national and local government.

Age friendly neighbourhoods offer an opportunity to create an environment where people want to live and work throughout their lives and one where urban spaces and facilities are designed so that they are suitable for all.

This review briefly outlines the policy under the following headlines:

- Is a single design possible for age friendly neighbourhoods?
- What are the benefits of creating age friendly neighbourhoods?
- Who is responsible for creating age friendly neighbourhoods?
- Public policy proposals

The issues dealt with in this review are relevant only to England.

2. Context

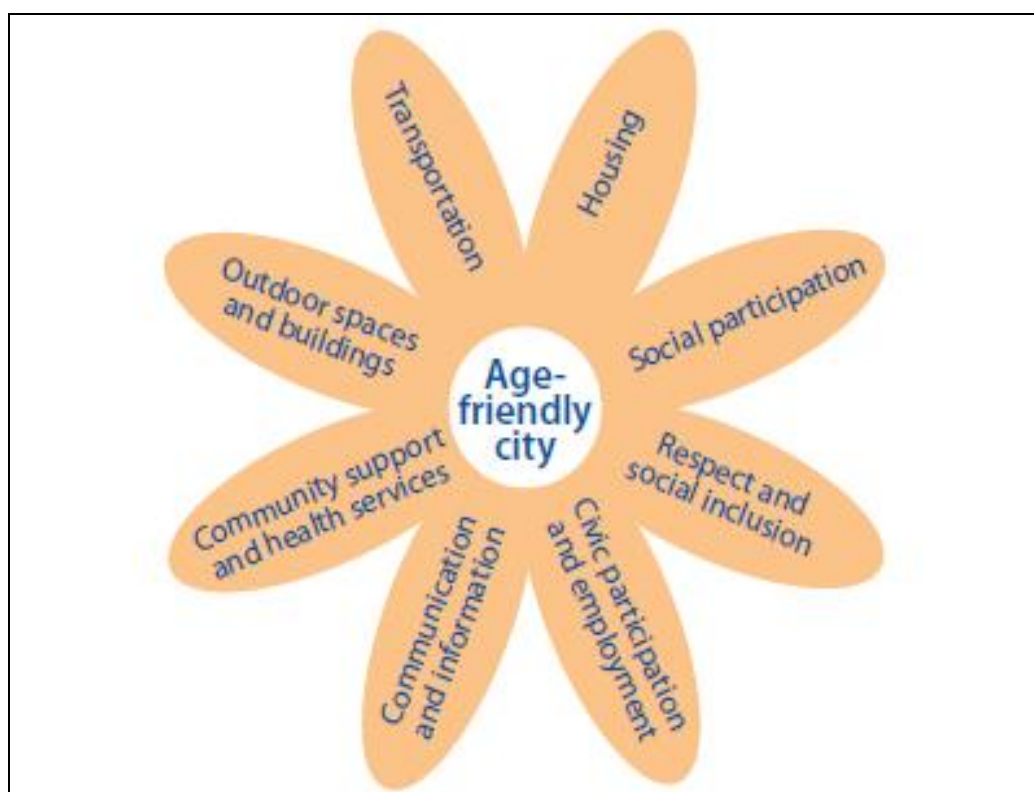
Is a single design possible for age friendly neighbourhoods?

Over recent years a number of definitions have been used to describe the characteristics of an age friendly neighbourhood, but a single agreed definition has not emerged.

Whereas the Lifetime Homes Standard¹ provides an agreed list of features for accessible and adaptable homes, the same has not been achieved for neighbourhoods. This is partly because every neighbourhood is different and older populations are diverse. Each neighbourhood would understandably need a different response. There is however a convergence around a number of similar themes or characteristics that should be considered to achieve an age friendly neighbourhood.

The World Health Organisation has issued a Guide for Age Friendly Cities², which pulls together a number of topic areas (illustrated in Figure 1), based on research conducted into building age friendly cities. The definition contained within the guide brings together elements of the physical environment and social interaction, which affect the experience of people living in a city as they age³. Each topic area is recognised for the influence it has on people's quality of life, for instance on personal mobility, health behaviour or participation and mental well-being. Although the Guide refers to 'cities' this concept is being used in both small and large environments. For instance in Ireland, all the counties – rural and urban – have adopted the WHO approach. The principles in each of the topic areas are relevant at all scales.

Figure 1: Age-friendly city topics



Source: *Global Age Friendly Cities Guide*, WHO, 2007.

Although the WHO has split the characteristics of age friendly neighbourhoods into eight areas, they recognise that many aspects of city life overlap and interact. For instance social participation is also reliant on transportation as much as having the opportunity to participate in something. There is a checklist in the WHO guide, but there is not a detailed blueprint for an age friendly city.

In 2011 a number of cities from around the world, including Manchester and Newcastle in England, signed the Dublin Declaration for Age Friendly Cities. In doing so they declared they would work to meet actions based on the WHO Age Friendly Cities Guide. All the cities that signed the Declaration agreed that the voice of older people had to be at the centre of the initiative. However, all the cities have made their own way to become age-friendly cities, using the approach that is appropriate for them⁴.

The most recent Government research into Lifetime Neighbourhoods also placed an emphasis on resident empowerment⁵. This was seen as the foundation for the other changes that needed to happen in neighbourhoods to improve access; services and amenities; the built and natural environment; social networks/well-being; and housing. The current Government is also developing the idea of Dementia Friendly Communities. Several councils will pilot initiatives that build on the idea of age friendly cities, but with an additional and specific focus on dementia. It will be helpful to follow the pilots as they set out what they plan to achieve.

Age UK and its predecessor organisations gathered evidence from older people about the issues they faced when out and about in their local neighbourhoods. *Towards Common Ground* was a manifesto that set out the ten components that should be the minimum requirement to make a place good to live in⁶. This developed into a framework with an additional focus on ‘people’, see figure 2.

Figure 2: Age UK Age Friendly Neighbourhoods

Places	People	Services
Better meeting places and green spaces	Local social activities	Better local buses and parking
Public seating	Better relationships between different age groups	Accessible and clean public toilets
Better-quality pavements	Being able to have a say in local decisions	Local shops and services within easy reach
Safe, well-lit streets	Volunteers and neighbours helping people out	Somewhere to turn for advice

Source: Agenda for Later Life; Age UK 2011.

There is a correlation between topics in the definitions from Age UK, the WHO and the Department for Communities and Local Government, but to develop this concept further there needs to be more focus on the role of older people in designing, consulting and leading projects to improve their neighbourhood.

Are the benefits of age friendly neighbourhoods fully understood?

The streets, services and neighbours in our immediate home environment have a significant impact on the way we live. Research has shown that older people are likely to spend more time in their local neighbourhood and in many cases to have lived in the same community for a considerable amount of time⁷. The homes and neighbourhoods in which people live are an important part of meaning and self-identity for older people⁸.

Neighbourhoods are therefore a crucial part of continuing to live independently in later life. Researchers have warned that “Most older people want to remain living at home, but if their neighbourhoods are inaccessible they are effectively trapped inside”⁹. There is a distinct relationship here between the quality of the neighbourhood and social isolation in later life, which is not widely recognised and could have cost implications for public services.

For many older people, a lack of good quality support and infrastructure within their neighbourhood acts as a barrier that prevents them from being active locally. In a survey 52 per cent of respondents agreed that the lack of public toilets in their area stopped them from going out as often as they would like¹⁰. Similarly, poor pavements, a lack of places to sit down and poor access to local services act to isolate older people.

Older people are active citizens and contributors to the economic and social well-being of our communities. Nearly one-third of children whose mothers work are cared for by grandparents and more than a third of 65–74-year-olds undertake formal volunteering at least once a month¹¹. Investing in neighbourhoods that will enable us all to go on being as active as possible as we grow older clearly has wider benefits.

The benefits of improving neighbourhoods are recognised in public health policy. Creating healthy and sustainable communities was one of the six policy objectives in the Marmot Review of health inequalities. The review recognised social determinants of health at a neighbourhood level, such as removing barriers to community participation, being able to access green spaces, public transport and active travel¹². This is now reflected in the government’s Public Health Outcomes Framework, which includes indicators on social connectedness and older people’s perception of community safety¹³.

However, neighbourhood infrastructure and services have been hit by public spending cuts and that means that getting value for money is more important than ever. For many older people, lack of good quality support and infrastructure within the neighbourhood acts as a barrier that prevents them from being active locally. Lack of public transport, or somewhere to sit down, or access to a clean public toilet limits how far people are able to go. Poor quality pavements or poor street lighting in an area can stop people feeling confident enough to go out at all. Relatively low cost improvements to neighbourhoods could enable older people to continue being active for longer, which is a benefit to us all.

By seeing the costs in the round, investing in better neighbourhoods could be seen to reduce other costs. For instance, maintaining public toilets could cost a council £25,000 a year and every pavement repair can cost upwards of £80. But when

compared to the cost of the NHS and social care, the amount is relatively low, while the benefits accrue to a large number of older people. An 'age-friendly' neighbourhood may be the key factor that enables someone to go on living in their own home, rather than going into residential care. This could save the taxpayer around £18,000 per person a year.¹⁴

The benefits of having age friendly neighbourhoods are not recognised by national or local government. There is often little consideration of older people in the design, maintenance and regeneration of neighbourhoods. For instance, the government's recent guide to support local shopping parades did not recognise that older people are probably a large proportion of the local market¹⁵. Older people's spending reached an estimated £120 billion in 2011(65 plus), around 18.4 per cent of the overall household expenditure, and is set to grow¹⁶.

Who is responsible for creating age friendly neighbourhoods?

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Commission for Rural Communities commissioned the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York to explore and develop the idea of a 'lifetime neighbourhood', and search out and present examples of how the idea has been taken forward, but beyond this, there has been little impetus to influence or implement change. Given that local government is responsible for many aspects of creating age friendly neighbourhoods, this is where pressure should be focussed.

The key stakeholders that could lead the process are broadly: local authorities, working in partnership with their partners, including the voluntary sector, community groups, older people themselves, or councillors. In practice all of these will play a part, but this division is a way of understanding where the impetus for change comes from and the process that results.

It may also be possible to influence the new Health and Wellbeing Boards through their Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies (JHWSs). For example, Loneliness and ill health and disability can result from the physical environment in which older people find themselves and are mutually re-enforcing. Evidence suggests that loneliness and isolation increases older people's use of expensive health and social care services.

Council and their partners

The council, along with partners in the public, private and commercial sector, could provide a strategic framework that would aim to design and maintain neighbourhoods that are age friendly. There are examples of councils that have decided to take this cross-cutting approach, seeing this as a strategic change programme for the council, rather than the responsibility of a single service or service provider.

In Edinburgh a joint strategy was launched in 2000 as a ten year, overarching strategy with an action plan to tackle discrimination and improve the lives of older people. 'A city for all ages', brought together the City of Edinburgh Council, NHS and partners from the voluntary and commercial sector and was designed around older people as active citizens that wanted to make a contribution to the community. The programme works within existing structures and mechanisms to influence decisions, rather than have a dedicated budget, which may prove the best model in the current

difficult financial situation many councils find themselves in. There is also a City of All Ages Advisory Group, made up of older people and representatives from the voluntary sector, to develop the agenda¹⁷.

Manchester's age friendly neighbourhoods agenda is taken forward by the Valuing Older People partnership (VOP). The partnership brings older people together with the council, NHS and voluntary sector organisations setting the strategic direction for the city. VOP Locality networks bring together all services and community organisations in a locality in order to identify local concerns, take collective action, share ideas and, in effect, find local solutions to local issues. Each VOP Network develops a local action plan based on officer feedback, consultation events, questionnaires and their contact with local older people's groups¹⁸.

An alternative council approach is to focus on planning and regeneration, which have a significant impact on many topics within the age friendly neighbourhoods concept. For example, the GLA (Greater London Authority) has included lifetime neighbourhood principles in the London plan, particularly in regard to how planning can influence those principles and in the context of London's diverse neighbourhoods. The GLA are currently developing advice on implementing this new area of policy and other connected policies.

The recently introduced National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF) is an important factor in implementing change in neighbourhoods. The NPPF requires local planning authorities to assess and then plan for the housing needs of specific groups in the community, including older people¹⁹. The NPPF therefore has the potential to improve assessment, strategic planning and the delivery of better neighbourhoods as well as housing.

In particular, the rights and services for socially excluded older people need to be protected as these people may find it difficult to engage and influence the political and planning process. Research shows that social exclusion rose among people aged over 50 between 2002 and 2008. In addition there were increasing levels of exclusion from decent housing and public transport, as well as difficulties accessing local amenities²⁰.

However, there are concerns that many local authorities are not preparing for an ageing population and are missing the savings that could come from investing in these kinds of preventative services²¹. The current economic climate presents a further challenge. An ILC report emphasised concerns that the lifetime neighbourhood's agenda is fundamentally linked to our capacity for regeneration and redevelopment²². The cuts to local authority spending are also a concern as they impact on services and amenities that work to create age friendly neighbourhoods.

Older people, community-led response

The importance of hearing older people's views has always been seen as an important part of age friendly neighbourhoods. However, this is increasingly moving away from passive consultation and towards increasing participation and empowerment. Through older people's forums and other community groups, older people already play a part in campaigning for better neighbourhoods.

For example, Leeds Older People's Forum has been campaigning to make Leeds 'a city for all ages'. Frustrated by the promotion of Leeds as a city for young people, with a heavy focus on nightlife and clubbing, they wanted to highlight the common needs of older and younger people. They organised a 'flash dance' in the city centre – inspired by 'flash-mob' campaigns where a group of people suddenly start an unannounced coordinated action in a public place to get their message heard. The attention that the event captured convinced the council and shop management company to meet and hear their concerns.²³

This is an example of an intergenerational approach to improving neighbourhoods and there are others including efforts to diffuse tensions between older and younger people around the issue of community safety, building greater confidence within neighbourhoods as a result.

The Newcastle Elders Council has an 'older-person-friendly city' working group, which has carried out several inquiries into aspects of the city and its neighbourhoods. For instance, they have tackled parks and open spaces, gathering information from their members to develop a 'checklist' that was then used to assess the parks. Findings and recommendations were summarised and presented to the council. As a result, there is now an agreement to hold events for older people in parks and to provide adult outdoor exercise equipment²⁴.

Seeing the potential to replicate this type of success elsewhere, Age UK launched 'Change One Thing', a campaign to make local neighbourhoods better. We supported groups of older people, their families, friends and carers to run local campaigns to improve their neighbourhood. We provided printed toolkits and face-to-face support from Age UK staff to help them identify the relevant decision maker and get them to act. Although the campaign has now come to an end, the lessons learned from it will be applied to potential opportunities through local partners and the Age Action Alliance.

The current government has emphasised the greater role individuals should take in community life. The programme of localism and 'big society' has been developed with this in mind, but many commentators feel it is yet to bear fruit²⁵. Nonetheless, there is an opportunity in new rights set out in the Localism Act 2011 for communities to have more say in the shape of their neighbourhoods and the services they rely on. A community led approach already exists in some places; for instance, where parish and town councils have initiated community led planning. However, the new rights in the Localism Act will bring this opportunity to more people and it only remains to be seen how many will take them up in the coming years; as yet it is not clear that significant numbers have done so.

Neighbourhood planning has a particular resonance with the age friendly neighbourhood's agenda. It has the potential to give local people more control of the plans and policies that affect their local area, allowing them to plan for new homes, shops and offices that could be built. Other rights such as a 'community right to challenge' (allowing people to challenge their local authority to let them run local services) and a 'community right to bid' (allowing people to bid to buy buildings of local importance) could also bring about neighbourhood level change.

Alternatively, the emphasis on community-led approaches could mean that the loudest voices dominate, without recognising the impact they may have on other people within their community. This is a concern given that older people are less likely than younger groups to feel they can influence decisions locally and nationally²⁶. While older people need to lead and be at the centre of change, it cannot be assumed that this can be done spontaneously or that this will address the diversity of need in a neighbourhood.

Councillors

As ward representatives, councillors have both the electoral mandate and the local knowledge to bring about positive change at a neighbourhood level. This role can go much wider than any formal responsibilities or portfolio they may have within the council to cement the strong link between the councillor and their older electors.

However, an Age UK survey in 2011 found that only a third (35 per cent) of respondents agreed that councillors are working to benefit older people²⁷. Councillors have a good idea of what is important in their ward and can bring the co-ordination and leadership to make improvements happen. They have both the knowledge of the local area and will have contact with some of the main players involved (inside and outside the council), plus the electoral mandate for action.

While some councillors meet with older people through groups or surgeries, this is not happening consistently and often focuses on a minority of active older people. In addition, the Age UK survey²⁸ found that more than half of people aged over 60 (54 per cent) say they have never had any contact with their local councillors. Although this is a better response than for other age groups (75 per cent of those aged between 16-24 and 69 per cent of those aged between 25-59 have never had any contact) this is not a good record for local representatives.

In 2011 Age UK launched the Pride of Place campaign to help improve neighbourhoods for people in later life. Over 200 councillors became advocates and committed to make time to listen to older people and bring about change at the neighbourhood level. Examples of actions that were taken include, Councillors Jim Beall and Barbara Inman of Stockton Borough Council undertaking regular 'ward walkabouts' to share local intelligence and to identify problems. They explain, as much as possible, that they aim to solve problems on the spot²⁹.

A councillor's role in their community is not a one-off occurrence. There needs to be an ongoing commitment to keep people involved and support their needs. One frustration commonly voiced about engagement with councils is that things do not change or that people never hear what happened in response to their views. As ward representatives, councillors have both the electoral mandate and the local knowledge to bring about positive change. This role can go much wider than any formal responsibilities or portfolio they may have within the council to cement the strong link between the councillor and their older electors.

Councillors that took part in Age UK's Pride of Place project identified a range of actions they would do differently that relate to listening to older people, communicating with other councillors, improving links with other organisations and practical activities – see comments below³⁰.

Pride of Place: Councillors' response to what they will do differently as advocates for older people

- *Give more attention to identifying hard to reach older people's groups.*
- *Be more aware of needs of older residents (and need to think specifically about them) in terms of my council work and services council provides.*
- *Communicate what I've learnt to other councillors.*
- *I plan to publicise the Pride of Place scheme within my local council and hopefully encourage fellow elected members to join the scheme.*
- *More local ward work and contacts with older people's organisations.*
- *Go and learn/find out what is happening, what is needed and go out and work hard to make a difference.*
- *Try to give more priority to involvement with issues for ageing people both as a resource and also in terms of improvement of the environment.*

3. Public policy proposals

- Every local authority should be working towards achieving age friendly status – communities that offer a good quality of life to all generations, reflecting the priorities of the Dublin Declaration.
- Older people should consider how best to take action to improve neighbourhoods for all ages. Local activists should work with the voluntary sector and community groups to challenge national and local government to listen to older people and invest in age friendly neighbourhoods.
- Local authorities should draw on intergenerational practice to help meet policy objectives such as stronger, safer communities, local economy, environmental sustainability, and also improved adult health and well-being and tackling isolation.
- There is no guarantee that 'localism' will mean everyone in a community gets to have their say. National and local government need to involve older people throughout. They should support older people, particularly those that may feel excluded, with funding and advice to design and lead projects to improve their neighbourhoods.
- Local planning, regeneration and street management teams should be aware of the implications of demographic change and the views of older residents in order to design and maintain neighbourhoods for all ages.
- Councillors should understand and act upon the views older people have of how their neighbourhood can improve, challenging the council's decision making and initiating change that meets the needs of older people in their ward.

See also papers on social isolation, public transport, engagement and volunteering.

Annex 1: References

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- ³⁰ Pride of Place Evaluation, Age UK, 2012