



## Developing Age-Friendly Cities: Policy Challenges & Options

This viewpoint provides a 'tour de force' on the development of age-friendly cities within a global urban context. It suggests that the approaches adopted in the UK require better understanding and elaboration at both a conceptual and operational level to ensure that we provide meaningful improvements to the quality of life for older people living in our cities.

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## Background to age-friendly cities

Developing what has been termed 'age-friendly' cities has become a significant issue for public and social policy, embracing questions covering different types of communities.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this include: first, the complexity of demographic change, with the emergence of a wide spectrum of housing and community needs amongst those in the 50 plus age group; second, awareness of the importance of the physical and social environment as a factor influential in maintaining the quality of life of older people; third, the policy debate about what represents 'good' or 'optimal' places to age, as reflected in the work of the World Health Organization (WHO) around 'age-friendly' cities, these defined as encouraging: '*...active ageing by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance the quality of life as people age*'.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the importance attached to building age-friendly cities, the approach itself requires better understanding and elaboration at conceptual and operational levels. Some important and critical questions that might be raised include:

- What are the origins of the age-friendly approach?
- What is the case for developing an age-friendly approach within cities?
- What needs to be done to make age friendly communities a realistic option for older people?
- What are some of the barriers that might be encountered in attempting to implement the policy?
- What are some of the issues and alternatives that policy-makers need to consider?

The above questions will be examined in the context of the process of urbanization affecting communities across the world. Population ageing and urbanization have in their different ways become the dominant social trends of the twenty-first century, with their interaction raising issues for all types of communities - from the most isolated to the most densely populated. By 2030, two-thirds of the world's population will be residing in cities; by that time the major urban areas of the developed world will have 25 per cent or more of their population people aged 60 and over. City regions of the UK will need to plan ahead both for an ageing population but also for one where there are more people living into their late-70s, 80s and beyond: Liverpool City Region will have 17.3 per cent of its population *aged 75 and over* by 2036; Sheffield 15.1 per cent; Leeds 14.2 per cent; and Greater Manchester 14.2 per cent.

Cities are regarded as central to economic development, attracting waves of migrants and supporting new knowledge-based industries. The re-building of many cities – notwithstanding economic recession – provides opportunities for innovations in housing and services suitable for a range of age and income groups. However, the extent to which what has been termed the 'new urban age' will produce 'age-friendly' communities remains uncertain. Cities produce advantages for older people in respect of easy access to medical services, provision of cultural and leisure facilities, shopping and general necessities for daily living. However, they are also seen as threatening environments, often creating insecurity and feelings of vulnerability arising from changes to neighbourhoods and communities. What is the scope for developing age-friendly cities in response to these issues?

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<sup>1</sup> - The research on which this paper is based is summarised in Phillipson, C. (2011), *Developing age-friendly communities: New approaches to growing old in urban communities*. In Settersten, R. and Angel, J. *Handbook of the Sociology of Aging*. New York: Springer.

<sup>2</sup> - World Health Organization (2007), *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide*. Geneva: WHO.

## Developing age-friendly cities

Debates about securing optimum community environments for ageing populations emerged from a number of organizations during the 1990s. The theme of age-friendly communities arose from policy initiatives launched by the World Health Organization (WHO). A precursor was the notion of 'active aging' developed during the United Nations' Year of Older People in 1999 and elaborated by the European Union and the WHO.<sup>3</sup> The idea of maintaining 'active ageing' referred to the notion of older people's 'continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs, not just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labour market'. Achieving this was seen as requiring interventions at a number of levels, including maintaining effective supports within the physical and built environment. Here, the WHO acknowledged that: 'Physical environments that are age-friendly can make the difference between independence and dependence for all individuals but are of particular importance for those growing older. For example, older people who live in an unsafe environment or areas with multiple physical barriers are less likely to get out and therefore more prone to isolation, depression, reduced fitness and increased mobility problems'.<sup>4</sup>

The theme of age-friendly environments was subsequently applied to urban contexts, with work beginning in 2005 around the theme of 'Global Age-friendly Cities'. Subsequent work by the WHO, based upon focus groups with older people, caregivers and service providers, produced a guide and checklist of action points focused on producing an 'ideal' city relevant to all age groups. This work concluded that: *'It should be normal in an age-friendly city for the natural and built environment to anticipate users with different capacities instead of designing for the mythical "average" (i.e. young) person. An age-friendly city emphasises enablement rather than disablement; it is friendly for all ages and not just "elder friendly"'*.<sup>5</sup> Building on this work, in 2010 the WHO launched the 'Global Network of Age-friendly Cities' in an attempt to encourage implementation of policy recommendations from the 2006 project. By 2012 there were 103 cities and communities participating across 18 countries. In the UK, the Urban Ageing Consortium has been formed, the result of a collaboration between the Beth Johnson Foundation, Keele University, and the Valuing Older People (VOP) Partnership at Manchester City Council – Manchester having been a founding member of the WHO Network.<sup>6</sup> The aims of the Consortium include: developing a strong research and evidence base to inform work around age-friendly issues; to develop a strong network of UK cities working on the age-friendly theme; and to encourage private and public sector partnerships of groups working to improve the quality of life of older people living in cities.

The possibility of creating age-friendly cities may also be linked with models of urban development produced during the 1990s and early 2000s, notably ideas around 'sustainable' and 'harmonious cities'. The former raised questions about managing urban growth in a manner able to meet the needs of future as well as current generations. The latter emphasised values such as tolerance, fairness, social justice and good governance, these regarded as essential in achieving sustainable development in urban planning.

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<sup>3</sup> - European Union (1999), *Active Ageing: pivot of policies for older people in the new millennium*. European Commission website <http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/employment-social/speeches/991116ad.doc>, accessed 19.8.2012; World Health Organization 2002, *Active Aging: A Policy Framework*. Geneva: WHO.

<sup>4</sup> - World Health Organization (2002), *Active Aging: A Policy Framework*. Geneva: WHO, p.27.

<sup>5</sup> - World Health Organization (2007), *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide*. Geneva: WHO.

<sup>6</sup> - For details of the work in Manchester see McGarry, P. and Morris, J. (2011), 'A great place to grow older: a case study of how Manchester is developing an age-friendly city'. *Working with Older People*, 15 (1): 38-46. For details of the UK Urban Ageing Consortium see [www.bjf.org.uk/news-and-events/news/uk-urban-ageing-consortium](http://www.bjf.org.uk/news-and-events/news/uk-urban-ageing-consortium) Developments in the WHO Network can be found at [www.agefriendlyworld.org](http://www.agefriendlyworld.org)

Such themes were also influential in the elaboration of ideas associated with 'lifetime homes' and 'lifetime neighbourhoods', which emerged in the UK with acceptance of the need for policies to support population ageing at a community level.<sup>7</sup> An additional influence was recognition of the development in many localities of what came to be termed 'naturally occurring retirement communities' (NORCS), i.e. neighbourhoods that, with the migration of younger people, effectively evolved into communities of older people. The key issue behind the 'lifetime' concept was an understanding that effective support for older people within neighbourhoods would require a range of interventions linking different parts of the urban system—from housing and the design of streets to transportation and improved accessibility to shops and services.

### **What is the case for developing an age-friendly approach?**

The argument for an age-friendly approach revolves around the mix of *challenges* and *benefits* which urban environments pose for older people. The challenges may be summarised as follows:

- 80 per cent of the time people aged 70 and over is spent at home or in the neighbourhood surrounding the home: hence the importance of maintaining a high quality physical environment.<sup>8</sup>
- Cities have to meet the needs of stable groups (e.g. older people who may have lived in or around the same community for much of their lives) and highly mobile groups (e.g. students, professional workers) who may stay for a very short period within a particular neighbourhood. The two groups may bring contrasting expectations about the way in which particular localities should be developed.
- Fear of crime / feelings of insecurity: these may be especially strong among older people living in urban areas (despite low levels of victimisation). Such perceptions may limit participation in certain aspects of daily life e.g. 33 – 55 per cent of older people are likely to feel unsafe moving around their neighbourhood at night.<sup>9</sup>
- Withdrawal of resources such as shops, banks and other key services. Some neighbourhoods may suffer from a form of 'institutional disengagement' as traditional businesses close – unable to compete with hypermarkets and out-of-town developments. Older residents (but other age groups as well) may be particularly vulnerable to such changes – especially those with limited mobility and who rely on good quality facilities within easy reach.

But cities also have many benefits for older people:

- Cities have an infrastructure of resources and facilities which can work to raise the quality of life for older people (e.g. museums, galleries, libraries).
- Cities are centres for creative and technical innovation – this can be used to develop new ideas to engage with ageing populations.
- Cities provide specialist resources for minority groups – these may become particularly important for migrants adjusting to old age.

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<sup>7</sup> - For a review of this area see Harding, E. (ed) (2009), *Weathering the downturn: What is the future for Lifetime Neighbourhoods?* London: ILC.

<sup>8</sup> - Horgas, A.L. et al. (1998), Daily Life in Old Age. *Gerontologist*, 38: 556-568.

<sup>9</sup> - Smith, A. (2009), *Ageing in Urban Neighbourhoods*. Bristol: Policy Press.

- Cities provide a broad range of social networks around which healthy ageing can be built.
- Accepting this mix of ‘challenges’ and ‘benefits’ within urban environments: what are the policy measures what need to be adopted to assist their development?

## Constructing age-friendly communities

Creating a better ‘fit’ between urban environments on the one side and ageing populations on the other is assuming some urgency within social policy. The WHO develops the point that *‘making cities more age-friendly is a necessary and logical response to promote the wellbeing and contributions of older urban residents and keep cities thriving’*.<sup>10</sup> Equally, measures to support the inclusion of elderly people within cities must be viewed as a key part of the agenda for creating sustainable and harmonious urban environments. Implementing this agenda will, however, demand radical interventions across urban areas. A number of themes can be identified here:

- first, developing new forms of ‘urban citizenship’ which recognize and support changing social needs across the life course;
- second, applying an age-friendly approach within the context of lifelong/lifetime communities;
- third, encouraging innovation in housing options for older people; and
- fourth, ensuring the engagement of older people in the re-generation of neighbourhoods.

The first argument concerns the need to link the discussion about age-friendly cities to ideas about urban citizenship and rights to the benefits which living in a city brings. Painter, for example, cites the work of Henri Lefebvre, who explored issues relating to citizenship and rights in an urban context. Lefebvre stressed:

*‘The use-value of the city over its exchange value, emphasizing that citizens have a right to make use of the city, and that it is not just a collection of resources to enable economic activity. The uses of the city by citizens should be seen as valid ends in themselves, not merely as a means to produce economic growth ... The right to the city is the right to live a fully urban life, with all the liberating benefits it brings. [Lefebvre] believed the majority of city residents are denied this right because their lives are subordinated to economic pressures — despite being in the city, they are not fully of the city.’*<sup>11</sup>

This last point applies especially well to older people, who may find that despite having contributed to an urban world in which they have spent most of their life, it may present major obstacles to achieving a fulfilling existence in old age. On the one hand, cities are increasingly viewed as key drivers of a nation’s economic and cultural success. On the other hand, the reconstruction of cities is often to the detriment of those outside the labour market, especially those on low incomes. Achieving recognition of the needs of different generations within cities, and exploiting the potential of the city for groups of whatever age, will be central to implementing an age-friendly approach.

<sup>10</sup> - World Health Organization (2007), *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide*. Geneva: WHO.

<sup>11</sup> - Painter, Joe (2005), *Urban Citizenship and Rights to the City*. Durham: Durham University International Centre for Regional Regeneration and Development Studies.

Second, some of the issues associated with the above are being developed through the ideas associated with lifetime communities and neighbourhoods. In planning for lifetime neighbourhoods, Harding suggests the need to consider:<sup>12</sup>

- accessibility of the built environment;
- appropriateness of housing available;
- fostering social capital;
- location and accessibility of services;
- creating aesthetically pleasing public spaces which promote a sense of place and social cohesion;
- cross-sectoral integration and planning of services;
- building intergenerational relationships by shared site usage;
- better use of information technology.

Work by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) in the USA made the point that although mobility begins inside the individual unit or house, it must carry on throughout the entire built environment: *'...from inside the dwelling, down the street and into the restaurant, theatre or store...continuously across the entire urban environment'*.<sup>13</sup> This argument applies equally to all types of communities — suburban as well as inner and outer city. In relation to suburbs, for example, these have frequently been designed with families and commuters in mind, rather than the specific needs of older people and/or smaller households. There is scope here to explore the urban design implications of a different population mix within neighbourhoods that explicitly have a longer lifespan. Strategic guidance on urban design might be developed further to indicate how 'lifelong' adaptability for an ageing population can be built into communities from the start. This could build on the resource pack, 'Strategic Housing for Older People: Planning, designing and delivering housing that older people want.'<sup>14</sup>

Third, as recommended by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People,<sup>15</sup> the 'age-friendly' approach could be used as a framework for developing greater innovation in housing for older people. To date, progress has been slow in expanding housing options for older people, beyond specialist provision such as retirement villages and extra-care schemes.<sup>16</sup> The reality, however, is that in most cases older people would prefer (if they are considering moving) the option of a mixed-aged community and accommodation which provides a reasonable amount of space.<sup>17</sup> These requirements will be additionally the case as the baby boom generation (those born in the late-1940s and early 1950s) move into retirement. For some groups within this cohort there is likely to be a significant degree of interest in wider housing options for later life – such as co-operative housing and inter-generational housing. Meeting this demand will require creative partnerships between older people, local authorities,

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<sup>12</sup> - Harding, E. (ed) (2009), *Weathering the downturn: What is the future for Lifetime Neighbourhoods?* London: ILC.

<sup>13</sup> - Atlanta Regional Commission (2009), *Lifelong Communities: A Regional Guide to Growth and Longevity*. Atlanta: ARC.

<sup>14</sup> - Housing LIN/ADASS (2011), *Strategic Housing for Older People: Planning, designing and delivering housing that older people want*. Housing LIN.

<sup>15</sup> - All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People Inquiry Report (2011), *Living Well at Home*. Counsel & Care.

<sup>16</sup> - Pannell, J., Aldridge, H. and Kenway, P. (2012), *Older People's Housing: Choice, Quality of Life and Under-Occupation*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<sup>17</sup> - Homes and Communities Agency (2009), *Housing our Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation*. HCA.

building companies, housing associations and other relevant groups. In many cases, groups of older people will themselves want to take control in developing new types of housing more directly tailored to the needs and aspirations they are bringing to later life.

Fourth, a critical issue for an 'age-friendly' approach concerns ensuring the involvement of older people in urban regeneration policies. A study in the UK by Riseborough and Sribjlanin found that older people were often 'invisible' in regeneration policies.<sup>18</sup> The problem here was less the absence of older people in consultations around policies, more an underlying 'ageism' which viewed them only as 'victims' of neighbourhood change. The authors make the point that regeneration practice could benefit from the experience of older people, their attachment to their neighbourhoods, and their involvement in community organizations. At the same time, there is also a need to develop urban regeneration strategies targeted at different groups within the older population, with awareness, for example, of contrasting issues faced by different ethnic groups, people with particular physical/mental health needs, and those living in areas with poor housing alongside high population turnover.

## Conclusion

Despite the benefits of applying an age-friendly approach, some critical questions also need to be faced to ensure effective implementation of such a policy. At the present time, discussions around age-friendliness have been largely disconnected from the pressures on urban environments in the Global North, where private developers retain the dominant influence on urban planning. The result, according to Harvey is that the 'quality of urban life has become a commodity, as has the city itself, in a world where consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy'.<sup>19</sup> The tension here is between the social needs of older people, as an increasingly important constituent of urban populations, and the pressures on public space arising from private ownership. This may lead to a distortion in provision in terms of meeting the needs of competing groups within the urban system.

It might be further argued that the benefit of thinking about age-friendliness lies more in its challenge to re-assessing the values (and ideals) that might be nurtured within urban communities. From the 1960s onwards, writers such as Jane Jacobs and Richard Sennett argued the case for celebrating the diversity of city life. Giradet put forward his vision of the city 'as a place of culture and creativity, of conviviality and above all else of sedentary living'.<sup>20</sup> In the United Kingdom, Richard Rogers and Anne Power developed a new approach to urban planning, one calling for a sharing of spaces for the collective good and for a reversal of the drift towards suburbanization. All of these — and similar ideas — are relevant to developing age-friendly cities and arguably need closer integration to the work of those involved in developing the broad infrastructure of urban areas. Thus despite the many obstacles to implementing this approach, its potential for reminding us of the values to be nurtured for harmonious city living are important and certainly relevant for building communities fit for populations of older people.

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<sup>18</sup> - Riseborough, Moyra and Alan Sribjlanin (2000), *Overlooked and Excluded? Older People and Regeneration: A Review of Policy and Practice*. London: Age Concern.

<sup>19</sup> - Harvey, David (2008), "The Capitalist City." *New Left Review*. 53:23-42.

<sup>20</sup> - Giradet, H. (1999), Sustainable Cities: A Contradiction in Terms? In *Sustainable Cities*, Satterthwaite, D. (ed) London: Earthscan.

## Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

## About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing LIN is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit [www.housinglin.org.uk](http://www.housinglin.org.uk)

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If you have an example of how your organisation is closely aligned to a 'Living Lab' approach or a subject that you feel we should cover, please contact us.

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