

Findings

Local Urban Environments and the Wellbeing of Older People

This study investigated how local outdoor environments can influence older people's health and wellbeing. It used qualitative techniques to engage in depth with older people in three different Scottish urban neighbourhoods. It also examined how much influence the older people felt they had in decision-making affecting their local environment. The findings indicate that certain key aspects of local environments can either promote or detract from older people's mental and physical wellbeing especially by affecting the amount of exercise and social interaction older residents might attain. Planners and urban designers could usefully develop a greater awareness of older people's perspectives. The need for improved participation in decision-making and better advocacy for older people with respect to planning and environmental issues is also identified. Specific findings include the following:

- The older people interviewed felt that it was important for the local environment to be clean and free of litter, in order both to reduce environmental health risks and to create a sense of positive collective self-esteem.
- A healthy environment was thought to be one that was free of pollution, especially air pollution which was identified by many as affecting older people with chronic illnesses.
- Walkability was a key issue and was commonly impeded by barriers including uneven pavements, high kerbs and obstructions on pavements. Places to sit and rest were also needed if older residents were to walk far.
- Outdoor informal social interaction was felt to be crucial for wellbeing and was promoted by walkable environments with pleasant places to gather away from heavy traffic.
- Excessive noise was disliked and relative quiet preferred especially in residential areas, though many liked to hear people and activities around them to some extent.
- Environments that provided good aesthetic and sensory experiences and especially those that contained some natural elements were felt to promote mental and emotional wellbeing particularly for individuals under stress.
- Many of these features were felt to be more salient for older people than for other residents.
- Different urban environments vary with respect to these important aspects and where the poorer environments coincide with other forms of deprivation, existing inequalities including health inequalities will be compounded.

- The behaviour of others around them in various ways also influenced the extent to which older people would use and benefit from their local outdoor environment.
- Participants in this study differed in the extent to which they felt able to make their voice heard in relevant decision-making fora. There was a feeling that in general older people are overlooked in many policy spheres. It was also highlighted that some older people find active participation overly demanding and need others to advocate their interests.

The study was carried out in three urban neighbourhoods in the Strathclyde region of Scotland. These comprised a relatively deprived inner city neighbourhood, a suburban estate neighbourhood of a little under median deprivation, and a more affluent coastal town. In each area, in-depth interviews were carried out with older individuals and on occasions with small groups. Observation was also carried out in each of the three study areas to provide further insights into how older people were using the local environment. Analysis identified key themes relating to key aspects of the local outdoor environment that affected participants' wellbeing and regarding their ability to influence relevant decision-making.

Cleanliness and pollution

Litter and waste on the streets, which could include domestic and bulk waste, was felt to pose a health hazard to neighbourhood residents. It also appeared to have symbolic importance, signalling a lack of care for the place and a lack of self-esteem in neighbourhood residents. Both of these aspects could be important to older people: the former due to increased vulnerability to pathogens and the latter due to their sense of identity in place and their general aesthetic enjoyment. Pollution, especially air pollution, was also highlighted as affecting many older people in particular any with respiratory problems. Of the three neighbourhoods researched, these problems were worst in the inner city neighbourhood which was also more deprived.

Peace and quiet

There was some feeling among those involved in this study that noise became increasingly difficult to bear with increasing age. Generally, participants preferred quiet environments as excessive or unexpected noise could disturb sleep and relaxation and could cause anxiety. Those in the inner city neighbourhood appeared more acclimatised to higher levels of environmental noise however, and several individuals, especially those living alone, emphasised that they did not like to live in overly quiet, cloistered surroundings but preferred to be aware of 'some life' around them. Nevertheless noise issues appeared to be a common area of conflicting interests with neighbours and one reason why many participants preferred to live around other older people.

Walkability

Study participants were aware of the health benefits of exercise and the great majority attempted to get some, within the limits of their varying mobility. Several barriers to walking in all of the localities were identified. Heavy traffic was disliked because of pollution, noise and danger. Physical obstructions could pose very significant barriers: examples of these were high kerbs, uneven pavements, bins and shop displays placed on pavements. The natural topography could also create difficulties and flat places were definitely preferred for walking. Places to rest were very important in allowing less

mobile people to make even relatively short excursions on foot and thus preventing them becoming housebound: public benches were highly valued as such. Interviewees were more likely to walk in places that were attractive for example with good views, attractive landscaping and/or interesting architecture. Local services such as shops also provided places to walk to and toilets and local public transport were crucial supports for older people making outdoor excursions.

Opportunity for social interaction

Social interaction was often a crucial element of the participants' out of doors experience and as well as planned excursions, opportunities for informal social interaction were highly valued. Environments that were the most walkable were also those that made it easiest for people to encounter each other and spend some time socialising, and places to sit also provided places to gather. Local services such as shops and cafes again provided focal points for meeting and interacting. Neighbourhood layout could also affect the extent to which people were able to see and interact with their neighbours – high rise buildings with little communal space were identified as poor for this whilst quiet streets with small gardens made it easier for people to recognise and greet each other.

Positive sensory environments

Places that provided a positive sensory experience – often visually, but other senses such as smell and hearing were important – were clearly felt to promote emotional and mental wellbeing. Natural elements such as vegetation and water were especially enjoyed. Places that had high amounts of such elements were often sought out and were felt to be therapeutic especially at times of emotional stress; several participants had felt that such aspects of their locale had helped them through emotional low points. More anthropogenic aspects were also enjoyed however such as scenes of interesting activity, and historic or architecturally interesting buildings. Participants needed such elements to be accessible at street level and close to home as many found it difficult to reach even a neighbourhood park – and indeed might not go there for other reasons. For this reason, small scale resources such as flower tubs and window boxes were highly valued by these older interviewees. Pleasant views, again usually considered to be those with natural elements, were important to those spending a lot of time indoors. There was some indication that paying attention to such features might be more important in more deprived, densely built-up or polluted areas where residents were already under more stress.

The behaviour of others in the local environment

Safety was a concern for all participants, affecting their use of their local environment, and strongest on the whole for those in the inner city area. Many of the interviewees would not go out all at night and many also had concerns with using public transport in the evenings. Several avoided local parks due to safety concerns, even in the daytime, again mostly in the inner city area and there were strong calls for the restoration of local park-keepers. Intergenerational interactions could be problematic and many participants admitted to being wary of teenagers in general although some also acknowledged that this was unfair and often, though not always, a misunderstanding on the part of older people. An important factor in how it appeared that older people used the local environment is the way that they are generally responded to and treated by others:

greater recognition of and considerateness towards older people in public spaces and places would enable them to use such places more freely.

Older people and decision-making regarding local neighbourhoods

Many of these involved in this study were actively involved in their local communities and some felt that older people were more so than younger generations. Others were not active but felt able to put views across should they need to. Some, however, felt that they were not consulted at all and were overlooked. In general, even among those that were themselves active, a view was expressed that older people are in general treated as 'not having a brain any more'. Many would have liked the chance to contribute more and participate more actively. However it was also felt that many older people would find active participation taxing and should not be expected to take on something that would be a burden rather than an opportunity. In this sense it appeared that there would be a role for strengthened advocacy for older people. An important consideration to emerge is that at times a minority group of active older people might be being asked and expected to represent all older people; this is undesirable and rather, the diversity of older people and their interests also needs to be recognised.

Environmental equality and older people

This study had an interest in investigating whether inequalities might exist in various ways regarding older people and the benefits derived from their local urban environments. The design and relatively small scope means that it cannot be fully conclusive, but findings indicate that the aspects that were identified as being important for older peoples wellbeing might be more salient for older people than others - and so where these are deficient, older people would be more badly affected than others, which is one form of inequality.

In addition, it was also clear that these relevant aspects differed between places. In this study, the inner city study area emerged as the least advantageous and the small town as the most advantageous, although this was not the case on each single aspect. It is likely that some aspects at least might vary according to levels of deprivation and if this is the case, then such environmental disadvantage will compound other forms of deprivation.

Another form of inequality is that potentially indicated by the findings with respect to participation and representation in policy-making fora. Improvements in this respect should help to address inequality, with the overall aim of improving the extent to which older people can use and benefit from their neighbourhood environments.

Further information

A more detailed report on this study including summaries and policy recommendations can be downloaded at: http://www.scrsj.ac.uk/media/media_70702_en.pdf

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