Background Paper: The ‘wants’ and ‘needs’ of older people

Previous research has noted that common aspirations important to many older people are: independence, autonomy and choice, keeping active and feeling included, and having control of their own lives (Godfrey, 2004). As such, policy directives such as Better Government for Older People (2004) emphasises working with older people to promote independence, choice and integration. Similarly, the notion of ‘personalisation’, a term officially introduced in the publication of Putting People First (2007) has also emphasised the drive towards offering people more choice and control of their lives; people having choices in how their needs are met, and receiving better access to universal public services. In meeting these aims, the modernisation of health and social services agenda has sought to drive forward a cultural shift towards reducing ‘dependence’, through investment into preventative and rehabilitative services, and also through personalised support to promote independent living.

A further invested interest in regeneration, and renewal strategies, places prominence on involving local communities in reducing social and economic inequalities, promoting and sustaining individual and collective health and wellbeing, and facilitating social inclusion at local levels (Godfrey, 2004). Adopting similar messages from children’s Sure Start initiatives, the governments A Sure Start to Later Life (ODPM, 2006) contends that there should be more involvement from local communities and easier access; its aim is to combat the exclusion of older people through ‘comprehensive services that can empower older people and improve quality of life’ (ODPM, 2006:9). More recently, a policy driver, by newly in office, Conservative and Liberal Democrats coalition government in what has been termed the ‘Big Society’, places community work and social enterprise at the forefront of the political agenda, and is conceived as becoming one of the ‘great legacies’ of the new government. The ‘big Society’ agenda is set to decentralise power from politicians, and to give communities and local people more power over their lives, by encouraging communities to ‘work together’ in pursuit of improving the lives of all.

Echoing these imperatives, although somewhat earlier than some policy directives, Godfrey (2004) and her research report ‘Building a good life for older people in local communities’ sought to understand what it means to be an older person; to address whether older people felt they are a valued part of a community; and further establishing what opportunities are available in two research localities for growth and development. Personal narrative accounts described both the opportunities and challenges faced by individuals as they get older, and also offered insight into what contributory factors make for a ‘good life’ for managing the transitions and changes that occur in this stage of life. Key findings in this research are as follows:

- Experience of ageing is influenced by the wider social context of older people’s lives (i.e. place)
- Central to conceptions of a ‘good’ old age was the notion of ‘interdependence’ and not ‘independence’ per se; an important aspect of interdependence was being part of a community
- Social relationships and social engagement important for a ‘good’ life
• Accessible point of contact for help and advice
• Help with tasks that become increasingly more difficult
• **The significance of ‘place’** – having a clean, safe and comfortable environment as well as having a sense of community.
• Services such as health and social care being inflexible, insensitive, and unresponsive to individual need; services focus on responding to physical demands of ageing rather than considering the psychological, emotional, social and cultural aspects that impact on the ageing process. For example, ‘going out’ was not considered important enough to warrant a service of that nature.
• Engaging older people ‘in action’ to secure a ‘better life’ requires a range of opportunities for participation.

As a basis of these findings, Clough et al (2008) organised three consultation events in three different localities of Lancashire, in order to collect the views and experiences of older people, and carers, of what they are looking for when they are finding it difficult to manage in their daily lives. The findings suggested that what is important to older people is that their individual circumstances are heard, thought about, and responded to, in an individualized and meaningful way. The overarching message was in putting the ‘right’ things in place to help older people to live independently, and maintain control of their lives.

From consultation discussions in Lancashire, the key factors that older people and carers expressed that both facilitated and hindered management of their daily lives were:

- **Information and advice** is paramount; factors such as accessibility, availability, accuracy, reliability, and the dissemination of information is very important. People require information regarding what services are available, basic information being accurate and up to date, and someone to negotiate an information system to match individual need, and further, to help people clarify their situation, and help them think through what they can do, with the choices they have been offered.
- **Getting out** – meeting people, shopping, and being involved in activities are important to an individuals’ quality of life; factors such as isolation, and feeling excluded from events in the community have a negative impact on health and wellbeing. Factors that influenced unwanted isolation were poor transport; little or no contact at evenings and weekends; existence and cost of social activities.
- **Consistency**, and joined-up services: services are considered to be most effective when service providers work together, do not repeat the same questions, respond in the way they have said they will respond, and in a crisis situation, offer a timely response.
- **Managing everyday tasks** – it is the small things that help older people lead fuller lives. Many services are considered too focused, and yet many of the activities of daily life that become problematic, are minor things that have been previously managed by individuals in the past. People worry about how to cope with many seemingly small tasks in daily living (i.e. dealing with banks, answering letters, managing PIN numbers, reliability of workers, maintaining the house and so forth)
- **Are services personal?** Individual accounts both reflected older people feeling valued, and also for others that they felt that they did not matter.
- **Feelings of responsibility** – family carers and the people they care for worry what will happen if the carer is ill.
In establishing the views and experiences of older people, a shift in focus to the nature and role of local communities in supporting older people to live fuller lives was examined. Central in understanding accounts reported was whether older people felt that they were valued as part of a community, not only in terms of isolation but whether they felt excluded. Linking communities in supporting older people is particularly important given the rise of an ageing population, and no extra resources for public services to fund the rise. The consultation suggested that the challenge for local communities is to find out what is feasible in their areas with the resources they have. Furthermore, to determine whether local communities can take more interest, and take more responsibility for supporting older people in leading fuller lives. Many older people stressed in consultation discussions that they wanted to recover a sense of being part of a community, and not to be excluded.
Thus, the findings of this consultation were used by Age Concern Lancashire as evidence to support their bid to the Big Lottery fund. The focus of the proposed research is to examine the ways in which local communities can support older people. The current research project entitled - 'Linking Communities' is a three year research project, funded by the Big Lottery, and run by Age Concern Lancashire. This project has been built upon this earlier work that sought older people’s views regarding services, but taken further this project will examine whether the involvement of local communities in the development of services for older people results in better provision, and subsequently, enhance personal feelings of health and wellbeing.

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