

Pride of place

How councillors can improve
neighbourhoods for older people



Age UK's Pride of Place campaign is calling for better neighbourhoods for everyone in later life.

We want to enable older people to be active and make a contribution to their local community.

This report outlines what local councillors can do to improve neighbourhoods for older people in their ward or division.

- **Make time to listen** to older people.
- **Make change happen** to improve the neighbourhood.
- **Make an ongoing commitment** to keep people involved.

Age UK is inviting councillors to become Pride of Place advocates and work with us to improve neighbourhoods for older people.

Visit www.ageuk.org.uk/prideofplace to find out more and sign up.



1 Why neighbourhoods matter now

In the midst of the current challenges facing local authorities, why is the quality of neighbourhoods of particular importance now?

As local authorities are forced to cut their budgets, councillors are facing difficult decisions about where to make savings. At the same time, new measures around localism are likely to bring profound changes to councils and their relationships with their residents.

So in the midst of these challenges, why should local councillors take time to think about neighbourhood issues for older people?

In this report, Age UK sets out how relatively low-cost improvements to neighbourhoods will enable older people to continue being active for longer, and how that is good for us all.

Our society is ageing. One in four children born today is likely to live to 100.¹ As the number of older people rises, it is important that as many as possible remain active and able to contribute to the local community for as long as possible.

Yet 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.

The place where these things are most critical is the immediate neighbourhood. Exactly what area this covers should be defined by local residents rather than imposed from outside, but it is likely to be within a local government ward.

Many of the things that older people say they need in their local neighbourhood are relatively inexpensive to provide. The long-term benefits of improvements could significantly outweigh the costs. (See page 2: ‘What impact would better neighbourhoods have?’)

Spending cuts mean that getting value for money is even more important than ever. The localism agenda brings opportunities, but these may need to be shaped to meet local people’s needs. A new approach to improving neighbourhoods is needed and local councillors are uniquely placed to make it happen.

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.

Many older people have told us that they want to feel a sense of pride in their local area. They love many things about their neighbourhood – but they also know what needs to be fixed. Councillors can help them bring these improvements about.

A new approach to improving neighbourhoods is needed and **local councillors are uniquely placed to make it happen.**

2 What impact would better neighbourhoods have?

As the population ages, investment in better neighbourhoods now is vital to bring about long-term savings.

Of course, improvements to neighbourhoods cost money, and few councils have money to spare. Maintaining public toilets could cost a council £25,000 a year,² for example, and every pavement repair can cost upwards of £80.³ But when compared to the cost of the NHS and social care, the amount is relatively small, 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 about £18,000 a year.⁴

The Government is piloting 'community budgeting' in a number of locations during 2011. This follows the successful 'Total Place' pilots of the previous government. Under a community budgeting system, the costs of improving local neighbourhoods could be offset against the savings in the health and social care budgets. This would make the value of better neighbourhoods much clearer.

Older people should not just be seen as the recipients of care and support services. Millions are active citizens and contributors to the economic and social well-being of our nation. They contribute significantly to the UK economy already, with a spending power amounting to over £100 billion annually⁵ and this is only likely to increase. People in later life are also active in community groups, sports associations, as school governors and in local politics.

Almost a million people over the age of 65 care for a relative or friend.⁶ Nearly one-third of children whose mothers work are cared for by grandparents,⁷ and more than a third of 65–74-year-olds undertake formal volunteering at least once a month.⁸

As our society ages, our communities will rely increasingly on the activity of older people. We need to invest now in neighbourhoods that will enable us all to go on being as active as possible as we grow older.

Case study The cost of poor paving

While walking to the bus stop, 81-year-old Phil Healey tripped over a tree root that was breaking through the paving. Mr Healey fell flat and banged his forehead and hurt his left hand and right knee as he tried to break his fall.

Fortunately some passers-by were on hand to help him to a nearby seat and call for an ambulance to take him to the local hospital. He was discharged later that day.

Following his experience he phoned the local council to tell them about the pavement and asked them to mend the area where the tree roots were protruding by nearly five inches. Even though he had taken pictures and shown that the walkway is uneven the council has not yet made any repairs, as it argues that there is no dangerous edge.

Mr Healey has had to go back to hospital for further tests and treatment. He has received physiotherapy to help manage the pain and regain his mobility. With the help of his local Age UK he is still trying to get the pavement repaired by the council, to make sure that no one else suffers a more serious fall at the same spot.



3 Why councillors are key players

Co-ordination of different players from the public, private and voluntary sectors is needed, in order to bring about more ‘age-friendly’ neighbourhoods.

In some communities, groups of older people have the willingness, confidence and capacity to enter into this arena themselves and argue for what they need. Age UK is supporting groups of older people through its ‘Change One Thing’ campaign to identify the one issue within the local neighbourhood that is most important and then campaign to change it. Through the programme, groups are campaigning to improve pavements, public toilet provision, bus routes and litter.

Localism measures to devolve power downwards may offer new opportunities for groups such as these. But we have to recognise that in many neighbourhoods, older people simply do not have the capacity or organisation to take this on. In some communities, there is no support from a local Age UK, Age Concern or Older People’s Forum; people may be isolated or suffer from poor health; or language or culture may present barriers.

Age UK believes that all older people deserve neighbourhoods where they can live life to the full – this should not just be the privilege of those who have the capacity to argue for it themselves. That is why we are calling on local councillors to take a lead.

Case study

‘It just seems like common sense.’

Councillors Jim Beall and Barbara Inman of Stockton Borough Council do regular ‘ward walkabouts’ with council officers and others.

They have divided the ward into ‘patches’ and aim to do a one-and-a-half-hour walk in one of these patches about every two months. Over the course of a year they will cover the whole ward.

The walkabouts are an opportunity to share local intelligence and to identify problems. As much as possible, they aim to solve problems on the spot – making a note of broken pavements and kerbs that need repairing, for example.

The walkabouts involve officers from the council’s Care for Your Area, antisocial behaviour and enforcement services, from the local neighbourhood police as well as the housing provider (where there is social housing) and sometimes the fledgling residents’ association. The biggest challenge in setting them up was getting all these people to work together.

Cllr Beall is keen to stress that what they are doing is nothing new. ‘It’s not rocket science – it just seems like common sense’, he said.

A resident in the ward commented:

‘A lot of people won’t go to the council, so the walkabouts are a good way for the councillors to find out where the problems are.’

Local ward councillors are ideally placed to play this co-ordinating role. As the first level of elected representation in this country, councillors have a responsibility to their ward electors and are in a position to hear the views of a wide range of older people in their ward, whatever kind of community they represent.

They have both the local knowledge of the area and some of the main players involved, and the electoral mandate for action. We know that older voters make up a significant proportion of the electorate and are more likely to vote than younger people.⁹

Councillors will need to work collaboratively, and take on a role that is much wider than any formal responsibilities that they may have within the council. They need to liaise with other ward councillors, with local representatives of other statutory agencies such as the police, fire brigade and health services, with the voluntary sector where appropriate and (where there are two-tier councils) with the respective county or district council.

Case study

Changing One Thing in Stockport

Two local clubs for older people in the Stockport area, Heald Green Young at Heart and the Poppy Club, decided that they would like to take part in Age UK's Change One Thing campaign with support from Age Concern Stockport (now Age UK Stockport).

Staff from Age UK helped members of both groups think through all the problems affecting them in their neighbourhoods. Issues included a bus route that did not run frequently enough, a dangerous road junction, people cycling on pavements and poor public toilets. But the main concern was with uneven and broken pavements in the area.

The poor state of the pavements made people feel nervous about walking – one member of the Poppy Club had in fact recently tripped over a broken pavement and fallen.

The groups decided that they needed to collect evidence of the problem. Age Concern Stockport supplied them with disposable cameras and members are currently photographing and mapping particular problem areas. They then plan to contact the council and raise awareness by sending a letter to the local press.

4 What can councillors do?

Local neighbourhoods are as varied as the people that live there and there is no single blueprint for an ‘age-friendly’ neighbourhood.

Although there are some common features, the priorities of older people in any particular community will be unique. A variety of different organisations may be responsible for meeting these priorities.

What councillors can bring is co-ordination and leadership to understand people’s priorities and drive improvements forward.

Age UK is inviting councillors to:

- **Make time to listen** to older people.
- **Make change happen** to improve the neighbourhood.
- **Make an ongoing commitment** to keep people involved.

Here we suggest some questions for individual councillors to consider.

Make time to listen

Councillors have a good idea of what is important in their ward from knocking on doors and dealing with case work. However, councillors need to find the time to hear about the day-to-day concerns that can have a big impact on living in the ward. Older people are concerned that their views are not taken into account and that there is a reluctance to listen to their advice. Of course older people in any one neighbourhood will not always agree, which is why it is vital that councillors seek the views of a wide range of people.

Considerations for councillors

• What existing groups can you tap into?

Is there an older people’s forum or network with whom you can consult? Has the council appointed an older people’s champion? If there are existing groups and structures, it is a good idea to make use of them, but do not restrict consultation to them.

• What are the barriers to older people getting involved?

There may be existing opportunities to participate that older people do not feel are for them. Public meetings or surgeries need to be accessible, with good transport links, and the details of the meeting need to be promoted widely. Surveys need to be clear, concise and easily readable.

• How can socially excluded views be heard?

Hearing the views of older people who are socially isolated is vital but will take a different approach. By working with trusted individuals and anticipating where these people may go (e.g. GP surgeries), you may be able to make a connection with those who will never turn up to meetings or fill in surveys.

• What are the issues affecting older people?

How can the physical fabric of the neighbourhood better meet everyone’s needs? What needs to be done to bring people together locally and help older people stay active and involved? What changes are needed to sustain really local services that are geared towards people of all age?

Make change happen

Improving neighbourhoods will take more than talking. In some cases there will be a simple answer to a problem. But there is a complex web of organisations that affects many decisions about neighbourhoods, which can be obscure to local people but which councillors deal with every day. Communities are not idle recipients of services and infrastructure. They want to take responsibility and be involved in the design and, where appropriate, the delivery of solutions.

Considerations for councillors

- **Where are the opportunities to influence decisions?**

As a councillor, you are in a good position to identify the various decision-makers on a particular issue. You may be able to open doors into the council system of local partners and providers, representing older people's views and influencing decisions. You can help make direct connections between service providers and communities so that neighbourhoods are improved.

- **What resources are available?**

As a councillor, you may be aware of local funds available for small projects – and advise neighbourhood groups about the process of making applications. Councils can also provide officer time and expertise as well as or even instead of money. For example, they may have expertise and experience in putting together match funding for projects or engaging with local partners or businesses.

- **Are there opportunities to find new local solutions?**

Many older people will have the time and inclination to get more involved in their neighbourhood. As a councillor you may be able to identify ways in which older people can be more involved in their neighbourhoods, whether it is through representation on committees or taking over the running of local facilities. You can also help people to think creatively to solve neighbourhood problems – for example, could a community toilet scheme replace council-run public toilets?

Make an ongoing commitment

Improving neighbourhoods is not just a one-off occurrence, but an evolving process. In the real world of limited funding and difficult choices, councillors may not be able to solve every problem that older people identify. One frustration commonly voiced by older people is that things don't change as a result of consultation. So people need to be kept up to date, to have an understanding of the process and why things are happening. Councillors will need to commit to ongoing dialogue with older people.

Considerations for councillors

- **How can people be kept involved?**

The progress of consultations and resulting neighbourhood improvements should be reviewed and updated regularly.

5 What do older people need in their neighbourhood?

All neighbourhoods are different and the older people who live in them have differing priorities and needs. But there are common issues that many older people report.

Age UK and its predecessor organisations have gathered evidence¹⁰ from older people about the issues they face when out and about in their local neighbourhoods. Up and down the country, the following issues have been mentioned.

Places

- Better meeting places and green spaces
- Public seating
- Better-quality pavements
- Safe, well-lit streets

People

- Local social activities
- Better relationships between different age groups
- Being able to have a say in local decisions
- Volunteers and neighbours helping people out

Services

- Better local buses and parking
- Accessible and clean public toilets
- Local shops and services within easy reach
- Somewhere to turn for advice

The priority for older people varies considerably between areas – what is important for a small rural community will be very different from the needs of older people in a suburban or inner-city area. And of course people's individual circumstances determine which issue is most important for them (whether they have access to a car, for example).

The most significant feature of this range of issues – particularly in terms of bringing about changes – is the variety of actors or decision-makers involved.

For example, in shire areas the pavement along which people walk to get to the bus-stop is the responsibility of the county council. The benches and litter-bins they pass on the way may have been provided by the parish council. The bus shelter is controlled by the borough council, while the bus itself is run by a private company. The free bus pass is funded by central government, but administered by the county council.

This is the reality of local neighbourhood decision-making – and one that is likely to become more, not less, complex as local public services change. New powers devolved to local councils and communities are bringing more opportunities for older people to have their voices heard. And whether or not you like the term 'Big Society', in future there will be space for a much wider range of people and organisations to get involved in solving problems and delivering local support. This will do nothing to decrease the complexity of the response needed.

5.1 Public transport

Seven out of ten single people over the age of 65 do not have access to a car.¹¹ Public transport that fully met the needs of older people would enable them to get out to do shopping and other leisure activities, to meet friends and relatives, and to look after their own health and well being.

The national bus pass for older people has enabled many more people in later life to get out and make the most of local amenities. But equally important are bus routes that meet the needs of older people. This problem is particularly acute in rural areas – for example, in Cornwall, 19 per cent of households (40,000 properties) cannot get to either of the main county hospitals by public transport before 12pm.¹² Elsewhere, older people report that buses do not serve shopping centres or GP surgeries.

The Department for Transport's national travel survey 2008 found that 30 per cent of older people have problems walking to or using a bus.¹³ Some councils have introduced alternatives to the bus pass, such as travel tokens, which can be used for taxis or rail transport. These have been extremely valuable to many older people, and should be maintained.

In the current climate of budget cuts, transport may seem like a soft target. However, councils need to recognise that lack of transport can have a profound impact on people's lives. Without accessible transport, older people experience greater social isolation, which is likely to result in an increased demand on adult social care services. In contrast, studies have shown that access to public transport helped older people to stay socially connected and active, which in turn helped them keep mentally alert.¹⁴

Case study

'If I couldn't get out of the house I would go mad.'

Enid Gill likes to get out of the house most days. 'It means everything to me to get out', she says, 'I like to get some fresh air – and I get to meet some lovely people.'

Enid is totally blind and uses a wheelchair, so getting out is a challenge.

'There isn't a bus comes anywhere near', she says – the nearest bus stop is a quarter of a mile away. She would also find it impossible to climb the steps up on to the bus.

Until last year, she used to receive bus tokens or vouchers from the council, which could be used for taxis in lieu of the free bus pass. But the council has now stopped providing tokens.

Luckily, Age UK Darlington runs a local transport service, and a volunteer driver picks Enid up three or four times a week to take her to lunch at the centre.

When asked what it would mean if she couldn't get out, Enid said, 'If I couldn't get out of the house I would go mad. I might as well give up on life.'

Studies have shown that access to public transport **helped older people to stay socially connected and active.**

6.2 Public toilets

As people age, they are more likely to suffer from incontinence or take medication that means that they need to go to the toilet more frequently. There are more than 2.5 million people in the UK who suffer from urinary incontinence.¹⁵

The British Toilet Association (BTA) estimates that in excess of 40 per cent of public toilets in the UK have been closed in the past ten years.¹⁶ A survey carried out by Help the Aged in 2006 found that 82 per cent of respondents felt that public toilet provision in their areas did not meet their needs.¹⁷ A report¹⁸ produced by the Department for Communities and Local Government under the previous government highlighted a number of reasons for this decline, but did little to change the situation.

This situation is set to become even worse. The BTA estimates that more than 1,000 public toilets could face closure in the next 12 months.¹⁹ There is no statutory requirement on local authorities to provide public toilets. In the current climate of local authority budget cuts, many local authorities are reviewing their public toilet facilities with the intention of making savings. Community toilet schemes (where local businesses offer their facilities in return for a financial incentive) can be a workable alternative, provided that they meet the needs of older people.

It is absolutely vital that councils understand the important role that public toilets play in enabling many older people to get out and about in their neighbourhood. The 2006 Help the Aged study found that 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 like. This evidence suggests that lack of public toilets is a significant factor in the isolation of some older people.

6.3 Pavements

Falls are the most frequent and serious type of accident for people aged over 65.²⁰ Having a fall can have a big impact on an older person's life, destroying confidence, increasing isolation and reducing independence. After a hip fracture, 50 per cent of people can no longer live independently.²¹

There are many causes of falls – and Age UK is campaigning for better falls prevention services for all older people to reduce their risk of falling. But uneven or broken pavements are significant risk factors. A survey commissioned by Help the Aged showed that every year, nearly one in ten people over the age of 65 trip or fall because of damaged or uneven pavements.²²

All councils need to ensure that pavement repairs are carried out promptly and that people are encouraged to report problem areas.

6.4 Places to sit down

For older people who are becoming frail and less mobile, public seating can make the difference between living a full life and feeling cut off and isolated. Many older people cannot walk for more than ten minutes without a rest.²³ Going to the supermarket, queuing at the post office or waiting at the bus stop can become impossible for many if there is nowhere for them to sit down.

Walking is good physical activity for older people. Benches or other places to sit down will encourage those older people who are becoming less mobile to continue getting out of the house and taking exercise, and so will reduce the likelihood of these people becoming housebound and isolated.

Public seating does not have to be expensive, and in some instances could be provided or renovated by local volunteers or community groups. Councillors need to find out from older people if seating is adequate in their neighbourhood and find innovative ways of meeting this need.

6.5 Accessible local services

Older people use a wide variety of services provided by public, private and voluntary sectors. Simple, accessible services are vital to an age-friendly neighbourhood.

A local shop or post office not only provides the services that people need, but also gives an incentive to get out of the house, go for a short walk and have a chat. This is just the kind of regular social interaction that people who live alone need to prevent social isolation.²⁴ Local services such as post offices or pharmacies can also be an essential signposting points for information, advice and more specialist services.

Local councils rarely have direct responsibility for the provision of local services, but can play a role by providing incentives for businesses to invest in an area, approving planning strategies and applications or working with other statutory bodies such as the NHS.

6.6 Personal security, street lighting and cleaning

Research by Help the Aged illustrates older people's concerns about crime and low-level nuisance, including graffiti, rudeness and rowdiness and litter.²⁵

These are problems with no easy solutions, but the provision of better street-lighting, investment in street-cleaning and dealing with low-level nuisance all help older people to continue getting out of their homes. This in turn may well help deal with some issues as the presence of older people on the streets may provide a disincentive to disruptive behaviour by others.

6.7 Community activities

Sometimes older people's needs can be met, not by physical infrastructure or services, but by being part of local projects that encourage mutual support and a sense of community. For example, fear of young people may be better tackled by a community project involving young and old together, rather than improvements to the physical environment. Community activities can include volunteering projects that deliver support to isolated older people, the organisation of local social events and trips, car clubs, and hospital-visiting programmes.

Often it only takes very small amounts of public money – as little as a few hundred pounds – to enable people to organise projects and activities. These might include working with established voluntary organisations such as local Age UKs and Age Concerns, youth projects or sports clubs.

Even when times are tough, we hope that councils can work with other statutory agencies, for example, the police and fire service, to hold back small sums that will unlock local voluntary action.

Public seating does not have to be expensive, and in some instances **could be provided or renovated by local volunteers or community groups.**

Further resources

Global Age-friendly Cities: A guide, WHO, 2007

Manchester: A great place to grow older
(Manchester's Strategy for Ageing 2010–20)

*Towards Common Ground: The Help the Aged
manifesto for lifetime neighbourhoods*,
Help the Aged, 2008

*Towards Lifetime Neighbourhoods: Designing
sustainable communities for all*, International
Longevity Centre and Department for
Communities and Local Government, 2007

Inclusive Design for Getting Outdoors (I'DGO)
is a research consultancy focused on identifying
the most effective ways of shaping outdoor
environments to meet the needs of older
people and disabled people. www.idgo.ac.uk

Notes

- 1 Estimates vary widely, from 20 per cent to 50 per cent. This is a cautious estimate based on a correction issued by the National Statistician to original 2008 ONS estimate, ONS website www.ons.gov.uk
- 2 The Provision of Public Toilets, House of Commons, Twelfth Report of Session 2007–08, HC 636, London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2008
- 3 Personal communication from Highways Estimator, Dorset County Council, March 2011.
- 4 £350 per week saved for a person having home care instead of residential care (home care = £145 per week, residential care = £493 per week) adds up to approximately £18,000 per person per year (England-only figures).
- 5 Households headed by someone aged 65+ contribute about £102 billion of spending power every year: *Family Spending 2010 edition*, Office for National Statistics, 2010
- 6 *Invisible but Invaluable*, Age UK, 2010
- 7 *Social Trends No. 39 – 2009 edition*, Office for National Statistics, 2009
- 8 *Citizenship Survey: April–June 2010*, England, Communities and Local Government, October 2010
- 9 ‘Quantifying the Changing Age Structure of the British Electorate’, Dr Scott Davidson, De Montfort University, 2010
- 10 *Towards Common Ground: The Help the Aged manifesto for lifetime neighbourhoods*, Help the Aged, 2008
- 11 *National Travel Survey 2005*, Department for Transport, 2006
- 12 Executive Summary – Report of the Minor Procedures & Outpatients Single Issue Panel, Cornwall Council, November 2010
- 13 *Transport Statistics Bulletin: National travel survey 2008*, Department for Transport, 2009
- 14 T. Knight et al., *Understanding the Travel Needs, Behaviour and Aspirations of People in Later Life*, Department for Transport, 2007
- 15 C. W. McGrother, ‘Storage Symptoms of the Bladder: Prevalence, incidence and need for services in the UK’, *BJU International*, 93 (2004): 763–9
- 16 Email from Mike Bone, Director, British Toilet Association, 4 January 2011
- 17 *Nowhere to Go*, Help the Aged, 2007
- 18 *Improving Public Access to Better Quality Toilets: A strategic guide*, DCLG, 2008
- 19 Email from Mike Bone, Director, British Toilet Association, 4 January 2011
- 20 London Health Observatory, www.lho.org.uk/LHO_Topics/Health_Topics/Diseases/AccidentsInjury.aspx
- 21 *Stop Falling, Start Saving Lives and Money*, Age UK, 2010
- 22 ICM research for Help the Aged SPOTLIGHT survey, Jan 2008
- 23 E. Burton and L. Mitchell, *Inclusive Urban Design: Streets for life*, Architectural Press, 2006
- 24 T. Knight et al., *Understanding the Travel Needs, Behaviour and Aspirations of People in Later Life*, Department for Transport, 2007
- 25 *Social Inclusion and Older People: A call for action*, Help the Aged, 2007



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