

Policy Position Paper

Age friendly neighbourhoods (England)

April 2016

Everybody should be able to live in an age-friendly environment that enables people of all ages to lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Key issues

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. Lack of public transport, or somewhere to sit down, or access to clean public toilets limits how far people are able to get around and poor quality pavements, poor street lighting or fear of crime can stop people feeling confident enough to go out at all.

The decline in local services over the past few decades, characterised by closures of banks, post offices, pubs, garages and local stores has also caused problems for many older people, particularly those with declining mobility, poor health, low incomes and limited social contacts. However, the Post Office network has stabilised, and is committed to continued national coverage of around 11,500 branches.

There is no single agreed definition of age friendly neighbourhoods, but in simple terms, it means designing an inclusive environment for all ages to lead independent lives. The Dublin Declaration for Age Friendly Cities states that the 'age-friendly city and/or community encourages active ageing by optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age'. An age friendly community is also likely to benefit other groups. Measures to make communities accessible to an older person with limited mobility are likely to also help someone pushing a pram.

While national government can set the framework for age friendly neighbourhoods, local government has the main part to play. In 2011 a number of cities from around the world, including Manchester and Newcastle in England, signed the Dublin Declaration, agreeing to 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 them.ⁱ More communities across the UK are adopting age-friendly strategies, including areas as diverse as London and the Isle of Wight.

The Government has also been promoting the idea of Dementia Friendly Communities, with 142 signed up to date and a target of a further 100 by 2018ⁱⁱ. Most recently, the Healthy New Towns initiative between NHS England and Public Health England is working with 10 housing developments to test how good urban and housing design can promote healthy lifestyles and prevent illness.

As this suggests, there are now many opportunities for local government to commission services that support older people to remain active in their neighbourhoods. However, the continuing reductions to local authority budgets present a challenge to how much local authorities can realistically achieve.

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 also contribute to and shape their neighbourhoods. Local activists and older people’s forums 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 promote good intergenerational practice in meeting policy objectives such as stronger, safer communities, a robust local economy, environmental sustainability, and also improved adult health and wellbeing and tackling isolation.
- Everyone in a community should be able to have their say and national and local government need to involve older people throughout, including co-design of key services that affect them. 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 councillors should listen to, understand and act upon the views older people have of how their neighbourhood can improve, challenging the council’s decision making processes to be more responsive and inclusive. They should initiate change that meets the needs of older people in their ward and enables them to lead independent lives as active citizens.
- 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. This should include maintaining pavements and footpaths, reducing road obstacles and providing benches to help people keep active as they age.
- Local authorities, Health and Wellbeing Boards and representatives of businesses operating in the area should work together to reverse the decline in access to essential services, and ensure that all older people have their basic needs met, including access to banking and cash services, healthcare and basic food shops. This will need to take into account the local transport infrastructure.
- The future of the Post Office must continue to be safeguarded, and the Government must recognise its social importance as part of the community and ensure that it meets the principles of trust and accessibility.

Also see policy positions on: loneliness and isolation, public transport, engagement and volunteering, housing design, adaptations and support.

ⁱ 'Age-Friendly Cities sign the Dublin Declaration', Age UK blog, September 2011

ⁱⁱ *Prime Minister's Challenge on Dementia 2020: Implementation Plan*, Department of Health, March 2016

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