



Key learning on Building Age-friendly Neighbourhoods with Asset-based Approaches

- To create age-friendly neighbourhoods, older people need to have opportunities to connect, participate and contribute.
- Social cohesion and a sense of belonging are incredibly important in creating age-friendly neighbourhoods.
- Social infrastructure (such as libraries, community centres and bus services) is vital for creating age-friendly neighbourhoods, however, these resources are unequally distributed.
- Older people are not a homogenous group, as such, opportunities to connect and contribute need to reflect the diversity of the population.
- Bringing a range of ages together through intergenerational projects can be effective in strengthening community cohesion.

Introduction

Ambition for Ageing has been working in 24 wards across Greater Manchester, supporting older people to generate ideas and design and deliver their own projects within neighbourhoods to make the places in which they live more age-friendly.

This briefing brings together learning gathered from local delivery leads on the programme, to offer guidance as to how we can work with older people to create more age-friendly neighbourhoods using an asset-based approach.

The briefing comes out of a larger piece of work, exploring what over 3000 respondents across Greater Manchester told us makes an age-friendly neighbourhood.

The research identified six key themes that interlink to make an age-friendly neighbourhood, which are further explored in our complementary briefing, **What Makes an Age-friendly Neighbourhood.**

Ambition for Ageing is a £10.2 million Greater Manchester level programme aimed at creating more age-friendly places and empowering people to live fulfilling lives as they age.

We do this by providing small investments to help develop more age-friendly neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester in addition to funding larger scale work across the city-region.

As a research project, we are committed to sharing the learning we gain from the programme to help influence local, regional and national policy.

Empowerment, control and Collective Action



To create age-friendly neighbourhoods, older people need to have opportunities to connect, participate and contribute.

Our programme has used events and activities designed and led by older people as a way for older people to connect and contribute, helping them to increase their sense of belonging in their neighbourhoods. We have found that this approach gives many older people a strong sense of ownership and care for the projects, increasing the potential for longer-term sustainability.

In addition to this, the person-led approach has enabled older people to have a say, through an outlet where they will be listened to and can make a difference. By providing the opportunity and the support for older people to come together in collective action (such as through residents groups and the Older People's Network) older people feel they have more control over their environments and can have influence, helping them to feel safer and more secure in their neighbourhoods.

In order to be as inclusive as possible, it's been necessary to invest a significant amount of time into confidence-building and providing both informal and formal training in areas such as committee and advocacy skills, and raising awareness of equalities issues. Staff have also needed to support older people to create and maintain democratic structures that go beyond simply representing the views of the 'usual suspects'.

“ It went from a project about isolation, about loneliness, to more of a project about older people passing on their skills and feeling valued in the community. ”

Diversity and flexibility

Older people are not a homogenous group; they are not all alike simply because they are all older people. As such, opportunities to connect and contribute need to reflect the diversity of the population.

Taking an asset-based, micro-funding approach has allowed for hundreds of projects to be developed through Ambition for Ageing, providing a wide range of different opportunities to suit different tastes and needs. We've found that diverse opportunities offering varying degrees of engagement, both formal and informal are key. Both flexibility and accessibility are important.

Unconscious exclusion

Our programme frequently encountered situations of unconscious exclusion, whereby activities and places were designed and assumed to be 'open to all', but were unknowingly exclusionary towards particular groups or individuals.

We have found a combination of both targeted work and improving the inclusivity of mainstream activities to be useful in tackling this. Work has focused on providing awareness training, embodying and promoting an awareness culture around accessibility, and the encouragement of open conversations about what different individuals need in different spaces.

Case Study: Eve's story

Eve is registered blind and although she spends time with family during the weekend, she normally spend her weekdays alone following the death of her husband. After finding an Ambition for Ageing newsletter in her post, Eve's daughter suggested she look into taking part.

A member of staff came out to visit Eve, which made her feel comfortable straight away. Following their chat, Eve tried out a local reading group and is now a regular at weekly friendship group for blind and partially sighted people as well as taking part in a 'Living with Sight Loss' course. She has also joined her local AfA steering group, where she is able to represent others with sight loss.

Social cohesion and a sense of belonging have been found to be incredibly important in creating age-friendly neighbourhoods. Many of our programme participants felt a sense of belonging and connection in their neighbourhoods when they felt they lived alongside ‘people like me’; people they could relate to and identify with.

Throughout delivery, our programme encountered existing tensions within neighbourhoods felt by older people, particularly around perceived cultural and generational differences. These often arose from existing stigmas, misconceptions, and a lack of understanding.

To tackle this, staff invested considerable time into breaking down barriers within neighbourhoods, creating opportunities for people to come together who would not have ordinarily met. Through this, Ambition for Ageing has helped to make the unfamiliar familiar, allowing people to discover commonalities and widen their perceptions of who they consider to be ‘people like me’.

Case Study: Norman’s Story

During an event, Norman from the local reminiscence group did a pitch for an investment and spoke about his knowledge of local history. Some of the audience found this particularly interesting, especially a group that included Muslim men who had moved to the UK as adults. As a result of their interest, Norman arranged to give a dedicated talk at the local Community Centre.

Initially nervous about giving the talk, due to not previously spending time with members of the Muslim community, Norman spoke about his worries with a member of Ambition for Ageing staff.

The member of staff softly challenged Norman's concerns, asking him to think about whether the Muslim community may share some of his fears. Norman took the conversation to heart, stating it had opened his eyes to the similarities between the different communities. Following his talk at the group, Norman has now built a friendship with some of the South Asian men who attend the Centre’s groups.

The benefits of intergenerational work

Ambition for Ageing has also found that bringing a range of ages together through intergenerational projects can be effective in strengthening community cohesion; alleviating fears, challenging prejudices and supporting communities to share and make better use of existing skills.

Whilst projects focusing on dispelling myths about older people can successfully reduce stigma around ageing, it’s also important to dispel myths about younger people.

Although this may appear to take the focus away from older people, our programme has found that this can play a key role in making older people feel safer in their communities. Most importantly, intergenerational work needs to be designed and facilitated well, to ensure that the work goes beyond simply perpetuating stereotypes.



“ It’s a nice change to be able to spend time with another age group as people sometimes think us older people just want to be together. ”



Re-thinking community spaces and resources

“ Since Ambition For Ageing funded the installation of a new boiler, even more groups have started using the club space, with more looking to join since the announcement of the library closures. ”

Social infrastructure (such as libraries, community centres and bus services) is vital for creating age-friendly neighbourhoods, but the reality is that these resources are unequally distributed across neighbourhoods.

Our programme has re-invested in local social infrastructure, supporting neglected and run down spaces within neighbourhoods to become valuable community assets. These spaces have then acted as sites from which further age-friendly activities and projects have been able to flourish.

In addition to this, Ambition for Ageing has been re-thinking the use of existing community spaces and resources, to be more innovative and joined up with what is available. Our programme staff have built connections between community groups that had previously operated in silos, encouraging them to work together to share both spaces and resources. This requires careful negotiation skills and sensitivity, to balance sometimes competing interests and values within neighbourhoods and assist them to find common ground. Whilst time-consuming, this process has helped increase capacity, sustainability and resilience within neighbourhoods.

Our programme recognises that particular spaces have particular meaning to particular people. This understanding has allowed us to successfully build on existing assets, but also challenge and facilitate change. Some projects have encouraged older people to take part in activities in spaces that were previously viewed as ‘off limits’ or threatening, to help alleviate fears surrounding certain community spaces within neighbourhoods. This kind of work facilitates the re-negotiation of spaces in communities, transforming the social meaning of places to become more inclusive.

This document is one of two briefings produced by Ambition for Ageing on the topic of developing age-friendly neighbourhoods. The second document, titled, **What Makes an Age-friendly Neighbourhood** uses research and learning gathered from the Ambition for Ageing programme to explore what older people across Greater Manchester think makes a neighbourhood age-friendly.

To read the full report and accompanying briefings visit www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/neighbourhoods

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