Number 12

An enfolding community?
Neighbourliness and older people

Introduction

This research briefing is based on a review of neighbourliness, carried out for Age Concern England in 2007 by Kevin Harris of Local Level. The review included a national seminar for practitioners, researchers, and volunteer workers from local Age Concerns; followed by three focus groups with older people (one in Shipley, West Yorkshire, and two in Bishopthorpe, York). This was augmented with desk research drawing on previous work. This briefing summarises the main themes, and offers a framework for practical work which might help ensure that older people have supportive neighbours around them, and where possible a social environment to which they can contribute.

Why is neighbourliness an issue?

Is there a crisis of neighbourliness? Various social changes such as increased mobility, more privatised leisure and a diminished public realm all seem to have weakened local social relations in many neighbourhoods. Examples of cohesive, close-knit communities, where neighbourliness is routinely and consistently practised, can still be found. But when the topic is discussed, narratives of decline are usually offered. These point to a strong sense that co-residents are now less readily categorised as similar; and that neighbourliness is now typically experienced at best as more *individualised*, perhaps involving a few particular neighbours, rather than reflecting an 'enfolding community' which collectively nurtures, protects and supports its members.

Increasingly, the practice of neighbouring is *discretionary*. As we have become more mobile, with our families more widely distributed, and as other options for social interaction have become available, we tend to invest more time and energy in our personal social networks than in our neighbourhoods.

When today's older people speak of their childhoods, they tend to refer to social networks in which the people they knew, knew one another: their social ties overlapped. Norms of behaviour are easily established and upheld in such contexts.

Young and middle-aged people nowadays are more likely to have networks characterised by diverse ties in various areas of interest or need. These ties are less likely to be local, and an individual's contacts are less likely to know much about each other. This trend towards personal social networks weakens the norms of local social relations and might be said to place neighbourliness in jeopardy. For many older people it is hard to maintain such a network, and potentially problematic to live without neighbourly support.

This represents a looming problem for social policy. If connections between neighbours are thinly-spread and less visible (because of design, use of cars, lack of local shops, or for other reasons) then it's not surprising that we begin to experience a vacuum of responsibility in our neighbourhoods. The practice of 'looking out for' a neighbour falls to a few or into neglect.

Neighbouring cannot be taken for granted, so should policy seek to make it more deliberate, more strategic? Can neighbourliness be incentivised?[1] Or does it have to be substituted increasingly by formal services? To what extent is it dispensable? What role might older people themselves play in the rejuvenation of the practice of neighbouring?

What do we mean by neighbouring and neighbourliness?

The term **neighbouring** refers to the actions and behaviour of neighbours in each others' interest, which contribute to positive relations between them and to a sense of belonging.

Neighbourliness involves non-obligatory willingness to share some social and practical responsibility for others who live in the same locality.[2] The term refers to the *attributes* of the behaviour that guides *neighbouring* – usually comprising friendliness, helpfulness, and respect for privacy.[3]

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[1] Richardson 2006.
[2] This definition is based on D. Abrams 2006: 25.
[3] P. Abrams in Bulmer 1986, ch.5.

The essence of neighbouring is that it is low-level and relatively trivial, but it accumulates. One commentator notes that its importance may lie 'in small and unremarkable actions and behaviour that give people a sense that they are secure and at home in their own places.'[4]

Neighbourliness depends on this basic platform of neighbouring. It begins with the practice and experience of such 'unremarkable' little acts of recognition among co-residents. These acts not only provide reassurance; taken together, they contribute to a sense of shared responsibility which, in turn, affords action in time of need. Just as it is harder to mobilise a disconnected collection of people when they are faced with a crisis, so it is harder to generate neighbourly support without a basis of *recognition*. Hence the significance of the most trivial, non-committal acts of recognition – a smile in passing and a grunt of acknowledgment, a half-wave or a word about the weather.

This platform of everyday sociability can form the basis for broader social integration and participation. However, it is not always going to be visible to the outsider, or indeed to a newcomer. Nor is it always going to be adequate for dealing with adversity (particularly an internal crisis within the neighbourhood, like a feud between households).

Our appreciation of the significance of neighbouring has to take account of passive behaviours associated with 'looking out for each other.' Neighbouring does not have to involve interaction. The visibility at the door of newspapers, post, or milk bottles and the act of taking them in, or of putting the wheelie bin out or putting it away, can be important signals of live occupation of the home and of the neighbourhood. Small signs give important messages to fellow residents. In a focus group for the present study, a 90 year old woman claimed to have 'the best possible neighbour' who keeps an eye out for her, and she herself keeps an eye out for someone else:

'I check to see if John's blinds are up. The blinds go up at eight o'clock. If he's not up I tell another neighbour.'

This is a balanced example of non-intrusive neighbourly support, apparently trivial and yet loaded with implications for the sense of well-being of those involved. Housing design can influence the visibility of such signs: homes for older people that are designed for easy communication of this kind can contribute hugely to sustained independence. Technology can also play a role, for instance in the simple use of a phone-chain whereby residents in independent apartments call one another every morning, to check they're alright.[5]

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[4] Lishman 2006: 4-5.
[5] Lawrence and Schiller Schigelone 2002: 698.

Neighbourliness and change

Older people often reflect on a decline in neighbourliness and they sense that it has become more individualised. The key explanations are in the changed profile of social capital, and the way in which neighbouring has become discretionary.

Narratives of decline

Participants in the present study reflected a sense that neighbourliness had changed since they were young, and most clearly felt that it had in some way declined. These views are echoed in the literature, which is replete with examples of collective behaviour in the past:

'You shared your stew and you shared your soup, and if your bone had a good bit of bristle on it, it went from pot to pot.'[6]

'In my first house, I hadn't even got a table; you just put a board over the child's pram… All the neighbours helped out, everybody helped everybody else.'[7]

'It didn't matter when you went out or when you came in, you always saw a neighbour and they always spoke to you.'[8]

Today, people readily describe acts of helpfulness and friendliness around them; and cohesive, supportive neighbourhoods can still be found. But these interactions and exchanges are more individualised and do not seem to amount to a healthy stock of neighbourliness, as a resource on which everyone can draw with confidence and without hesitation, as of right. The resource of neighbourliness is felt to have become impoverished. A sense emerges in people's accounts of a former enfolding community now mysteriously dissipated.

Neighbouring is individualised

Participants found it difficult to clarify whether this is more a decline of quantity or of quality, or both. Previous research provides clarification:

'The loss they identified was that of an underpinning security of a close-knit community, of mutual support spanning the generations and involving everybody. This had been replaced by individual support offered by specific neighbours, greatly valued but seen also as more fragile and vulnerable to changing circumstances.'[9]

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[6] Hall 2003: 10.
[7] Hall 2003: 17.
[8] Clark and Carnegie 2003: 126.
[9] Godfrey et al 2004: 164.

This understanding, from a study of older people in Leeds and Hartlepool, is re-enforced in research conducted into neighbourly support among older people in the Netherlands:

'Neighbours in present-day neighbourhoods often are isolated in the network and the neighbourhood. This makes the exchange of support among neighbours an individualized activity. It involves only two neighbours, rather than a larger neighbourhood community.'[10]

Society has changed

The perceived decline in neighbouring and neighbourliness is generally attributed to a range of factors including the increased use of cars, less socio-economic homogeneity in neighbourhoods, increased economic wealth, the weakening of the local public realm, and a more organised welfare state. The relative impact of such forces may be open to debate; what seems beyond dispute is that those whose lives tend to be localised, particularly children and older people, are likely to be affected disproportionately by these changes.

Social capital has changed

Not all participants in our focus groups were emphatic about levels and standards of neighbouring in the past. One man told us that things were *worse* during the Second World War:

'The next door neighbours wouldn't talk to us. I don't think anything's changed over the years.'

He went on to describe an incident where he and his mother were excluded by neighbours from an air-raid shelter. It then emerged that they were consistently ostracised as a one-parent family. This point neatly illustrates the social changes beneath the surface of this general history: while the intervening years are believed to have seen a general decline of social capital, over the same period we have seen more acceptance of 'alternative' lifestyles and of previously excluded groups, including one-parent families.[11] This illustrates how the history of close neighbourly relations is idealised: the plight of a single mother and her son would surely not be so traumatically exposed nowadays.

The celebrated close-knit community, and the robust civic culture and social capital associated with it, can also represent 'a powerfully constraining, disciplining or exclusionary force for those groups of people who deviate

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[10] Thomése et al 2003: 536.
[11] Arneil 2006.

from the given norms, along religious, ethnic, cultural or gendered lines.'[12] For older people with such recollections, however, the sense of loss is genuine and often bewildering.

Neighbouring is more discretionary

Part of the explanation for this is that for most of us now, neighbourliness is no longer *necessary*. Talja Blokland explored this in research into social relations in a particular Rotterdam neighbourhood over a generation. She notes:

*'The most significant changes are **the diminished need to be neighbourly** and the increased opportunities to relate to fellow neighbourhood residents **at one's own discretion**. Neighbourliness is less uniform, and the mutual familiarity of neighbourhood residents has gradually become less public. Generally, therefore, mutual attachments are fading among neighbourhood residents… The cause of this decline is not that people are unwilling to help each other or are less social or helpful than in the past or compared to the ideal country village. Rather, it is attributable to the social structure, which increasingly accommodates **structured choices according to personal discretion**.'[13]*

Neighbourliness is essentially a code of voluntary informal behaviours, and if it is not perceived as necessary its practice will decline. That decline implies a corresponding increase in uncivil and anti-social behaviour,[14] theoretically leading to widespread practices of retreat, seclusion, exclusion and alienation – conditions which are particularly threatening for older people. How then do we promote local social relations, which are fundamentally informal and voluntary, in order to restore a recognisable sense of collective responsibility and interdependence at local level?

Benefits of neighbourliness for older people

The review reasserts the importance of sociability in the lives of older people. Sociability and engagement are central to their conception of well-being,[15] and for many older people, the neighbourhood is the primary environment for this:

'Underlying the value placed on home and neighbourhood were having good neighbours who could provide friendship, be alert for emergencies, provide help and support if frail or ill, and substitute for relatives.'[16]

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[12] Arneil 2006: 39.
[13] Blokland 2003: 122-123, emphasis added.
[14] Harris 2006a: x.
[15] Godfrey et al 2004: 138.
[16] Gabriel and Bowling 2004: 682.

Neighbourliness provides the following benefits:[17]

- Safety and sense of security. This can be reflected in a general sense of ease or discomfort, as well as in perceptions of crime and disorder. Informal connections between neighbours provide a basis for sharing information, maintaining evidence of occupation, raising alerts, and mobilising a response if needed.

- Instrumental aid, support, and the flow of information. A basic level of neighbourhood interaction facilitates the possibility of further interaction by gradually establishing the grounds for reciprocity. Where neighbourliness is evident we would expect to find people sharing materials such as tools, helping one another occasionally with simple tasks, and in the course of various interactions, passing information and providing the context for sharing experience.

- Establishing and defending norms of behaviour. A viable neighbourhood constitutes the ecology for the practice of acceptable norms of behaviour. Variations can be particularly challenging for older people, who depend perhaps more than most on recognisable signals of predictable behaviour.

- Priming local residents for their own defence and development. Informal and repeated interaction among residents makes it possible to mobilise effective community action – for example against some perceived planning or environmental threat.

- Sense of attachment. The sense of belonging is not necessarily correlated with length of residence, but it could be argued that it plays an important role in serving to minimise disorder.

- Health and well-being. There are well-recognised psychological and disease-related health benefits for older people. For example, there seems to be a positive association between 'belongingness support' (which includes talking daily with friends or neighbours) and health outcomes.[18] Risk of Alzheimer disease is twice as high in older people who are lonely as it is in those who are not.[19] Research in Australia concludes that the presence of *discretionary* friendships, rather than family, contributes to longer survival in older people.[20] This suggests that neighbour-connections which constitute friendships, and which promote social engagement, are likely to contribute to health protection.

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[17] Harris 2006b: 58-59.
[18] Tomaka et al 2006.
[19] Wilson et al 2007.
[20] Giles et al 2005.

In their experience of and attitudes towards neighbourliness, older people vary significantly, and this diversity should not be disguised. Focus groups for the Age Concern review suggested that older people's attitudes to neighbouring differ according to:

- temperament and confidence

- demonstrable need – physical and emotional

- the strength and extent of family and friendship networks

- their local built and green environment.

'Becoming a burden?' Care, interdependence and neighbourly help

Relations with neighbours can be complicated for older people because of declining health, pressures to become dependent, and reduced ability to reciprocate. Declining health can mean significant, possibly irreversible, decline in social contact. Older people are often acutely aware of this danger:

'I don't worry about being ill… Everyone gets ill… I worry about not being able to get out, about not being able to go to the shops or do what I have to do… see my friends.'[21]

Older people's needs increase at a time when there is often a decline in their ability to reciprocate. Thus the combination of pressure on social networks and an increasing need for care can come to dominate the outlook and affect the quality of life of many older people.

Care provided by neighbours is often not negotiated; does not depend on direct reciprocity, duty or obligation; and is usually based on 'a sense of humanity or good citizenship.'[22] The role of neighbours providing informal, low-level help is to operate in the area between what the older person can manage for themselves, and whatever requires more committed attention from family, closer acquaintances, or formal services.

An important consequence of persistent ill-health can be that after a point, caring for older people in certain conditions becomes perceived as the responsibility of family and/or professional services, not well-intentioned neighbours. While there is a logic to this, to do with expertise, dignity and privacy, the transfer of responsibility can be awkward for a neighbour to negotiate.

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[21] Respondent quoted by Godfrey et al 2004: 93.
[22] Nocon and Pearson 2000: 364-365.

The responsibility of low-level care assumed by a neighbour can spiral to a level which becomes too demanding. The transition from the need for help, through a need for care, to relative dependency is not necessarily irreversible, but each little shift can raise questions about the loss of independence.

UK research reports how the early lives of many older people were characterised by a 'strong ethos and value attached to caring,' almost certainly associated with close-knit communities with dense overlapping ties. Strikingly, when it came to expectations of their own needs, these experiences were not reinforced by respondents:

'On the one hand, there was an emphasis on "giving help to others," which found practical expression in "neighbourliness," interest in and involvement in the community. On the other hand, there was a vociferous rejection of such expectations of their own children and an expressed anxiety not to be a burden to them.'[23]

This tension between a lost sense of 'enfolding community' in which unspecified known neighbours could be relied on to help, and the fear of becoming a burden, is accentuated by the decline of older people's social roles. No longer breadwinners nor parenting advisers, for many, actions like helping to prepare and serve the family meal, reading with the grandchildren, pottering in the family garden – these are roles from which they have become excluded or for which their time is increasingly compartmentalised. The grounds for interdependence are thereby eroded.

And yet interdependence is an emerging principle in the quality of life of older people:

'The central and underpinning value carried through into old age was that of interdependence – that tied together seemingly contradictory notions of caring about others, not being a burden and an emphasis on reciprocity in relationships.'[24]

The availability of neighbourly support is critical here. If they have to turn to formal services, older people often surrender the principle of interdependence; or, put another way, it might seem that interdependence is confiscated.

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[23] Godfrey et al 2004: 65.
[24] Godfrey et al 2004: 101.

Family neighbours and neighbour-friends

The review explored relations that older people have with various social groups. This section focuses on the two that are most significant.

As geographical mobility has become more common and average household size continues to decrease, extended co-resident families are becoming more rare. In terms of numbers, family neighbours constitute the smallest fraction of people's social networks, but close family members are the preferred option for both instrumental and emotional support, if available.[25] Similarly, informal help in the home is most likely to be provided by family members.[26]

US research has suggested that friends and neighbours in many contexts are perceived as a *compensatory* substitute for family.[27] In the UK, it may be that there is particular emphasis on not inconveniencing others or being seen to be over-demanding: acceptance of help from close family members was found in one study to be subject to complex negotiations and characterised by efforts to maintain balance.[28]

Friendliness is a key component in neighbourliness but it is not the same as *friendship*. On the whole, in the UK tradition at least, neighbouring and friendship tend to be quite distinct. Crucially however, this principle appears less likely to apply to children or to older people, whose lives typically are more localised. One study notes that among older people 'there is often behaviourally a blurring of the distinction between friends and neighbours.'[29]

Many older people mention strong residual friendships, sustained remotely, with people they haven't seen for some time and may never see again. These relationships are likely to play a role in mental health, in that they help to hold memories in a dependable place; and to some extent they may help in taking some of the pressure off neighbour-friendships.

Again, older people often have long-standing friendships that are sustained in relative proximity: the phenomenon of the close friend who is a *near-neighbour* – perhaps living across town now or in a nearby village. Such relationships have an important place in the menu of social network options, especially among active older people, and their loss may be keenly felt. As mobility declines in later life, any expectations that neighbours can somehow compensate for such friendships may lead to considerable disappointment and require adjustment.

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[25] Logan and Spitze 1994: 464-465.
[26] Coward 1987.
[27] Rosow 1970: 61-62, Berry et al 1990: 181.
[28] Godfrey et al 2004: 167.
[29] Cantor 1979: 445-6.

Neighbourliness and place

Could neighbourliness be designed-in?

Older people's ability to sustain informal social relations is linked to their sense of satisfaction or safety in their neighbourhood.[30] Jane Jacobs drew attention to the importance of 'eyes on the street' and the fact that it is possible for social interaction to be designed-out.[31] From older people's point of view, we can identify a number of factors that might help to ensure that neighbourliness is 'designed-in'.

- **Outside the door**

  One seminar participant described how the process of painting her front door generated numerous positive interactions with her neighbours. The door opens directly onto the street and painting it 'took ages,' because of the occasions afforded for interaction in the neutral, semi-public space outside the house. Just being there – not loitering but legitimately occupied and *available for conversation* – provided the opportunity for connections to be made. The way the home connects to the street is a hugely significant factor in neighbouring. The government's recent *Manual for streets* promotes 'the desirability of public fronts and private backs' in design, stressing the negative effects of having houses turn their backs on streets.[32] Many older people live in flats which typically open out onto a vacant landing: these are conditions which do not invite lingering and where the possibilities of reassuring serendipitous encounters are almost completely designed-out.

- **Liveability: street design and maintenance**

  The notion of 'liveability' refers to environments which people feel positive about occupying. Pavement maintenance, lighting, and appropriate traffic control are critical factors in older people's experience of their neighbourhoods. Liveability may be less important to those who are highly mobile, and the principle has taken some time to gain political recognition. Hence for example the persistent phenomenon of footway parking – a hazard that typifies the lack of consideration towards, and sense of powerlessness experienced by, many older people in the streets. All such factors can have an impact on sociability, reducing the inclination to go out and the likelihood of positive interaction.

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[30] Scharf and Smith 2004.
[31] Jacobs 1961.
[32] DfT 2007: 5.6.2.

- **Green spaces**

  It is not just the built environment which has an effect on local social connections. A study in Chicago looked at green spaces in common areas on a large housing development. It found that:

  'compared to residents living adjacent to relatively barren spaces, individuals living adjacent to greener common spaces had more social activities and more visitors, knew more of their neighbours, reported their neighbours were more concerned with helping and supporting one another, and had stronger feelings of belonging.'[33]

- **'Third places' and places that promote serendipitous encounters**

  Inclusive neighbourhoods have a mix of places which promote unstructured and serendipitous encounters, as well as semi-formal or formal structured relations such as those in day centres and through good neighbour schemes. Interactions resulting from everyday encounters help people feel reassured and included in their neighbourhoods: they reflect and stimulate a sense of neighbourliness.

  The term 'third places'[34] describes 'neutral' public places and spaces, neither home nor workplace, routinely used as social gathering places. Their significance lies in the possibility of occupying the space without pressures to interact, but with the option of safe, escapable interaction with others. Even without interaction, mutual recognition is reinforced, and such weak ties can be the basis for support in time of need.

  Third places should be considered alongside semi-formal and formal groups and associations, and not as entirely independent phenomena. Often the connection is through some kind of (usually low-key) 'occasion'. For example, many pubs cater for a spirit of convivial, low-competitive games such as darts, skittles, dominoes or pétanque. Libraries organise or support reading groups. Faith groups often have low-commitment drop-in occasions such as coffee mornings. Leisure centres have age-group keep-fit sessions. Conviviality permeates such occasions and their social value for older people has possibly never been properly assessed.

- **Empowerment in decision-making processes**

  Older people commonly experience an accretion of negative experiences – a sense of danger, disorder, pollution, persistent noise, shops closing or construction work going on around them – but tend to be very reluctant

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[33] Kuo et al 1998: 843.
[34] Oldenburg 1989.

to move away because change is very challenging and often, from many people's point of view, *ought not to be necessary*. Their feelings sometimes reflect the frustration that the changes affecting them are beyond their control. In spite of significant progress in community governance recently, the sense that many older people remain inexcusably excluded from consultative processes is widespread.

Population churn and length of residence

Research suggests that population density and higher turnover do not pose a risk, in themselves, to the personal social networks of older people. However, when people have *specific needs* that can be met by neighbouring relationships, then density and population turnover become risk factors. Very old people are at risk in this respect.[35]

Length of residence seems to have an effect on the number of local friends that older people have; but not on whether people interact with their neighbours, nor on levels of informal social control, trust and cohesion, or community participation.[36]

There seem to be two key points for older people. First, low-level recognition and occasional brief chats may be insufficient to constitute a resource which can be called on when needs arise. The level of neighbouring which some older people need could be said to be of a different order to that which is likely to satisfy other categories of resident: it probably calls for a more consistently stable local population. Secondly, the degree to which churn causes the erosion of a supportive 'community' (as opposed to the availability of a limited number of neighbour-friends) will be felt particularly keenly by many older people, who may have no means of repairing network damage.

Age diversity and mixed neighbourhoods

As neighbourhoods have become less occupied over recent generations, as families have dispersed, and occasions of routine intergenerational interaction have reduced, a climate of fear of younger people has been allowed to develop in many areas. Should this effect be countered by establishing more sheltered enclaves? What is there to be said for older people clustering together in neighbourhoods? Or does it make more sense to invest in measures to increase levels of intergenerational interaction?

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[35] Thomése and Van Tilburg 2000: 73-74.
[36] Oh 2003 :506.

Older people benefit from having others of different ages and backgrounds around them, but many no longer welcome such variety. In the present study, participants in the day centre focus group not only wanted other older people around them in their neighbourhood, several specifically said that they didn't want young people around:

'You can do without the noise of children, you don't want it.'

In this case the respondent was pleased to have grown up with all ages around her, but now she says she wants peace. 'There was more respect in the past,' she claimed.

One reason often put forward for the diminution of social networks is the lack of varied housing in neighbourhoods, and 'pathways of housing choice that give people the opportunities to adjust their housing, without having to leave the neighbourhood.'[37] Thus some interpretations of the notion of a mixed neighbourhood imply a diverse housing mix appropriate for four generations, sometimes called 'lifetime neighbourhoods.'

Older people's accounts of their own childhoods often refer to reciprocal exchanges between family members, which extended to caring for older relatives.[38] It has been noted that many young people lack the experience of caring that had been common in previous generations.[39] Younger people commonly are able to opt-out of spending time with older people. While intergenerational projects address this to some extent and can be very powerful, they can be experienced as 'special.' Perhaps what is needed is a more fundamental shift in intergenerational culture.

The rural context

Change is now probably more rapid in British rural areas than ever before, creating new pressures and tensions in local social relations. However, research suggests that neighbour relations are relatively durable in the face of significant changes to neighbourhood size or scale.[40] At the same time, the commonly-held belief that older people in rural areas of the UK have stronger networks than those living in urban areas has been dismissed.[41] If the urban trend of more individualised neighbour networks comes to apply in the rural context, where lower densities mean that people have fewer options for extending their networks, it could have serious implications for older people.

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[37] Groves et al 2003: 50.
[38] Godfrey et al 2004: 62.
[39] Nocon and Pearson 2000: 362.
[40] Berry et al 1990.
[41] Wenger 2001: 122.

Does neighbourly support require a *critical mass of co-residents who recognise each other*? Or is a small local individualised network going to be adequate for older people?

In rural areas, key resources and facilities such as hospitals, shops and transport hubs are usually less accessible than they are in urban and suburban areas. This may put more pressure on neighbours to provide informal help both in terms of care and in terms of favours such as giving lifts by car. To put that another way, it could provide willing neighbours more opportunities to offer such help, than their urban counterparts.

Mobility and transport

Access to transport has an indirect effect on local neighbourhood relations, in three main ways. First, residents with easy access to private transport often use it to travel away from their neighbourhood for long periods. Thus neighbourhoods are to some extent abandoned to those who lead more localised lives - typically young, unemployed, disabled, and older people.[42]

Secondly, policy has largely failed to limit the negative effects of increased use of private transport on neighbourhoods. Social contacts between neighbours are likely to atrophy where traffic dominates the streets[43] and sprawl reduces the occasions for walking.[44]

Thirdly, for older people, adequate access to private or public transport offers opportunities to maintain extra-local social networks and can contribute greatly to levels of confidence, which in turn can help to maintain *local* social networks.

Furthermore, public transport itself seems to function as a kind of mobile 'third place,' where reassuring conversations take place. Transport is often essential to give people *access to supportive social networks*. A useful distinction has been made between 'serious' and 'discretionary' travel:

'While "serious" transport requirements may be provided for by alternative means, the "discretionary" trips that contribute significantly to the quality of life may be lost when private transport is unavailable.'[45]

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[42] Connolly 2006.
[43] Appleyard et al 1981.
[44] Freeman 2001.
[45] Davey 2007: 49.

Issues for Age Concerns

The review sought to bring some order to a wide range of issues about older people's local social connections. Several issues have arisen which merit attention by both policy makers and Age Concerns. These are offered here.

1. The local context is often crucial for children and for older people. Local policies - for instance in the provision of amenities or the design of streets – which are not child-friendly or older-person friendly, are unlikely to be conducive to neighbourliness. Policies that are neighbourhood-unfriendly will affect older people disproportionately. We need to explore ways of ensuring that more residents of all ages feel able to occupy their own neighbourhoods consistently. It's also important that older people feel empowered to participate in the decision-making processes that affect them locally, and are supported in contributing to local governance.

2. More creative thought needs to be given to the ways in which older people can be *needed* in **neighbourhood roles**, for example in collecting and accompanying children, in monitoring the environment, in being available to collect deliveries when a householder is out and so on. Appropriate roles will be those which support reciprocity and interdependence. There is clear potential here to involve older people in the uptake and use of online neighbourhood networks, to compensate for the decline of other communication channels.

3. Increased emphasis is needed on the principle of **interdependence**, as a way of addressing the paradox of being cared-for and not being a burden. How do we avoid becoming a society in which older people suffer exclusion because of perceived imbalances of reciprocity? Part of the answer lies in ensuring that older people and young people are less unaccustomed to each others' presence. From this it would be possible to promote higher levels of informal, non-intensive caring among young people. However, **intergenerational interaction** should not be seen solely as the subject of special projects: we need to find ways of recovering it as a cultural norm.

4. As society has diversified, numerous tensions have emerged, and many of these touch on the lives of older people. Demographic changes, especially high levels of immigration related to population turnover in their localities, leave many people bewildered and feeling isolated. Often older people conscientiously seek to establish connections with any newcomer, but may face a genuine barrier where there is little common language: 'they don't understand English, where do you start?'

With visible **differences of culture** and perhaps a lack of knowledge about behaviours where they may risk causing offence, it is understandable if people from the host community sometimes withdraw. In practice, there are two types of initiative which are likely to succeed: *individual* connections around some common topic such as music, sport or food (sharing or exchanging baked food for example); and *collective* activities such as street parties which create a welcoming but undemanding context for encounters.

There seems to be no reason why **the welcome gesture for new neighbours** should not be formalised to some degree, with appropriate local media campaigns, particularly with regard to asylum-seekers and refugees who are non-voluntary newcomers. This could emerge as part of the role of street reps, currently being developed in various neighbourhood management and housing market renewal pathfinder areas. Another suggestion is the 'welcome walkabout' for new neighbours, which could provide a role for older residents and also bring established residents together.

5. Environmental barriers to neighbourliness do exist, and efforts to address these should continue: it's important that neighbourliness should not be designed-out. All neighbourhoods need neutral or 'third' spaces – community centres; micro-parks; benches; street corners that are clean and safe to stand and chat; bus stops; the ground floor lobby area and dedicated community rooms in a tower block; coffee shops, libraries and post offices – places that are safe for lingering or resting, which are 'escapable,' but where people may be more prepared to hover in conversation, and connections with others can be lightly refreshed and maintained.

6. Policy makers and practitioners have to find new solutions to the need for **informal support** for older people in a context where personal social networks have become stronger and local ties have become weaker; where neighbouring is more likely to be discretionary than constantly rehearsed; and where formal services are already under great pressure with an ageing and increasingly unhealthy population. Age Concerns need to promote the importance of light-touch support for small, independent informal and semi-formal groups.[46] This applies especially to local companionship groups, which may overlap, rise and fall, and at times behave in exclusive or even undemocratic ways, but which play a critical role in enabling connections that enhance older people's quality of life. Such groups allow social relations to flourish, while formal systems can stifle them. The first principles for Age Concerns to press with local authorities are: to be aware of such groups and recognise their significance; and to avoid any policy that might damage them.

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[46] Taylor et al 2007.

7. The role of **community development** applies to all of the issues above. Community development approaches can contribute to the promotion of welcoming neighbourhoods that are older-person friendly, in which older people are empowered to contribute their experience and opinions. They can help to lubricate communication channels and encourage interdependence; work to normalise intergenerational interaction and the understanding of living with difference; promote safe, welcoming, inclusive third places that stimulate community activity; and advocate for informal social relations and groups that give rise to neighbourly support.

How to get further information

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Resources

A Guide to Community Development, Age Concern England.
Available on *acknowledge* at: http://10.1.1.14/ace/Home/ACE/ROSD/
Research&Development/RDU_InvolvingOlderPeople.asp

Neighbourliness, Smith Institute.
Available at: http://www.smith-institute.org.uk/pdfs/neighbourliness.pdf

Toolkit and guidelines for consultation with older people,
The Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths University.
Available at: http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/mobilising-knowledge-final-
report.pdf

**The neighbourhoods blog: neighbourhoods, neighbourliness, social
capital and life at local level**.
Also contains useful links. http://neighbourhoods.typepad.com/

Communities and local government website
Communities and neighbourhoods pages at:
http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/

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