



Older People and Neighbouring: The Role of Street Parties in Promoting Community Cohesion

A Streets Alive Briefing



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Summary

Streets Alive's research has shown that street parties provide a rare opportunity for all generations to meet in their street for a day. These modest and very British events uniquely ensure that the full range of backgrounds in a community meet as they are right outside residents' doors.

Effective examples for residents to engage all generations of their neighbours have been identified.

Streets Alive proposes that these most powerful of small community events can also increasingly provide a platform for the new generation of active older residents to take a leading role in building socially integrated neighbourhoods.



Street parties and community cohesion

Street parties are unusual occasions that accentuate the ordinary in life in Britain's streets. They are a recognised part of British culture and a positive community-building activity. They give people a reason to come together semi-formally, and they provoke reflection about the contrast with the everyday.

Streets Alive has found that street parties are invariably successful as social occasions which promote community cohesion. They are inexpensive, resident-led, and can be shown to work for all generations.

They offer a relatively rare opportunity for intergenerational contact at neighbourhood level, and thus reflect and expose intergenerational issues.

The events require a genuine collective effort of organisation and usually prepare a fertile soil for neighbourly relations to flourish afterwards.

Street parties are also a good opportunity for active retired residents to take a more proactive role in building their community.



This briefing is based on Streets Alive's 7 years' experience and specifically on material gathered from interviews and surveys conducted by Streets Alive after street parties in various parts of England in summer 2007, together with material from 16 street parties previously held in 2005 in Easton, Bristol.

This work is part of Streets Alive's promotion of streets as social spaces, encouraging culturally thriving communities through traffic-free events. In addition to street parties, we promote larger community events and town centre 'car free days'.

This briefing is a collaboration with Kevin Harris of Local Level, drawing on his recently published review, *Neighbouring and Older People*. The research and briefing has been supported by the Social Change programme of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Street parties are defined here as small events for residents only, without external publicity, often in a single street: they are now often held anytime rather than just during national celebrations.

- Street parties bring people together**

The survey results show that 84% of respondents thought that street parties bring together residents of different backgrounds either 'a fair amount' (45%) or 'a lot' (39%). Respondents met on average between 7 and 8 neighbours 'for the first time' or 'got to know them better'. These findings alone demonstrate the opportunity that street parties present for integrating communities and promoting social cohesion, and justify more policy and practice attention than tends to be afforded. Respondents noted:

'We look out for our neighbours and are like a mini-community with people from different countries, and if you didn't get on well with different people from all walks of life, your life would be miserable.'

'People from all over the world attended.'

'The parties have brought everyone together. You get to know everybody, we all socialised.'

It is clear that street parties are a simple activity for bringing people together to appreciate national and ethnic diversity. Similarly, people of different generations can share positive experiences through such events. Nonetheless, our work suggests that differences in values *between generations* can emerge that may be at least as significant as those between ethnic and national backgrounds.



- Street parties can make rare things happen**

An organised outdoor event in the neighbourhood can have surprising consequences, as it legitimises conversations that allow residents to discover common interests:

'I introduced two people last week who had both lived in the street for 30 years and did not know each other – in their eighties.'

Key to the success of the events is that never less than 50% and often as high as 80% of households participate. This is due to the fact that they are held right outside people's houses. There is no question that everyone is 'invited'. Indeed, attendance is to some extent expected and so residents have to decide *not* to attend. The effect is that the whole diversity of a street is out for all to meet. In our increasingly segmented society, street parties are a rare multi-generational event.

Bringing about a striking visual transformation to people's immediate environment - an empty street without cars, albeit temporarily, also allows things to happen that aren't usually possible:

'It's great to see young people playing in the street without worrying about traffic. An opportunity to mingle without parents needing to take them out somewhere.'



- **Street parties establish a platform for neighbouring**

These modest but powerful events provide an important platform to strengthen neighbourliness. Neighbourliness is about an accretion of small, apparently trivial acts of recognition in the neighbourhood; a nod, wave or a 'good morning'. It depends on opportunities to establish the grounds of the simple commonality of living in the street. These provide the grounds on which practical and social support can be built, as well as a background sense of belonging.

Residents we spoke to were clear about the perceived benefits of their street parties for subsequent interaction:

'I introduced myself to some of my elderly neighbours and even though they didn't join in, we made contact.'

'It's nice to be able to say hello to more people.'

'I feel like I could knock on a neighbour's door if I needed to.'

'I don't feel as if I'm living among strangers.'

Neighbouring and older people

The need to provide more opportunities for interaction between neighbours should not be underestimated. Kevin Harris's review noted that for many older people, neighbourliness is now typically experienced 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*.

This reflects widespread assumptions that half a century ago, people were more neighbourly - views often supported by frequent reference to doors never being locked, children always playing in the street, and fellow residents constantly exchanging goods and favours. Where this culture of neighbouring flourished, it did so under certain social conditions which on the whole no longer prevail. A range of transformations - such as increased use of cars, greater relative wealth and mobility, systematic state welfare, and privatised leisure - have to some extent eroded neighbourly support networks.

For many older people, the effect of these transformations can be critical. 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 is 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.



Streets Alive believes that one way in which this trend can be actively and consciously countered is through organising neighbours' events such as street parties. This is a key reason for our efforts in promoting them as a regular part of the country's social calendar. Because they stimulate connections between older people and their neighbours, street parties have an important role to play in restoring healthy levels of interaction.



That said, it should be noted that the nature and quality of neighbouring varies widely, particularly between generations and social classes. Older people sometimes view relations with neighbours in a more formal way, holding a modest but notable distance which emphasises respect for privacy. Younger generations can experience this tighter personal space as unfriendly and contrary to their more liberal and open values.

In the neighbourhood

The social composition of most neighbourhoods is more heterogeneous than it would have been in the childhoods of older residents. Furthermore, the local built and green environment, and its internal arrangements such as housing tenure, can have a strong influence on the sense of community.

Other factors such as relative wealth, mobility, long and diverse working hours can reduce the amount of time people spend in their neighbourhoods. In particular, cars make neighbourly interaction difficult. For example, one respondent said:

'Because there are traffic problems - speeding through-traffic - there's a separation between the opposite sides of the street.'

Indeed, just the domination of parked vehicles can restrict movement in the street and constitute a psychological block to interaction. The street is seen as belonging to cars, not people. In addition, car-owning residents often get directly into their vehicle outside their home and so are less likely to encounter their neighbours. Only at a street party, residents have the rare chance to use their traffic-free street as a social space.

Our experience suggests that there can be a substantial generation gap in attitudes to the street. Older residents often view the street only as a highway, whereas younger generations tend to feel no inhibition in using it socially for a day.

All these influences serve to constrain social interaction, and they are likely to have their most negative impact on children and older people, whose lives are usually based more around the home and neighbourhood.

Housing tenure is another case in point. We have found that people are sensitive to the possibility that renters are less likely to commit to local social relationships:

'People are moved in for a short time, who can create a "one family crime wave." Such people often have no intention of mingling with neighbours.'

'Most renters stay six months or two years and then they are gone. You don't really get to know people like you used to. Everybody was in the street before, until the day they died. They stayed there forever.'

This raises questions about attitudes and the under-explored potential for street parties or other neighbours' events in social housing contexts. But while such factors can affect the organisation of a street party, they make its success all the more valuable and significant for those who experience a dearth of social ties.

In certain circumstances, as paid workers in the community know well, adversity can stimulate cohesion. Some of our respondents seemed to suggest that their street party helped people to unite in the face of threats of disorder and violence:

'People have been intimidated by a few antisocial incidents in recent years, they've inhibited friendliness. Talking with each other helps but takes time.'

Planning and preparing the event

A successful street party requires some but not onerous planning. However, organising residents are volunteers, and involving vulnerable older people can call for extra effort on their part. Their role is demanding and they often do just enough to make the event happen, especially the first time around.

In many cases, there is initial uncertainty about whether the event will happen at all, so some residents can be wary of committing to it, especially older people. For the organisers the involvement of older or vulnerable people amounts to extra work, so their participation can be seen as a bonus rather than a basic requirement.

Although many older people do join in more can be done to include those that are hesitant:

'Seats. More and better ones. Being pro-active in encouraging them. Also plan activities for them. Perhaps ballroom dancing. Need to find out what they want to do.'

The preparation stage is a critical time to get things right. One respondent told us:

'In the second year we had a team specially who invited older people, door knocking and "hosting" them, getting seats, chatting with them and so on. This was done because of what we learned in the first year.'

Further recommendations for involving *all* residents in street parties are included below.

Food and drink

Enjoying food together is central to street parties and can help ensure that they are inclusive intergenerational occasions.

'The cooking element brings together different ages.'

'There was lots of foods from different homes. And lots of chat about this.'

Decisions about who prepares what food, and how much, can be the subject of discussion in advance. People usually bring food to share in a buffet style, with a barbecue often acting as the hot food focus. Some street parties, however, have a more formal sit down meal.



For some older people who may be hesitant to attend a street party, them offering food is a reassuring option which means they have contributed. This is one of the ways in which the street party can enhance interaction even where there's limited involvement.

'One older woman who has lived all her life there donated food and photos, but did not actually attend on the day.'

There is also an ethnic dimension to the selection, preparation and consumption of food, which in street parties can contribute to interaction and the celebration of diversity. As one respondent said:

'People are proud of their food, saying "do you know how to eat it?"'

Holding a tea party, especially with a cake competition, can be particularly attractive to older residents, and indeed everyone.



Residents over 70 often expect street parties to mainly take the form of a tea party for children, as this has previously been the history of the events held for the Queen's Jubilees and other national celebrations. This can be a confusion factor and they are sometimes known to decline from participation for this reason.

Likewise expectations about drinking vary. Many older people tend to expect tea in the afternoon; others anticipate alcohol in the evening or even throughout the day, unless their faith or health forbids it. The association of alcohol with the loosening of inhibitions can be encouraging or threatening, or both; but either way it implies to some that the sense of order might not constrain behaviour throughout the event.

Activities and games

Organised games can be an engaging feature of street parties. Quiz style, physical or social games that involve different generations depend on a predictable degree of involvement of older people. Since some older vulnerable people, are uncomfortable with surprises, it can make a difference to engage them beforehand in discussing what kinds of game they might be interested to join; or to let them know what games are proposed so that they can watch.

Asking older people to be judges and prize-givers for games and competitions is a valuable way of promoting a basic level of respectful contact. One street had the youngest person offering a gift to the eldest.

Music and dance

There is always some form of music at street parties, but it also has enormous power to divide people. Decisions about the variety of music, its volume, whether there is live music, and the time of day or night when it is played, can make a huge difference to the quality of older people's experience.

Dancing will have been central to the social lives of many older people. Their role in a street party can be boosted by providing appropriate music, willing dance partners and a set time. It could be a chance to show off their skills and to teach others: this is an important consideration in an age where many older people lack respected social roles.



Including Older People

This review has considered older people's participation in street parties in relation to their frequent lack of integration in their neighbourhoods.

'If they know they can trust people and get to know them, they will come out in force. If they don't know you, the shutter comes down, and that's that.'

One implication in the material we collected is that some older people may exclude themselves from street parties, in spite of their being a valued opportunity for meeting neighbours. It is important to try to understand the reasons why that might be happening. Reasons can include different attitudes towards the occupation of public space; a sense of resignation after living in a street and seeing people move in and out again; and the perception that the events are just for

children or should be associated with royal celebrations.

But where older people do not participate, it does not imply that this somehow denotes any kind of social crisis. There are three points to note.

Firstly, if younger generations fail appropriately to engage with older people – understanding the nuances of invitation, activities and attention to detail on their behalf – then they may contribute to a diminution in their quality of life. This matters particularly because for many older people, as they become less mobile and more localised, the neighbourhood is the dominant arena of everyday life: any deterioration of relations within that arena will be the more keenly felt.

Secondly, the objective is not to engage older people in attending something against their will: the objective should be to have an impact on the general sense of neighbourliness and social cohesion. It is from that reinforced sense of community that appropriate ongoing potentially mutual support as fellow-residents can emerge. Of course, it will be far easier to effect that support if older people attend the event. But if they do not attend, neighbourliness can still be enhanced, and in the normal course of things we can still expect the benefits to extend to the older residents.

'The contact from the planning of the event has meant we have had more contact with older neighbours – even the ones that did not come.'

And thirdly, we should be wary of characterising older people as if they were necessarily just the recipients of benefit from the efforts of others. Most older people would prefer social relations based on *interdependence*, not dependence: it follows that attention should be paid to what they themselves can contribute, and to facilitating roles for them where possible. If there is no apparent role, we should not be surprised if they prefer not to participate.

'Quite a few were reluctant to join in, in spite of being actively invited. Some have donated things even though they did not come.'

The emerging active older generation

Many street parties are currently initiated by younger women with children. On the other hand, our ageing society includes an increasing proportion of still active and experienced retired residents with time on their hands. It is possible that this emerging generation of older people will take a more proactive lead in building neighbourliness. Street parties and other neighbours' activities are excellent opportunities for them.

Streets Alive is finding that people in their fifties and sixties are starting to reinvent street parties. Using their experience taking part in the many memorable street parties in 1977 for the Queen's Silver Jubilee, this group of 'younger old' could be poised to play a more active role in strengthening neighbourliness around the country.

Streets Alive

Streets Alive provides training for all forms of paid workers actively promoting social cohesion in communities in how to facilitate residents to hold street parties, and including meeting the needs of older people in this context. In addition, we provide support directly to residents planning their own event through our resource site www.streetparty.org.uk.

Contacts

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