

Conversations on Connected Communities

Summary Report

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1. Introduction

1.1 The context

Ageing Better's strategy sets out Connected Communities as a priority goal and as places "where social relationships flourish, making it easier to build and maintain close connections as well as wider everyday contact".¹ Connected communities are described as being fundamental to the quality of later lives, and:

- encourage and support people to get out and about and remain active;
- are inclusive across generations and accessible for people as they get older; and
- provide opportunities for people to get involved in their community.

By 2030, the Ageing Better wishes to see an increase in the proportion of people aged 50 and over who report they feel they strongly belong to their neighbourhood.

To achieve this, more local areas need to recognise the strategic importance of creating places that support people to age well, with a more integrated approach to social provision and physical infrastructure, including planning and transport. To this end, Ageing Better will:

- encourage and support more places to become age-friendly by growing the UK Network of Age-friendly Communities to critical mass;
- broker collaborations across social and physical infrastructure to support age-friendly transport, planning and design;
- influence funders and commissioners to develop and test more accessible and inclusive new approaches to community participation, especially support for informal, community led activities;
- directly stimulate new approaches to enable lifelong participation and enable people to access a wider range of opportunities; and
- identify and evaluate existing approaches to creating connected communities, especially informal opportunities for participation, spread the learning and encourage others to replicate what works and adopt good practice.

1.2 The project

The project sits in the context of Ageing Better's new strategy, and was designed to complement existing work on Community Contributions, Age-Friendly Communities, Digital Inclusion, and evaluation of the Leeds Neighbourhood Networks; work on the associations between the built environment and social fabric of communities; and work on transport and mobility.

This project focused on accessible and inclusive opportunities for people to participate in communities as they age. It aimed to look beyond volunteering, to things like community-led activities; group-based activities; neighbourliness and kindness – the social fabric of communities. The work is primarily concerned with place based communities and is also concerned with what (if anything) is particular to 'ageing', what concerns those aged in their 50-60s, the possibilities of intergenerational or multi-generational work, and those at risk of missing out of a good later life.

¹ See <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-07/Ageing-Better-Transforming-Later-Lives.pdf>

The aims of the project were to:

- gain a better understanding of the landscape in this area – including key stakeholders, organisations, thought leadership, and practical activities happening in communities;
- use this scoping work to develop and refine an Ageing Better Connected Communities programme; and
- to develop ideas and options within this programmes through which Ageing Better can add value.

1.3 Method

The Connected Communities scoping project was based on 64 stakeholder interviews and a review of recent relevant grey literature. Content from workshops with other external stakeholders was also integrated into the report. Interviewees included senior people from public sector and third sector organisations concerned with community and ageing agendas; managers and frontline practitioners on community and ageing programmes; expert practitioners in community-based physical development; and think tank staff and consultancy/independent researchers with interests in community and ageing.

1.4 About this report

This summary report outlines the main topics covered in the stakeholder interviews, and concludes with topline reflections on the overarching themes and issues to have emerged from the work. It is intended as a working paper to act as a stimulus for reflecting on and shaping a Connected Communities programme of work for Ageing Better. Ageing Better welcomes feedback on the themes and possibilities to emerge through this scoping project as it develops its Connected Communities programme.

2. Ageing in connected communities

The majority of stakeholder opinions came down against an age-specific approach to connected communities. While there was a recognition that life events and psychosocial needs tended to change over the lifecourse (and need to be attended to), there was a more fundamental view that ‘what’s good for old is good for all’, and that a focus on age perpetuates silo-working and silo-ed groups within communities.

Transition points were put forward as “a better organising principle than age”, particularly as “people don’t see selves as ageing unless they experience a crisis they perceive as relating to later life.” Addressing the shocks to social connectivity that can occur through bereavement, retirement, long-term conditions, changes in mobility, divorce, and moving home, for example, provides a means of identifying people at risk of social disconnection and provides a focus for connected communities work in exploring how best to find, support, and (re-)integrate people into their local communities. However, supporting people through transitions needs ‘buffering’ social capital, built ahead of the life event, that can be mobilised when difficulties arise. As growing this social capital takes time (years), the job of connected communities to support ageing was viewed as growing thick, inclusive social fabric in communities.

Interviewees from different sectors thought that without addressing ageism in a significant way, a connected community strategy risks being undermined. Ageism was described as widespread, largely socially tolerated, with significant and detrimental effects on outcomes in later life, “clumping older people together in tired, lazy ways as one unattractive mass of problems”.

3. Intergenerational connection

While contact between older and younger people was deemed important for both parties, intergenerational work seemed mostly ad hoc rather than strategic, and concentrated on isolated 'older older' people. A more multi-generational approach could be more beneficial – or more widely, connected communities that foster a diversity of connections and collaboration that reflect many different aspects of identity, not just age. There was a strong view that intergenerational contact should be reciprocal – each learning or giving and receiving something from the other.

The majority of interviewees thought that current relationships between older and younger generations in the UK were somewhat toxic, built on a foundation of ageism and deepened through austerity, public expenditure/service priorities, Brexit, and digital divides. A minority thought that these divides existed more in the abstract than in the social reality of people's local lives and were created or amplified by media reporting.

Libraries were cited as a rare common space used by both young and old and as a possible site for intergenerational exchange. They are "one of the few safe spaces, and one of few places you don't need to 'pay or pray' – they're respected, positive spaces with a common sense of ownership. People feel they have permission to go there and belong there".

4. 50s and 60s

Interviewees were asked about their views on a Connected Communities programme that focused on people in their 50s and 60s (to represent the idea of focusing, preventatively, on people looking ahead and transitioning to later life). The idea of connected communities that can support people in life transitions emerged again when considering this cohort of people, including divorce, empty nest (children leaving home having been born to older parents and having stayed in the family home longer than previous generations), menopause, and retirement (alongside other transitions/life events that challenge identity and elevate a risk of loneliness, such as bereavement, or a change in health and/or mobility). Connected communities need to build social support and information networks ahead of crisis points so that "people don't need to think about where to go and what to do at a difficult time, and don't rely on services if they don't need to."

Interviewees familiar with ageing issues strongly supported the idea of raising awareness of the need to plan ahead for their social wellbeing in later life – a 'social pension'. This includes helping people to create meaningful roots and stakes in their local communities and providing opportunities for people to come together to discuss, co-design and enact their future plans, for example on co-housing initiatives.

While transitioning out of work raises challenges around identity, loss and financial security, there was also a recognition that the nearly/newly retired can often look forward to the next chapter of their life, and have an outward-facing energy that can be supported. A connected community strategy might help catalyse this energy by engaging through employers, pension mechanisms, and GPs (in the form of a social health check, for example).

5. What is a Connected Community?

5.1 Characteristics

The descriptions of a connected community given by interviews focused strongly on psychosocial characteristics and relationships. Trust, belonging, and social purpose were fundamental and might collectively be described as active citizenship, meaning all people participate in the rights, roles and responsibilities of a connected community.

The literature reviewed for this paper identified similar factors, and added the need for sufficient time, commitment and clarity of focus, along with a need to work at different system levels, supported by strategic leadership. The importance of developing trustful, open relationships in place as the bedrock of culture change and sustainability were also highlighted as key features of place-based approaches.

In exploring wider civil society literature, key themes of tolerance and non-discrimination (inclusion), belonging and connectedness, trust, kindness, and change-oriented action (shared purpose) were identified. Connected communities of place and interest were described as needing to be adaptive systems where people and organisations can come together and learn about each other and about change-making.

5.2 Interdependence of communities and state actors

While interviewees broadly agreed that a connected community should focus on the social fabric of a place, the importance of acknowledging the interdependence between different types of stakeholders was also emphasised. Statutory services and the behaviour of public servants within them can promote the growth of connected communities, but this social contagion effect can also work in reverse (i.e. it can undermine connected communities). Current training in many public service disciplines often “over-professionalises, minimises human interaction, pathologises people, and is overly concerned with efficiency and data confidentiality/management. Developing relational approaches is deemed too ordinary to focus on and is assumed to exist as foundational in services, but it doesn’t to any great degree.” The development of more relational, person-centred, coproductive services was viewed as being particularly important for older people who can often feel disempowered. The rollout of social prescribing and the introduction of 1,000 new ‘link workers’ by 2020-21 (with more to follow) prompts the question of how they will be trained and embedded in local communities in ways that help them to understand local social assets and thicken local social fabric, especially for older people who may be the focus of much social prescribing.

Much of the above is captured by The Relationships Project.² The work is based on the argument that “relational poverty” has become widespread and acute, principally through technology, ideology, and current managerial models. The work is exploring what ‘our place’ would be like if relationships were central, if they were the organising principle across the multiple domains local life. Services, for example, should not be commissioned unless they can demonstrate how they can provide and develop (directly and indirectly) the relationships that people need, maximise people’s own contributions, and more widely contribute to the “warm web” of networks that should characterise a connected community. Such an approach has to be a conscious, explicit choice and practised to become habituated and enculturated.

² See <https://shiftdesign.org/portfolio/the-relationships-project/>

5.3 Barriers and challenges to Connected Communities

A number of barriers and challenges to developing connected communities were identified:

Areas that have highly **transient populations** make establishing deep, long-lasting ties between people more difficult (e.g. typically urban areas, and areas with large student populations).

Some people **choose not to participate** in community life, and wish to maintain, prioritise and protect their private sphere. Areas with large commuter populations and those with gated communities and housing developments in towns and cities were cited as examples of where this is problematic to the idea of an inclusive connected community.

Common rhythms of life are disrupted, diminishing or removing the opportunity for social interaction. Drivers of this disruption include the labour market (gig economy, zero hours contract working, multiple jobs); lifestyle choices and use of social/free time; and caring responsibilities.

It can take a significant amount of **time and sustained effort/resources** to affect the social fabric of a place. Interviewees across different types of organisations were critical of the scale of the shift in funding from community development work to specific project funding.

Communities and networks are not necessarily inclusive, socially productive or supportive of health and wellbeing (salutogenic). Communities house and are arenas for conflict and tension; social networks can be restrictive and restricted, reinforcing problematic dynamics. A critical, rather than rose-tinted, perspective is required in thinking about community, particularly in thinking about ageism and the way in which community networks and dynamics might reinforce stereotypes, feelings of disempowerment, and exclusion.

Bad design of the built environment. Examples include road layout (including the locations of crossing and transport connections) that disconnect people from each other and from local facilities; poor lighting, lines of site and natural surveillance; and the accessibility of community/public spaces. Accessibility extends beyond physical disability and should include designing spaces and building for 'neuro-divergent' people (such as those with dementia or autism), with attention to spatial characteristics (including lighting and distractions), way finding, and safeguarding.

The shift in public services becoming '**digital by default**' was described as potentially silo-ing people into online spaces. Interviewees across different sectors were concerned by the erosion of social contact in a digital by default model, and by the erosion of secondary effects and opportunities that such social contact has beyond the delivery of the particular service.

Austerity and cuts to public services mean the role of the state (or state-funded) services/activities in connecting people and providing common means to connect and relate is diminished. In response, strong local leadership is required that can make the case for investing in the social fabric of communities, with a wide portfolio of activities (supported by micro-funding as well as larger scale investment), with some that are age-specific for older people and some that are open/generic and age inclusive.

6. Social fabric

6.1 A focus on social fabric

Interviewees identified and reflected on the concept of social fabric as a specific dimension of connected communities. On the whole, interviewees agreed that a focus on social fabric would be value-adding: institutions tend to think/act from the perspective that “progress, impact, and innovation comes from ‘better programmes’” and therefore jump to institutional responses, but this view assumes and relies on a strong social fabric to work. Social fabric is “foundational – areas with no trust, and few assets and animateurs need to build this bedrock as a prerequisite”. Simple additions like warm welcomes, proactive door-knocking, encouraging people to bring friends, family and neighbours to activities, and learning and using people’s names were generally thought to be easy wins but underused. Kindness was described as a base note of social fabric that should permeate everything in order to create a widespread culture of kindness.

6.2 Threats to the social fabric

Interviewees identified many and diverse barriers and threats to an inclusive and socially productive social fabric. Generally speaking, the social fabric is particularly vulnerable to becoming weakened during rapid social change. Many interviewees (from different stakeholder groups) referenced Brexit as risking/prompting a major rupture in the social fabric and deepening political and social divides that intersect with age divides.

At the institutional level, services, third sector organisations and high streets have experienced significant change in a short period of time, with large gaps in social infrastructure appearing, and a lack of attention paid to the social fabric.

7. Hubs in connected communities

The importance of ‘local hubs’ was emphasised as a key component and enabler of a connected community. ‘Hubs’ were defined in a range of ways and included physical space/buildings such as community centres and libraries, anchor institutions such as development trusts, widely used local shops, local spaces (such as parks), and key people/roles that are highly visible and networked in communities. Hubs enable people to connect, and have the potential to share information, resources, support or opportunity between people and/or organisations. Most emphasised the need for a diversity of accessible places, some age-specific, some age-inclusive, that reflect the multiple identities and interests of local people. There was a suggestion that the last decade of austerity has diminished the stock and accessibility of community hubs: infrastructure that supports relationships is ‘wearing away’ through a shrinking public service offer, decline of high streets, closure and neglect of local facilities, and growing privatisation of the public realm.

Similarly, there was perceived to be “fewer people and organisations in communities with a ‘big picture’ who can span networks and issues”, and fewer ‘neighbourhood network weavers’ such as “wardens, estate officers, locally based housing support officers, and regular maintenance/gardening people. Libraries were often mentioned as a key local hub. A connected community needs to “think creatively to unlock the many existing spaces in communities”, particularly in ways that reflect local priorities and identities.

8. Equalities and diversity

Those identified as most at risk from being disconnected from their communities as they age include:

Older people from **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities**, which were mentioned by a cross-section of participants. Issues raised include: new generations of BAME older people who are experiencing a range of (multiple) long-term conditions in greater numbers; changing norms of close family ties and support within some communities; and questions as to whether policy, services, spaces and activities in communities are culturally sensitive or otherwise inclusive enough for older people from BAME communities.

Rural communities were described as presenting particular challenges for maintaining connections as people age due to lack of facilities, infrastructure, transport, critical mass of people, mobility issues, and lack of reliable, high speed broadband. There is a 'rural premium' on building connected communities – greater distances and thinner infrastructure mean it takes more time and costs more to participate and deliver services.

Many interviewees pointed to **residents of care homes and sheltered housing** as a group with a lack of bridges to and from their local communities. Relatedly, **older people with mental health problems and/or learning disabilities** were thought to be at particular risk of disconnection as there is a "high degree of institutionalisation" within this group. People with **physical and sensory disabilities** may also face increased risk in becoming disconnected to their communities as they age.

Carers were cited as a group likely to experience an increased risk of disconnection as they age, as becoming a carer is an established risk factor of loneliness.

People who work in the informal economy were mentioned as being at risk of disconnection as they age: as they stop working, there was a perceived risk that their social and information networks may diminish, with potential risks of financial insecurity adding to the risk of isolation in later life.

Older men were cited as a demographic at risk of disconnection and described by some interviewees as "tricky to engage". Men's Sheds were a commonly cited and well-regarded initiative to engage this group and there was a general sense that activity-based engagement worked better for this group. However, there was a recognition that Men's Sheds do not work for all and that diverse opportunities were required to reflect a diversity of identities and interests.

Older people who live in **highly transient communities** were thought of as a potential group at risk of disconnection in later life, picking up one of the barriers to connected communities described earlier in this summary report.

Other groups cited as being potentially at risk of disconnection in communities in later life include **LGBTQ older people** and older people in **recovery from substance misuse**. However, no further reflection or detail was added about these groups as they were largely outside the direct experience and expertise of interviewees. Older people **without sufficient IT/digital skills** were also perceived to be at greater risk of disconnection.

While the above outlines groups that potentially face greater challenges to staying connected in communities as they age, people at greatest risk may be those that span different groups. This suggests a focus on **intersectionality** and on the '**whole person**'. More generally, alleviating **poverty and healthy inequalities** were identified by most people as fundamental to improving the experience of ageing.

9. Built environment and transport

An inclusive social fabric requires an inclusive physical fabric – one that is clean, welcoming, accessible, and comfortable. There was a strong sense that the development of the public realm has predominantly reflected the needs of different identity groups (creating separate spaces for young people and older people, for example), while others pointed to an encroaching privatisation of the public realm and an increase in hostile/defensive architecture in public spaces that depleted a sense of common place and belonging across all parts of a community. In response, there was a need to deliberately (re-)design in public spaces and places, amenities and street furniture that invited and enabled people to linger, bump into each other, interact and belong.

Transport is key to a connected community, and particularly so in rural areas where transport is a “major barrier”. A connected community needs to be “accessible from the doorstep”. Transport not only helps people to get out, but is a catalyst, “increasing confidence and widening perceptions of what people think they can do.” Several areas described ways in which they had tried to coordinate and maximise the use of local transport provision. For example, commissioners of a local service made specific requirements in tender documentation to incentivise local consortium based approaches that could share access to new minibuses and make better, shared use of existing provision (pooled as a local fleet with use coordinated across a number of local organisations). One new service includes volunteer drivers and volunteer transport buddies to increase local capacity in ways that thicken the local social fabric and relationships between local people. The time spent by people making journeys on community transport is also recognised as valuable time in which people can build confidence and relationships obliquely. In another area, community transport is being fashioned as a collaborative offer across CCGs and third sector organisations, with different components and a coordinating IT/call service sat across the top (like a ‘community Uber scheme’).

10. Economies of connected communities

A small set of responses, mainly from local government stakeholders, concern the role of economic activity and development in connected communities. The most commonly made points were around the detrimental impact of declining high streets having a negatively effect on local pride in place and sense of belonging, perhaps “particularly for older people”. Aspects of the high street offer that have experienced growth in recent years have centred on “the experience economy” – pubs, bars, health and beauty services, and cafés, for example, have all seen an upturn but arguably focus on younger consumers. There has been significant growth in pubs and bars in city centres like Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds, all of which have large student populations. One interviewee expressed the view that while “cities are getting younger, towns are getting older”, exacerbating the impact of declining towns on older people.

There was some recent experiences of seeing more engagement in local renewal programmes from large shopping centre owners and retail outlet owners (often large pension funds) as pressure to generate financial returns on investments increases. An opportunity for a ‘new localism’ may be emerging to offer new partnerships and ways of working to meet local socio-economic challenges. There was also a reported increase in interest in community businesses, with older people most commonly the instigators of these businesses.

11. Conclusions

11.1 Headline themes and issues

Firstly, the dominant theme to emerge from the project was the need and desire for a **relational approach** to communities, ageing, and public services (or more widely, the use of public money). This theme had multiple layers: it reflected a desire to equalise (or up-end) power dynamics between citizens/communities and the state; and it combined a network perspective on the structure of community relationships and the availability and access of support this can afford, with the quality of those relationships beyond their simple existence and transactional exchanges.

Places need to become relational, with relationships the central theme and organising principle. This theme runs through from the macro to the micro of place. The project found calls to empower and resource communities and 'communitise' public services, with their primary purpose the creation, maintenance, and growth of relationships with family, friends and neighbours. Leadership was not just about setting a strong vision that related to the identity, values, culture and heritage of place, but was also about an open, honest, two-way dialogue and coproduction with citizens. At the micro level, frontline practitioners and active citizens need capacity-building, facilitative, network weaving skills, allied to empathy and kindness to bring inclusive connected communities into being. These approaches and skills help to shape the social fabric, and reflect the psychosocial properties of connected communities described by the interviewees.

The second main theme was that of **social divides**. Most relevantly to this project, intergenerational divides and ageism were highlighted as significant issues undermining inclusion of older people. Racial cohesion and the differential experiences of older people from BAME communities, the lack of attention to race issues in public policy, and the challenges of new generations of older BAME people were all raised as issues across the interviews and grey literature. Inequality was also highlighted as a divide which impacts on ageing well, and was often situated alongside the wider context of political divides in the UK, surfaced most recently and sharply through Brexit. There was also a divide between rural and other areas in the challenges they faced, with towns also highlighted as experiencing problems of economic decline and an ageing population. Some interviewees discussed the need for an intersectional approach to ageing, and this was also reflected in the grey literature. This is about understanding and addressing ways in which different dimensions of identity (for example age and ethnicity) interconnect, and about how interlocking systems of power impact older people through different aspects of their identity and place.

The third main theme concerned the (broadly defined) **social infrastructure** of local communities. The dominant view was that this had become depleted over recent years through a lack of core funding, lack of investment in maintenance and care of infrastructure, closure of services and facilities, and relatedly some privatisation of the public realm. Libraries, while facing challenges around budgets and transfer of ownership, were one of the few local facilities consistently mentioned as key, inclusive assets. As a response to depleted social infrastructure, interviewees were thinking creatively about the hubs and assets that existed in their communities and how they might become more accessible and socially productive. They also recognised that a diversity and critical mass of social infrastructure was needed that spoke to the diversity of people's interests and needs, and that enabled people to come together and connect both within and across social groups.

Anchor institutions were identified as important forms of social infrastructure, and the potential of community businesses was also highlighted, particularly with respect to ageing. More widely, new forms of social infrastructure were emerging online and offline in the form of place-based and

interest-based loose networks and online collaborative platforms. Private sector and private citizen space can also contribute to the stock of local social infrastructure.

Reflections on the themes

Ageing was often heard as 'older people' and responded to as such – lifecourse perspectives were mainly absent from conversations and the grey literature. Age and ageing intersects with the three main themes in different ways. Ageing perspectives were not often present in discussions about models of connected communities, and older people, and were mainly discussed through a deficit lens (increasing volume and complexity of health and social care needs and social isolation). Age is clearly present in the second theme of social divides, and again is presented as a problem or challenge around older people. Discussions around social infrastructure spoke to both the specific needs of ageing and older people, and the need for open, mixed spaces and facilities.

Intergenerational work connects to both the need to address social divides across age groups, and to the need for social spaces to facilitate this. There were not clear links between the dominant themes of the project and a potential focus on people approaching later life (described in shorthand in this report as people in their 50s and 60s). However, while there were mixed views on the importance of focusing on age generally, there was an appetite from stakeholders across different sectors for developing more strategic intergenerational work, and for working with and supporting people in their 50s and 60s to reflect on their social wellbeing and to think about how this will be maintained and/or evolve as they age.

A key question in the main themes from this project is the extent to which the themes integrate, rather than being treated as separate issues in public policy and services. Together, the overarching themes perhaps reflect something of a systems approach to connected communities: there is a relational operating model, which is reflected in the leadership, delivery, culture, and values of the institutions, services, business, organisations, networks and citizens that make up a local place, or connected community. There remains the question of how to integrate ageing and lifecourse perspectives.

There is also cause to shine a light on and celebrate what is being done – both the interviewees and grey literature recognise there is much enthusiasm and work being done on inclusive community building, despite current challenges. Much of this work is on the margins, as is to be expected for a project that in part focused on what was new and emerging, but it is also starting to come through in more significant ways: beyond innovative projects and online platforms, places such as Wigan, with their Deal, are starting to show how a more relational approach to place might be achieved.

11.2 Taking forward the Connected Communities programme

Many opportunities for collaborative work and potential partnerships emerged through the conversations, and Ageing Better is very grateful for the time, insights and ideas contributed by all participants in the project. Ageing Better is now reflecting on the detailed report from this project as it develops its Connected Communities programme. If you have comments on this report or would like to know more about Ageing Better's Connected Communities programme as it develops, please contact:

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