AGE-FRIENDLY "NEWCASTLES"

DISCUSSION PAPER AHEAD OF NEWCASTLES OF THE WORLD CONFERENCE IN NEWCASTLE, ONTARIO, CANADA 19TH-23RD SEPTEMBER 2016

As lifespans get longer, we are seeing the demographic balance in many of our towns and cities transform, with a significant rise in ageing populations. But are our towns and cities well designed for older age? – and **what are the challenges and opportunities of urban life for older generations?**

Many people believe that **society is failing to value and harness older people's skills, knowledge and experience**, a recent Guardian (UK newspaper) survey revealed. Some 92% of the 1,250 respondents to the ageing population research believe that older adults' contribution to society is not recognised.

One said: "On the whole **the public view older people as a drain on society instead of an asset."** Another added: "Older people are mostly seen as a bundle of problems and service-needs. Their strengths, skills and knowledge are not harnessed or appreciated in a society infatuated by the cult of youth."

In fact, older people in the UK contribute an estimated £61bn ($90bn or €78bn) to the economy through **employment, volunteering and caring**. And, according to Ros Altmann, the UK government's champion for older workers, being 50, 60 or 70 in the 21st century is no longer a predictor of physical or mental abilities. It certainly does not signify that someone has failing health and will soon be unfit to work, or no longer able to learn new skills. Meanwhile, with numbers of people aged 75 and over expected to double by 2040 and the proportion of older people in the UK due to rise from 23% to 28% of the population by 2030, it is vital to plan for the necessary services to support our ageing society.

So **how can we create a society where people aren't so worried about getting old, where there's less stereotyping of older people, more inter-generational contact, and more opportunities to see older people as assets?** What are the issues around financing retirement and how do we make sure older adults are not excluded because they don't have enough money?

Older people have different expectations these days, and that will continue to change. What might have been good enough for previous generations will not cut it in the future, and what we have is not sustainable anyway. So many older people want to stay in their own homes. It's about choice, **having the services in place to support people to make choices about how they want to live**, and be supported when necessary in later life.

There are certainly stereotypes surrounding the 'baby boomers' - well off retirees who maybe took early retirement, own a couple of properties, takes frequent holidays. Whilst we have made significant strides in reducing pensioner poverty in the last 20 years (previously to be old meant most likely you would be poor), there is **still a significant number of older people living in poverty today**. And with wealth inequality comes health inequality, as the UK Marmot report of 2010 pointed out.

Organisations such as the British Red Cross actively encourage **older people as volunteers**. We often find that there is a lack of confidence or an assumption that they won't be considered due to the stigma and stereotypes, and volunteering often helps build confidence within a modern working environment. There are a number of opportunities to increase work opportunities for older people - the "third" sector has notoriously low numbers of older people as employees despite having the most experience of advocating for them as a group. **It's a cultural shift that's needed so that young people growing up are understanding the value of older people and the many benefits they can bring to the workplace.**

In our towns and cities, a **well-designed outside environment** can make the world of difference to community involvement for some older people. Small things, like well-placed benches for people to rest if they can't walk so well, public toilet provision and thoughtful use of lighting and colour to aid those with dementia can be the difference between being active and housebound. Such improvements can benefit us all ultimately.

We shouldn't underestimate the role of understanding in the community too. The Dementia Friends campaign is a fantastic example of how to grow greater everyday awareness of a condition that affects many in our communities.

Making **active transport (walking, cycling) more accessible** for older people is important. We can learn a lot from our European neighbours here. In the UK, cycling remains a disproportionately young (and male) mode of transport. In the Netherlands and Germany, for example, it is far more common for older people to cycle. Improving cycle routes to make them safer is a start. In Scandinavia, planning laws encourage mixed-use development, making journeys from the home to shops and services a lot shorter, and more accessible for older people. This has obvious health benefits, but also can reduce isolation in our older population.

"Ageing London", a report published by the Mayor's Design Advisory Group provides recommendations on how to support a more age-friendly city. The report advocates the development of innovative new models of housing for older people and the establishment of a **"lifetime high streets" programme to support older residents in starting new businesses and to create new intergenerational community spaces.**

It's important **not to be segregated by age** and for all ages to interact on a day to day basis. It gives everyone a much richer and broader experience and hopefully removes the labelling of people as 'elderly' or 'past it' and the self-fulfilling behaviours that are often generated by this.

We need to ensure there are functional physical aids included in the city infrastructure which assist not just older but all less agile people, including those with disabilities, and those with babies and small children. This might include additional seating, entrances which are easy to get in and out of, accessible and reliable transport that people want to use, more public toilets that are clean and safe, smoothing or highlighting trip hazards on paths and roads so that overall, people of all ages can have as safe, active and socially connected lifestyle as possible.

So, how will ageing populations shape our towns and cities? Whichever "Newcastle"you live in the world, we want you to share experiences as an older person of the challenges and benefits of urban life. **How could your Newcastle improve for older residents? What physical or social changes would you like to see happen to enable a more inclusive, age-friendly city? How can we better use the skills and experience of older people – in their communities, or as business entrepreneurs and workers?** We will discuss these issues when we meet in Newcastle, Ontario for our next conference but meanwhile, send your views for publication on our website to *newcastlesoftheworld@gmail.com*

https://newcastlesoftheworld.com/best-practice-information/ageing-population-needs-and-opportunities/