

Birmingham Voices: Healthy Ageing in the 21st Century

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The Commission wanted to highlight the voices of the local ethnic minority communities in its report, as well as those of the white British majority. We wanted to gather data that illustrated older people's views on the broader issues that interested the Commission.

Specifically, we wanted to know:

1. What do key groups of elderly people in the Birmingham inner city area think about issues related to ageing well?
2. What are their concerns about ageing well in Birmingham and what do they regard as the solutions to their concerns?

To this end, we convened five consultations groups around Birmingham drawn from: **Clifton Road Mosque Ladies Group**, a mixed male and female group from **Halesowen Asian Elderly Association**, **Arabic Women's Awareness Group** (made up of women from Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and Kurdistan), **UK Caribbean Seniors**, and the **Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group** (predominantly white British group, and the sample were all white British). The sessions were held between **February and April 2013**.

The first four groups were recruited under the supervision of Chandrika Gordhan using her network of community champions. The community champions were given training and a brief about the aims of the groups and the participants we hoped would volunteer to join them. The briefing document was not designed to be read verbatim to potential participants, but rather contained key information that needed to be imparted in a natural and precise manner by the champions in the potential participants' own language. The fifth group was recruited by Janet Lord from the Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group from common membership with the [Birmingham One Thousand Elders](#) group. All the participants were residents in the Birmingham area, were relatively healthy (self-defined and on the basis that the participant was able to travel to and take part in the group discussion), elderly, and had the capacity to decide for themselves whether or not to participate. No parameters were placed around age as one of our interests was in how age is defined and ageing experienced. It was therefore left to the champions and the participants to decide between them.

The delivery of these sessions were designed to be socially and culturally acceptable, and the community champions played a pivotal role by making sure that the sessions were physically accessible and this encouraged elders to take part, to "have their say" and to share their experiences in a friendly environment. We took account of the fact that each Black and Minority Ethnic community was different, requiring flexibility and for the data collection to be adapted to their needs. The process mirrored that followed by Chandrika Gordhan for work in [Birmingham Arthritis Resource Centre \(BARC\)](#). Chandrika gave evidence to the Commission on her work, which can be seen [here](#).

Chandrika Gordhan and Heather Draper facilitated the first four and fifth groups respectively, using a common semi-structured guide (see table 1). All groups were conducted in English with translators present to help facilitators and participants where necessary. Verbal consent was confirmed and recorded at the

start of each group, but individual consent was confirmed on arrival by the facilitators (verbally or in writing as appropriate). The discussions were audio recorded. From these recordings notes were made about emerging themes around the questions posed, and illustrated with quotations.

The proposal was favourably reviewed by Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee of the University of Birmingham (REF: ERN 12-1447)

Table 1 Topic guide

1. What does 'ageing well' mean to you?

Prompts

What are the good things you associate with getting older?

What are the ways in which some older people can be much better off than others of the same age?

When do you think a person starts to get old? [This is actually a very important prompt that could be a question in its own right if answers do not emerge]

What would ageing be like in the ideal world?

What sorts of things may prevent a person from ageing well?

2. To what extent do you feel that you are included in the life of your community?

Prompts

What do you regard as your community?

Why might some older people feel that they have fewer rights and less say than younger people?

To what extent do you think people who feel this represent how you feel?

What kinds of examples can you think of where older people have a voice and are recognized as an important part of their community? It would be helpful to have examples where older people had to insist on this and examples where it was just accepted if you can think of examples of both

Are there things that your community does well in terms of making the lives of older people better?

How do you think communities could change to make things better for the older people living in them?

3. Some people think that it is down to individuals when they are younger to make plans to get the best out of life when they are older; others think that the state should ensure that older people age well or that communities or families should play a part in this. What do you think?

Prompts

What sorts of plans did you all make for getting older?

What kinds of plans do you wish you had made?

In what kinds of ways do you think you can as a younger person exert control over what happens to you in the future and in what kinds of ways do you think that you are unable to exercise control?

In what kinds of ways do you think you can as an older person exert control over what happens to you in the future and in what kinds of ways do you think that you are unable to exercise control?

In what sorts of ways have you experienced older people making their lives better and solving their own problems?

What things get in the way of individuals looking after their own futures?

Why should the state help older people?

What help can communities offer to improve the lives and well-being of older people?

What kinds of responsibilities should families have towards their elderly family members?

4. Is there anything else you want us to know about the challenges or advantages you have getting older in Birmingham.

Key findings

“So long as I could be with others, and can take care of myself then being old in Birmingham is not a problem”

How one knows when one is old

- “I did not know that I was ageing until I was old” (UK Caribbean Seniors)
- “When you’re younger you tend to bounce back quick, you do. When you’re older, this up here thinks, “Well is this it? Is this the start?” (Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group)
- “Getting old for a woman is when she stops her menstrual cycle, and starts going grey...” (Arabic Women’s Awareness Group)
- “Do you know men in our culture age differently, as they marry many times and raise children until ... when they cannot manage” (Arabic Women’s Awareness Group)

Good ageing

- “Good health means that you could manage on your own. There are many aspects to ageing well. Physically, mentally and spiritually is so important. I think if you keep fit than you will feel happier in yourself and feel and look younger.” (Halesowen Asian Elderly Association)
- “My faith is really important to me; it helps me to stay on a right path.” (Halesowen Asian Elderly Association)
- “I like to learn new things. At 67 I too call a taxi to go out. I believe in being independent and I like to learn as much as possible even at this age.” (Clifton Road Mosque Ladies Group)
- “I really felt very lonely after my husband’s death, but after a while you recover and you smile back at the world and carry on living until your time comes” (Arabic Women’s Awareness Group)
- “Eat the right things, exercise, and keep your mind focused.....keep busy and that’s what I do, and I am 84” (UK Caribbean Seniors)
- Health...If you've got your health you can do anything...if your brain’s gone it’s somebody else’s problem.. (Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group)

Barriers to ageing well

- “Money is really important, because without adequate money you cannot eat good food, pay your bills, keep warm, enjoy going out than you do need money to survive instead of just existing” (all but one group agreed)
- “In my case I feel as if I have lost my identity, I suffer with lot of joint pains and unable to sleep at night so always feeling tired, general weakness in terms of physically and emotionally” (Arabic Women’s Awareness Group)
- All my plans about old age has gone kaput, because my health has deteriorated so much” (UK Caribbean Seniors)

Being valued and making a contribution

- “I do not save any money, I just give it away to my children and grandchildren and that makes me feel really good about myself”(Clifton Road Mosque Ladies Group)
- “Being generous is really important, and sharing is all part of living”(Clifton Road Mosque Ladies Group)
- “I like helping my family over there as it makes me feel really good to give money to them; well that is how we have been raised to help each other if and when you can” (Arabic Women’s Awareness Group)
- I think it’s the other way around, I think the grandparents feel obliged to look after the grandchildren.(Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group)
- “I always say to them, “I’m glad you live [nearby] because I’m closer to my tools.” (Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group)

The importance of community

- “Being part of this community and where we live is also important and rewarding” (Clifton Road Mosque Ladies Group)
- “We come here at this centre and we really feel at home, and there is so much community spirit here with this group” (UK Caribbean Seniors)
- “Church is my community too” (UK Caribbean Seniors)
- “With this group we come together from diverse backgrounds, but together we are so much stronger and we provide mutual support and friendships, it does not matter what faith you are we are all one family and we share in each other good and sad times together”... That to me is what makes a good community.” (Halesowen Asian Elderly Association)
- “I think if you want to be involved there’s plenty of things for people to be involved in if they want to. And they don’t cost money.” (Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group)
- “You really have to get yourself motivated.” (Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group)
- “I feel really positive knowing that there is a community spirit to help and support each other, which makes me feel really confident to seek help when needed” (Arabic Women’s Awareness Group)

Transport really matters

- “Specialist Transport needs improving e.g. Ring & Ride –”Getting around is difficult” (UK Caribbean Seniors)
- “Transport = breaks isolation – “not confined to sticking in their four walls” (Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group)
- “Public transport needs to be improved, my balance is not good, and often worry that I may fall. People now a days will not give up their seat for you” (Arabic Women’s Awareness Group)
- “I just can’t help myself. When I see somebody alone on a bus looking a bit down I’ll have a chat.” (Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group)
- “They (bus passes) are really important and I find it absolutely fantastic to be able to jump onto a bus, even though I’ve got a car.” (Halesowen and Dudley Elders Group)

Cultural sensitivity really matters

- “I know when my sister was in hospital the nurses were totally naïve and ignorant about her needs, so the medical and care staff should be trained about other cultural needs”
- “If I have to go in the care home then the state should provide a home that meets our Islamic way of living. This really frightens me. We cannot be together with men in the same care home? We need a place where we could pray and the care workers need to be culturally aware of our needs” (Clifton Road Mosque Ladies Group)

We were able to reach elderly groups from all the targeted communities. The process chosen enabled the Black and Minority groups to speak openly about their hopes, desires and the challenges that they face ageing in UK.

Involving the community champions proved to be essential to address cultural sensitivity; and taking the project out to their own local venues was a key to success.