EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

AGE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

SUBMISSION FROM OPENSPACE RESEARCH CENTRE

Social isolation and loneliness can have a detrimental effect on health and wellbeing. Studies such as Steptoe et al (2013) show that being lonely or isolated can impact on both physical and mental health and this has cost implications for health and social care services. It is widely recognised that older people are vulnerable to social isolation owing to the loss of friends and family, mobility or income. However, it is also the case that the quality of the built environment has an impact on older people’s ability to go outside their homes. If an older person cannot get out and about locally, they are at risk of becoming ‘a prisoner in their own home’. By contrast, an environment that supports autonomy and access to the local neighbourhood can reduce older people’s dependence on more costly health and care services. OPENSspace has undertaken research that offers evidence on how aspects of the built environment can make a difference to how easy it is for older people to get out and about.

1 - Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

Research by the OPENSspace research centre, under their Inclusive Design for Getting Outdoors (I'DGO) project, has found that the design of Britain’s gardens, streets, neighbourhoods and open spaces affects older people’s ability to age well and live independently by supporting, or inhibiting access for all (see www.idgo.ac.uk).

It is therefore important to understand what aspects of the outdoor environment help or hinder, attract or deter people, in getting outdoors; our research has described this in terms of environmental supportiveness—the degree to which the quality of the environment makes it easy and enjoyable to be outdoors (Sugiyama & Ward Thompson, 2005; 2007a). If older people live in a supportive environment, they are more likely to be physically active outside the home (Ward Thompson & Aspinall, 2011). This, in turn increases their chances of social interaction thus reducing loneliness and social isolation.

The desire to get out and about does not necessarily diminish in older age, nor does the variety of activities people like to do outdoors. We have recently analysed the idiosyncratic projects that individuals want to do in old age that take them outdoors. It is perhaps not surprising that there is a positive relationship between the number of outdoor personal projects older people participated in and their quality of life (Curl et al., in press). We need an environment that supports diversity in people’s needs and aspirations, as well as in their functional capabilities and living arrangements.

The pedestrian experience is vitally important to older people, who are most often on foot when out and about. Analysis has also identified the components of a street that make a person feel safe and influence their decision to go out, such as adequate seating and smooth pavements. Newton et al (2010) found that if these components are absent, some older people limit outdoor activity for a range of reasons. The
implications are that older people’s quality of life can be significantly improved by good street design. Lesser-quality environments are often considered by older people to pose an increased falls risk, especially by those with vision, mobility or other impairments. They can heighten fears about crime, nuisance and traffic and make going outdoors less enticing and reinforce feelings of loneliness.

3 - Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland, including examples of targeted support or initiatives (including housing, health, third sector) and

4 - Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy

In order to alleviate loneliness and social isolation in older people the built environment must be designed in an inclusive manner such that older people feel physically able and mentally motivated to go out into their local neighbourhoods.

What is wanted is the provision of good quality footpaths and a lack of barriers and nuisance in accessing residential neighbourhood streets, shops and community services and local open space (Newton et al., 2010).

This could be achieved by the

• implementation of a set of consistent standards on the provision and maintenance of quality footpaths and the provision of uncluttered, nuisance-free footpaths.
• implementation of the presumption of provision of good quality, barrier-free footpaths in planning applications for all new-build developments.

In our research on older people’s access to their local neighbourhood and to public parks, we showed how important it is for people to get outdoors, engage with the natural world, and have the chance to maintain informal social contact with neighbours as well as to meet friends (www.idgo.ac.uk). High-quality outdoor environments can contribute to older people’s health above and beyond providing opportunities for being active (Sugiyama & Ward Thompson, 2007b). Pleasantness of open space and lack of nuisance such as dog mess or signs of vandalism were particularly associated with walking for recreation (Sugiyama and Ward Thompson, 2008).

Accessible and attractive local parks are particularly good at offering opportunities for all of these activities and their benefits. So such places need to be available wherever people live, within easy walking distance of home. And the routes to these places need to be easy to use as well as pleasant and attractive. Distance to a usable local open space has been shown to be an important factor in wellbeing, with older people whose neighbourhood open space was within 10 minutes’ walk (estimated at approximately 500 m distance) over twice as likely to be satisfied with life compared with those whose open space is further away (Sugiyama et al., 2009). Good quality pavements without trip hazards, easily identifiable ways into the park and well-maintained routes that offer feelings of safety and are well-used, are all important; if the route also goes past attractive streets, with no heavy traffic, so much the better (Aspinall et al., 2010; Alves et al., 2008).

Recent research in often deprived urban environments showed that older people’s
outdoor activity was predicted by having a clean, nuisance-free local park, attractive, barrier-free routes to it and other natural environments nearby. Being able to park one’s car outside the house also predicted time outdoors for these older participants (Ward Thompson et al., 2012).

References


