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Planning for an Ageing Society: Voices from the Planning Profession

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Planning for an Ageing Society: Voices from the Planning Profession

ANN HOCKEY, JUDITH PHILLIPS & NIGEL WALFORD

Abstract
The population of the United Kingdom is ageing inexorably, a trend which requires policy-makers, including spatial planners, to be creative and innovative in meeting the needs of older people. The significance of place in the lives of older people has been demonstrated by many researchers (see for example Peace et al., 2006; Gilroy, 2008) and underlines that spatial planners must be age aware. This paper uses qualitative research with planning practitioners to explore the extent of their age awareness and the means by which the opportunities and challenges of an ageing population are factored into their work. This is examined in the context of the wide-ranging multidisciplinary literature on the spatial experience of older people, and concludes that a clearer articulation of the elements of older people's relationships with place would assist planners in unpicking this complex subject and building locally appropriate age-integrated solutions for our ageing population which reach beyond predominantly physical dimensions of the environment.

Keywords: older population; ageing; spatial planning; planning policy

Introduction

In common with many countries around the world, the population of the United Kingdom (UK) is ageing inexorably. Over the last three decades, the population aged over 65 has increased by 1.5 million, with the median age of the population increasing from 35 to 39 years in the same period. In 2001, the Population Census recorded that for the first time there were more people of pensionable age than there were children in the UK's population. This trend is expected to continue, and by 2035, 23% of the population is projected to be aged over 65 (Office for National Statistics, 2010). This ageing of the population is largely accounted for by two demographic trends, namely increased life expectancy and decreased fertility, with the former being described as 'one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century' (McMurdo, 2000), whilst going on to note that the more common reaction is a 'doom-laden prediction' of the implications of this ageing of the population for social and care budgets.

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The increasing relevance of the ageing population structure to the policy agenda cannot be disputed. A range of particular challenges and opportunities arise from it, across a number of policy areas, including spatial planning, the focus of this paper. The significance of place in the lives of older people has been demonstrated by many researchers (for example, Peace *et al.*, 2006; Gilroy, 2008) and underlines that planners must be age aware. Yet, there is relatively little either in mainstream planning literature or in planning guidance to assist planners in developing an understanding of this context which goes beyond predominantly problem-based concerns with housing, access and mobility (Tinker, 1997; Gilroy, 1999; Harris & Thomas, 2004) to include broader social, economic and environmental considerations, and the social town planning envisaged by Greed (1999). Consequently, there is no guiding rationale for the inclusion of considerations of age and the consequences of an ageing population in the planning system. Given the current policy emphasis on sustainable communities, community planning, equality and diversity, this gives rise to questions relating to the extent of planners' age awareness and the means by which the opportunities and challenges of an ageing population are factored into the work of spatial planners.

Research undertaken as part of a multidisciplinary research project completed in 2010 with funding under the UK Research Councils' New Dynamics of Ageing Programme casts some light on this. This project, Older People's Use of Unfamiliar Space (OPUS), centred around the issue of older people's experience of unfamiliar built environments and acknowledged that one of the situations giving rise to feelings of unfamiliarity concerns the development or redevelopment of urban places (for an outline of the project, see Phillips *et al.*, 2011). Arising from this, it undertook, as one of its objectives, an investigation of the means by which the needs of older people were integrated in the planning process. As part of the research, group discussions and one-to-one interviews were carried out with planners and planning-related professionals with experience in local authorities in East Anglia and the South East of England, the setting of the unfamiliar environment studied. Whilst a relatively small number of planners were involved, their experience spanned a range of environments, urban and rural, higher and lower development pressures, unitary councils and shire districts, and all had substantial experience in the planning policy arena. They also included both males and females, and a spread of 'older' and 'younger' planners. Their 'voices' are considered to be illustrative of a wider body of planning and planning-related professionals encountering older people and age-relevant issues in the course of their working lives.

The following section examines the policy imperatives that provide a broad framework for the incorporation of age-related issues into the public, and more specifically, spatial planning policy agendas. An initial problem for planners in developing their understanding of the spatial experience of older people stems from the breadth of the concept, requiring the assimilation and translation of knowledges from a wide range of disciplines, including gerontology, geography, town planning and psychology. Whilst this aspect has been discussed elsewhere (Spaul & Hockey, 2011), a review of key themes in the literature enables us to contextualize the voices of the planners who participated in this research in

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relation to planning for an ageing society. The qualitative material from these conversations is presented in a separate section, allowing the planners' awareness of these themes to emerge from their words. In the discussion, we examine the connections and disconnections between the voices of the planners and the literature.

Ageing in the Policy Agenda

Seeking to address the needs of different groups in society, and to evaluate the differential impact of policies, has become an accepted part of the public policy agenda, going hand-in-hand with the concept of equal rights for all citizens which is the basis of most democratic systems (Healey, 2006). Age was not formally considered as a dimension of equality in the UK until the introduction of the Age Discrimination Act 2006, when it became illegal to discriminate against individuals on the basis of age in employment and vocational training. More recently, the Equality Act 2010 specifically included age as a dimension of equality, and placed a new Public Sector Equality Duty on public bodies, the key gatekeepers of access to, and quality of, environment and services for all members of the public. The duty applies to all public authorities in respect of all their functions, including policy-making, service provision and employment matters. The process of Equality Impact Assessment is a key tool in assisting local authorities to address their equality duties, involving the screening of policies and the delivery of services for their impact on people across all sectors of society (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009). A further tool, the Equality Framework For Local Government (Improvement and Development Agency, 2009a), provides a performance and improvement framework against which local authorities can measure their performance towards making their services equally accessible for all. Fundamental to achieving this are understanding the community, working in partnership and engaging with the community, organizational commitment and the provision of responsive services and customer care.

Developments in relation to the equality and discrimination legislation have been reinforced by the British planning system's concern for 'the public interest'—the planning system operates in, and must consider, the interests of all sectors of society (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2006). Further weight is added by the concern with sustainability and sustainable communities which has emerged as a policy priority over the last decade since it was first enshrined in planning legislation through the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act. The government's guidance as to how these issues are to be incorporated into planning policy has recently been revised, in the form of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Published in March 2012, this document refers to 'creating a high quality built environment, with accessible local services that reflect the community's needs and support its health, social and cultural well-being' and acknowledges the role which the planning system can play in promoting healthy and inclusive communities, but the only specific reference to older people relates to housing provision (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012, pp. 2, 13, 17, 39). A little more guidance was provided by the documents replaced by the NPPF, the Planning Policy Guidance notes and Planning Policy Statements,

again almost exclusively in relation to housing and transport (Harris & Thomas, 2004). Inter-agency and interdepartmental initiatives on sustainable communities and 'lifetime neighbourhoods' (Harding, 2007; Help the Aged, 2008) resulted in the publication of a National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society under the title Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods (Department for Communities and Local Government *et al*., 2008). Yet these documents did not constitute a strong message running through government guidance on how the planning system should include and respond to considerations of age and the consequences of an ageing population (Harris & Thomas, 2004), and has been further diluted in the NPPF. The result is that the way in which age is treated in the planning system may differ widely from place to place, and time to time, according to political will and professional understanding.

The Royal Town Planning Institute, representing the planning profession, has itself sought to address this, publishing guidance on Planning for an Ageing Population (Royal Town Planning Institute, 2004) and Housing for an Ageing Population (Royal Town Planning Institute, 2007), and working with the Department of Health to publish a good practice note on extra care housing (Royal Town Planning Institute and Department of Health, 2007). The Planning Officers' Society has worked with the house-building industry to publish a good practice guide for retirement housing (Planning Officers Society and Retirement Housing Group, 2003), and the Planning Advisory Service has published case studies of how exemplar local authorities are incorporating ageing into their plans (Improvement and Development Agency, 2009b). The World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities project (World Health Organization, 2007) and the Housing our Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation (Homes and Communities Agency, 2009) studied examples from Europe and beyond to develop guidelines and proposals to secure quality of life for older people. Whilst demonstrating that population ageing is being taken seriously by the profession, these publications do not have official standing in the policy- and decision-making processes.

Perspectives from the Multidisciplinary Literature

The significance of place in the lives of older people, as evidenced by the literature, either implicitly or explicitly embraces issues of inclusion and equality, and of facilitating access to a full range of social, economic and environmental opportunities. Yet the relatively weak policy context outlined above is compounded by the breadth of this literature which planners must assimilate in order to shape a picture of what challenges and opportunities exist. There is no well-defined boundary to older people's spatial experience, and planners must navigate through potentially 'policy relevant' discourses unpicking the social, economic, political and cultural contexts of the spatial in relation to the older population.

The category of 'older person' is itself the product of a range of factors, some of which are only indirectly related to the passing of time (Laz, 1998). Age represents several distinctive processes within the lives of older people. Chronological age simply defines membership of a particular birth cohort or generation, whilst the physiological ageing process brings the possibility of declining health, and some social and economic changes (e.g. widowhood and declining income) are also

associated with increasing age (Arber *et al*., 2003). Perceptions of age in society are undergoing adjustment as the life course changes: 'new' identities and lifestyles in old age are emerging as age intermixes with other dimensions of differentiation to produce a multi-differentiated population. Thus, there is enormous diversity within the broad category 'older people', which makes the formulation of policy responses addressing the entirety of the older population more complex.

Academic studies have paralleled the policy context by concentrating on accessibility and the home environment of older people. Less attention has been given to older people's perception of the built environment, and the impact and effects of urban form on them. The relationship between environment and ageing in the gerontological literature has been dominated by the ecology of ageing, in particular Lawton and Nahemow's (1973) press-competence model. This holds that the lower the competency of the older person (for example, through restricted mobility or cognitive decline), and the stronger the 'environmental press' (for example, poor neighbourhood or housing) the more negative the impact on the well-being and behaviour of the older person. The reasoning in this model is inherently attractive, and may be considered to be at the root of a problem-based approach to planning for an ageing population: facilitate improvements in the environment, and there will be consequential improvements in well-being.

Ploger (2006) contrasts this deterministic approach to planning with a broader view that incorporates cultural and social dimensions of everyday life, including life forms, multiculturalism and phases of life. This offers a more productive framework within which to distinguish the spatial experience of older people, and one which better aligns with the current policy emphasis on sustainability and sustainable communities. Relational geography (Massey, 1999, 2005), incorporating the principle that the features of an environment, and the dynamics of change and development, are considered in relation to the multiplicity of social interactions which take place within it, offers a further dimension and has been assimilated into planning theory (Graham & Healey, 1999; Healey, 2006). This prompts an examination of the dispositions and capacities of groups and individuals using that environment, and may be considered to be reflected in the increasing emphasis placed upon involvement of the public in policy formulation and decision-making.

A conception of place drawn from relational geography contributes to the field of environmental gerontology, a relatively recent area of study that has focused gerontologists' attention on older people's relationship with places and specific determinants of their lived experience in places. The effects of the built environment and use of space on older people's self perception and identity are being increasingly recognized (Peace *et al*., 2006), as are the ways in which use of space changes as people move through the life course (Rowles, 1978). This temporal perspective is double-edged, as both environments and people develop and change in complex interactions (Golant, 2003). Familiar patterns of activity and environments may separately or in combination mutate and diminish potentially provoking feelings of insecurity, disorientation, loss of independence and social exclusion (Phillips, 1999; Phillipson, 2007). Cultural practices and social processes play an important part in determining the relationship between older people and place (Andrews *et al*., 2007); indeed, the loss of support networks

and decreasing community participation together with alienating living environments and falling living standards can lead to social exclusion of older people (Scharf *et al.*, 2000). In these studies, place is a dynamic interaction of environment, individuals and social groups, to which people have different access and in which they have different experiences. Space itself becomes associated with certain social groups who influence its use (Wiles, 2005; Hopkins & Pain, 2007).

Studies of this place–people dynamic have revealed that place conditions and contributes meaning to everyday life and is characterized by a wide variety of place meanings and attachments (Manzo, 2005). The development of positive place attachments and meanings may be linked to activity patterns and a sense of well-being (Lewicka, 2005). Life course, age and personal networks play an important part here, as places become marked with experiences, personal relationships and life agenda (Diehl & Willis, 2004; Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2004; Smaldone *et al.*, 2005). Places have a complex network of meanings for a multiplicity of users, thus each individual 'negotiates' their use with others (Auburn & Barnes, 2006). The concept of 'insidedness', drawn from phenomenology and related to both the 'habitus' of Bourdieu (1990) and the 'topophilia' of Tuan (1974), demonstrates the extent of this complexity: spatial experience is the lived, unique concern of each individual, situated in and attached to specific places. For older people, functioning effectively in their physical and social environment requires a set of developed habits and attachments, which may be broken by changes in the physical and social environment. The intricate and individual nature of this relationship is demonstrated by Smith's (2009) study of ageing in deprived urban communities, which explores the factors underpinning the differential attachment, both negative and positive, of older people ageing in deprived neighbourhoods.

Place attachment and perceptions of place attractiveness have also been found to impact upon older people's health and well-being, a dimension which has recently received much attention (Krause, 2003; Crawford, 2010; Town and Country Planning Association, 2012). Attractive environments, and especially green space, encourage physical activity (Tzoulas & James, 2004; Tilt *et al.*, 2007) and sociability (Kazmierczak & James, 2007), whilst 'landscapes of decline' have negative impacts on health (Wakefield & McMullan, 2005), and restorative environments and experiences promote health and well-being (Scopelliti & Giuliani, 2004). Gilroy (2008) and Walker & Hiller (2007) have articulated these links between living environment and well-being specifically in relation to older people, and Wiles *et al.* (2009) have extended them to social space. The degree to which users of that space perceive it to foster and support positive forms of social interaction is a key determinant of place attractiveness. Studies of urban environments (Mehta, 2007; Cattell *et al.*, 2008) have attempted to capture the features which create 'lively streets' and the social processes which they support. Others have shown how the evolution of urban spaces, and in particular changes in the format of commercial development, can lead to the gradual alienation from these spaces of older people, as newer formats are seen to be geared to a younger population (Finkelstein *et al.*, 2008).

The allied issues of safety, certainty and security, related to the physical or the social environment, are both geographically and culturally specific and temporally shifting (Pain, 2000; Greene & Greene, 2003; Aalbers & Rancati, 2008). Brownlow (2004) shows that feelings of insecurity associated with specific places have a complex dynamic, with age being one dimension of differential response (Pain *et al.*, 2000). Feeling uncomfortable in a space may lead older people to retreat into familiar spaces (Blackman *et al.*, 2007), and expanses of empty space can intimidate people with dementia (Mitchell & Burton, 2006). The development of urban night-time economies heavily focused on younger people has had negative outcomes for other groups, leading to attempts to (re)create inclusive night-time economies (Tiesdell & Slater, 2006; Roberts & Eldridge, 2007).

The effect of the built environment upon physical activity, sociability and exclusion has been underlined by studies of accessibility, walkability and the importance of navigation for the mobility of older people (Walford *et al.*, 2011). Lynch's (1960) concept of the legibility of an urban environment (how people 'read' the environment) and the 'image of the city' which its users build are important here: minimizing instances in which older individuals become 'lost' or disorientated helps maintain self-respect and dignity (Ohta, 1983) and encourages use of public infrastructure (Foster *et al.*, 1998). A growing array of studies of the environmental variables which influence walking and physical activity in urban areas (for example, Talen, 2002; Borst *et al.*, 2008; Forsyth *et al.*, 2008; Sugiyama *et al.*, 2009) and specific tools to assess walkability from the perspective of older people (Cunningham *et al.*, 2005; Michael & McGregor, 2005) have revealed factors of particular relevance to older people, including pavement quality and ease of street crossing (I'DGO, n.d.), and landmarks such as historical buildings (Goodman *et al.*, 2005).

The foregoing discussions of the policy context and the multifaceted literature reveal the challenges faced by the planning profession and provides a framework for examining the qualitative information obtained from interviews with planners in the following section, referred to as 'voices' from the planning profession. These challenges, wide-ranging and essentially interrelated, span the physical and social dimensions of the built environment−older person interface, impacting upon their use of space, and include the following: the significance of place meanings, attractiveness and attachments; issues of well-being, health and activity; perceptions of safety and security; and the development of inclusion, exclusion and alienation. The extent to which they are reflected in our planners' voices is summarized under the headings of understanding the multidimensionality of the older population, unravelling the complexity of their spatial experience and interactions, and working in partnership and engaging with the older community to shape an 'age-integrated' policy perspective.

Voices from the Planning Profession

We have drawn on qualitative research undertaken as part of the OPUS project outlined above to investigate the extent to which these challenges are being met by planning practitioners. This multi-stage, mixed-method research project engaged with a group of older people and planners and involved both quantitative and

qualitative approaches. The findings reported here relate to a series of group discussions and one-to-one interviews which were carried out with public-sector planners in East Anglia and the South East of England during 2008–2009. The group discussion was approximately two hours in length; the interviews lasted between 50 and 75 min. Whilst the number of planners involved was small, numbering eight in total, their experience represented a greater number of organizations, covered four decades and spanned a range of environments, urban and rural, higher and lower development pressures, unitary councils and shire districts. The group discussions and interviews were semi-structured around certain lines of enquiry:

● To what extent are older people's voices heard and taken into account when planning and regenerating areas?
● What gives good quality of life in an area? Is this the same for older people?
● How can spaces be redesigned to make them more older-person friendly?
● How can we improve the ambience of spaces and the experiences of older people?
● What processes are necessary to engage older people in a meaningful way?

These were specified in order to capture the 'voices' of the planners and permit them to develop areas of particular interest and concern, whilst encompassing the themes outlined in the review of the literature above. The discussion and interviews were recorded and transcribed, and analysed both manually and using the nVivo software. Verbatim extracts from the interviews are used for illustration, but the identities of the participants and the organizations they represent are withheld for confidentiality reasons.

Multidimensionality of Older Population

The participants recognized the diversity and heterogeneity of the older population, and that older people have a wide range of diverse requirements with diverse policy responses. Two participants, who themselves might be considered to be part of the older population, spoke from their own experience of the life-course changes that they had encountered either personally or which had affected close family members, yet it was evident that more needs to be known about the composition, aspirations and requirements of this population, with one planner noting: 'It is a huge spectrum ... I don't think us planners really have a big grasp on that', and continuing 'I think one of the things that we really don't understand is the needs of the elderly over the long term. With an ageing population, what does it mean? Just because we are going to have an elderly population, will people need care longer or are they going to be healthier longer. What we term elderly may be healthy people'. Most participants made specific mention of people suffering ill health, disability and other forms of disadvantage, and policy responses for these, but little was said about the healthy, active older population, confirming the view that more needs to be known about the diversity and differential needs of the population. One participant thought this was not an indication of lack of will but because 'we are completely overwhelmed with everything we are expected to do ... I don't think

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there is a lack of willingness on behalf of planners, it is just perhaps a lack of ... time and focus ... we just lose track'.

An older planner reflected on the specific identification of the older population in the planning process thus: 'I started in planning in ... the mid 80s when local plans were just starting to emerge. I can't remember any particular policies ... as a defined equality group, (it) wouldn't have been an issue, 20/30 years ago ... it wouldn't have been until the mid to late 90s ... but that doesn't mean to say that older people and their issues didn't enter your thinking in an informal way'. Planning policy at the local level then was 'to do with the impact of the development on the locality ... not necessarily groups in society but particular areas ... more area based than ... sector based or issue based' and design was about 'aesthetics and functionality ... nobody really thought about things like lighting or security or overlooked spaces'. The advent of broader spatial planning principles in 2004 prompted planners in 'thinking about groups in society and identify particular needs and particular issues'. This may be achieved by engaging with formal older people's groups including Age UK, or by establishing older people's fora in the local area. Equality Impact Assessment was seen as being a helpful tool in prompting planners to think 'up front' about sectors in the population and provide an avenue for older people to be brought in to shape policy: 'I am not saying it is perfect but I think it is an improvement on perhaps what we have done in the past which is really just asking people to react to what we've done or produced'.

Spatial Interaction and Experience

Planners' understanding of the role of age as one of many dimensions producing a complexity of spatial interactions, experiences, expectations and requirements was explored via the theme of quality of life. A good quality of life was felt to be promoted by high-quality homes, good retail facilities, a high-quality public realm—a place where you would be happy to live, shop and spend your money. For older people there are 'additional things—safety, security, good public transport ... care accommodation nearby ... to stay within their communities, access to good community facilities nearby'. This same participant went on to note: 'You know, all those are particularly important to the elderly population but not exclusively ... they are all important in a wider population'. Another reiterated this: 'I mean everybody wants accessible developments so that they are talking about the need for local facilities, public transport, cycle ways, sporting facilities but they are issues for everybody I think'. Planning must recognize the needs of all sectors of the population, which may require a trade-off between different stakeholders and the requirements of subgroups in the population.

Generally, areas are not planned or designed specifically with ageing in mind; rather, consideration of age and older people in the planning process was limited to particular issues including housing, accessibility and mobility: 'older people do tend to find getting around harder ... They may need more wheel chair access, they might have trouble with steps, they might have trouble with kerbs, they might have trouble with their eye sight ... these things manifest themselves in the normal run of everyday life'. One local authority's housing policy 'says basically

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elderly person's accommodation … shall be located against the same criteria as everybody else's accommodation … because … if they want to access services presumably the people [population at large] want to access them'. However, sheltered and care accommodation, and retirement villages were considered specifically, and in relation to the latter, it was evident that the arguments in favour of and against retirement villages, from the perspectives of social interaction and inclusion, were well understood.

There was some mention of the impact of location on the perception of new infrastructure: 'We have schemes like a bus station … which necessitated chopping down trees near the waterfront to gain access … I think there is cynicism by the population and elderly people as to whether that is an appropriate place for the bus parking. It is an exposed place because it is by the river front, winds coming in'. Economic and lifestyle issues such as encouraging older people to downsize into smaller property were discussed, and one participant mentioned community facilities and educational opportunities: 'The problem is that often there are not enough of the halls or they haven't got space … They are also trying to do training courses and so forth to try to improve skills for elder people. Some people might want to learn computing or whatever you know. Just things like that, the internet you know. It is not just training for the unemployed … it is across the board'. Planners were also conscious of intergenerational issues, for example the siting of a play area next to specialist housing which might be viewed either positively or negatively.

Overall though, the emphasis tended towards well-designed physical environments considered to be suitable for all, plus specific provision as needed, with relatively little mention of the social dimensions of the people–place dynamic. One participant commented that older people wanted to: 'live as pleasant a life as they could possibly live; and that is no different from anybody else. And that actually feeds into the finer design of the public realm, the benches, the public toilets etc'. Another mentioned safety and security: 'things like making the environment safer … will automatically … make it better for old people'. Street furniture also featured: 'there is an awful lot of clutter that can be unattractive … street furniture sometimes isn't very good, maybe not always well positioned'.

Areas which are experiencing redevelopment and regeneration may be better positioned to actively consider the older population than those where incremental change is occurring. One planner explained: 'We have had quite a lot of … regeneration, promoting community halls, projects you know to try to help local people … and obviously trying to improve issues relating to elderly people is part of that' and 'where we have got new development sites … we are trying to ensure that they have got neighbourhood facilities, retail, local community facilities, public transport … general issues'. This may prove difficult to achieve in the current economic climate as 'where you have aspirations to improve the public realm … viability is something that developers will be constantly pressing as an issue and trying to water down that quality … some of the things that would be of concern to elderly people in terms of the public realm … could be problematic'.

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Older People as Partners in the Planning Process

Engagement with the local community plays a larger part in the planning process today than formerly. Whilst such engagement is not new, it now has a more formalized emphasis, and strives to achieve active, meaningful participation rather than reaction to plans and policies at an advanced stage of drafting.

Older people were not generally regarded as a 'hard to reach' group in relation to engaging in the planning process. Public engagement exercises run by planning departments often drew a higher proportion of older people, many of whom have more time during the day and were thought to have greater political awareness and ability to engage with the process. Although the older population may be well-represented in engagement exercises, meetings, exhibitions, etc., an issue arose when they were asked to formally record their views and ideas, as 'sometimes people will give you verbal comments but do not always want to put it down in writing'. This can mean that those views are not taken forward for consideration because 'if they don't want to give their contact details, trying to report back that someone just made comment in an exhibition, could potentially leave you open to challenge'.

The interviewees felt that there were particular groups of older people who might be excluded from engagement with planning, in particular the frail elderly, those who were ill, and those who were housebound, for whom specific provision may be required. Yet in general, the view, reported above, that quality of life for older people aligns with that of the general population, apart from this specific provision, was carried through into planners' feelings on the way in which age should be integrated in the planning process. One planner expressed the view: 'I don't like to think ... of older person's problems. I think of general planning problems and if you approach them broadly enough and intelligently enough then the problems of all the separate age groups and demographic groups get catered for in your general thinking rather than saying "Oh I must approach this with older people in mind"'. Another participant went on to identify a potential problem in approaching older people as a particular sector of the population for whom provision must be made, using the example of gypsies and travellers to illustrate this: 'a particular sector with particular issues and the Government has deemed that you will deal with them in a specific way ... It gives you a mechanism under guidelines. It gives you a hook and providing you tick that box you've done it. You've done your job'. Whilst other comments from the same participant revealed a sensitivity of approach to the older population, the danger of reducing the issues of a sector of society to a tickbox exercise is acknowledged.

Discussion: Planning for an Ageing Society

This paper sets out to explore whether the opportunities and challenges presented by an ageing population are being factored into the work of spatial planners. This has been explored in the context of a broad definition of planning which takes account of social, economic and environmental dimensions (Greed, 1999; Ploger, 2006), and in the light of the broad multidisciplinary literature concerning the spatial experience of older people (Phillips *et al*., 2011; Spaul & Hockey, 2011).

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It also acknowledges the disparate nature of the broad category 'older people', subsuming a multiplicity of life stages and lifestyles (Laz, 1998; Arber *et al*., 2003). The literature reviewed here has shown that there is widespread agreement that place and dimensions of the environment play a significant part in the lives of this broad sector of the population, and that this reaches beyond the central theoretical construct of the ecology of ageing. What then have the discussions with planning practitioners revealed about their understanding of older people and how they are represented in planning policy?

It was acknowledged that the broad categorization 'older people' subsumes a wide range of diverse requirements with diverse policy responses, yet it was evident that more needs to be known about the composition, aspirations, experiences and requirements of this population, now and into the future. With one exception, there was a tendency to focus upon health and disability as features of differentiation of the older population, and policy responses for these. Involvement of older people in the planning process was generally thought to be good, although this view was contradicted by the acknowledgement that there are parts of the older population who are not being engaged, notably those with health and mobility issues, the group for whom the policy responses appear to be geared. This suggests there may be a mismatch in the population being planned for and the population being engaged in the process, and a consequent mismatch in the response.

The conclusion drawn from the qualitative research is that the focus remains largely on problem-based issues, predominantly housing, accessibility and functional details of the urban environment. In this, there appears to have been little movement since Tinker (1997) and Gilroy (1999) noted these preoccupations of policy in the 1990s, despite the broadening base of spatial planning and the policy emphasis on sustainable communities which emerged during the intervening period. The majority of participants stressed the benefits of inclusive planning and design, but whilst sensitivity to the impact of ageing was demonstrated, as Harris and Thomas (2004) found in their assessment of Planning Policy Guidance, 'some aspects are more thoroughly considered and, presumably, better understood than others' (p. 492). It cannot be denied that this may be a consequence of Harris and Thomas's finding that there was no clear rationale in the Planning Policy Guidance series for the inclusion of age in planning. Yet it must also be remembered that there is at the heart of the spatial planning system an emphasis upon sustainability and sustainable, inclusive communities, themes which remain central to the recently published NPPF. Thus, it appears that it is a partial interpretation of these concepts which is being pulled through to inform planning practice.

Where then do the gaps lie in planners' understanding of the spatial experience of older people which should underlie 'proper' age-integrated planning? Across the discussions with planners, older people's experience of space was primarily expressed in terms of physical relationships, with housing, transport infrastructure and the public realm. There was little that touched upon the social and economic contexts of older people's lives and the impact of these contexts upon their use of the built environment. The impact of the environment on well-being and behaviour was considered predominantly in relation to provision of appropriate

forms of housing, with other aspects of well-being largely overlooked, for example, the link between attractive environments, green space, activity and health, and the positive effect of place attractiveness on social interaction, which tended to be treated as a function of transport and accessibility. The importance of place meanings and attachments for older people's use of space arose only in relation to regeneration and change being perceived as 'bad' *per se*, without mention of how this perception might be ameliorated by incorporating references to older people's memories and other elements of place attachment. There was little evidence either of consideration of the insecurity, disorientation, loss of independence and social exclusion which can result when environments change, although issues of safety and security were discussed in relation to crime, night-time economies and location of housing. Perhaps the largest gap was in understanding the cultural practices and social processes which determine the relationships between older people and place, and the impact on these of the loss of support networks, decreasing community participation, alienating living environments and falling living standards. Whilst overall, the participants displayed a sensitivity of approach to older people, only one participant spoke directly of the importance of community facilities, educational opportunities and support networks in shaping the lives of older people.

All the above are elements of older people's experience of space which emerge from the multidisciplinary literature as significant, but on the basis of the series of discussions reported here, it appears that planners are not being entirely successful in assimilating the multiple contexts of this experience. That there remains an emphasis on physical elements is perhaps not surprising, given the legacy of planning as a system of land use control and management, yet it is important that the social, cultural and economic determinants of a positive spatial experience for a growing section of society are not inadvertently overlooked. Add to this the diversity of the older population—'age' cannot be treated as a single category when considering proposals for change and development—and it is evident that there is no well-defined boundary to older people's spatial experience. Yet planning is a profession which regularly encounters such 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973) and weaving a path through a multiplicity of demands for the use of space from a multiplicity of stakeholders is part-and-parcel of planners' workday experience. This research, admittedly on the basis of a small number of individuals, suggests that a clearer appreciation of the elements of older people's relationships with place would assist planners in unpicking this complex subject and building locally appropriate age-integrated responses for our ageing population which reach beyond predominantly physical dimensions of the environment.

There is a clear imperative for this, given the UK's current and projected demographic profile and the policy priorities of equality, inclusive communities and active, healthy ageing. The question is how to achieve it. The analysis presented here has revealed that it is the interplay of cultural and social processes with the environment that should be the focus of attention. Incentives which could bring about a reorientation of approach in the UK currently include 'push' factors such as the drive towards localism and neighbourhood planning which confers a larger role on the community, the support given for strategies to improve health,

social and cultural well-being by the NPPF, and the establishment of health and well-being boards in 2013 offering greater opportunities for partnership working and coordination of health, social care and local government services. Factors 'pulling' in this direction include a more vocal older community, professional institute priorities embracing equality and community empowerment, and the promulgation of the model proposed by the Age-Friendly Cities project (World Health Organization, 2007) which demonstrates how the spatial and aspatial dimensions of age-friendly urban environments can be integrated. Additionally, routes such as planning education and continuing professional development, workshops and other learning resources constitute mechanisms that could refocus planners' conceptualization of the relationship between older people and their environments.

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