



Key learning on ageing in place for minority ethnic communities

- **Risks of social isolation amongst minority ethnic communities**

Bonds between people of a similar background are important for feelings of safety, cultural identity and practically in terms of language and cultural norms. Those who took part in the research had access to strong social networks and sources of support within their own ethnic community but little evidence of their social networks extending beyond this.

- **Social Infrastructure as a means to maintain bonding and bridging capital**

Looking at the spaces that were important to these participants - religious buildings, specialist retail spaces, green and outdoor spaces and minority ethnic led-community and voluntary organisations - there are signs of the potential for individuals to make social connections that act as bridges into other social worlds though weak ties of association.

Introduction

There is a lack of research into the experiences of social isolation for different minority ethnic older people living in the UK.

In response to this gap, we led a research project looking at the opportunities for building and maintaining social connections for older people from different minority ethnicities in five neighbourhoods across England.

This briefing summarises the findings of the work - a number of important spaces of social infrastructure that must be supported and maintained if older people from these minority ethnic groups are to be able to age in place.

The research was designed and ran in partnership with Ageing Better in Birmingham, Ageing Better in Camden, Connect Hackney and Leicester Ageing Together as part of the National Lottery Community Fund's Ageing Better programme. This briefing is a summary of the report *Ageing in Place for Minority Ethnic communities*, available on our website.

Ambition for Ageing is a Greater Manchester level programme aimed at creating more age-friendly places and empowering people to live fulfilling lives as they age.

We do this by providing small investments to help develop more age-friendly neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester in addition to funding larger scale work across the city-region. As a research project, we are committed to sharing the learning we gain from the programme to help influence local, regional and national policy. Ambition for Ageing is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK.



“ This place is important to me as it reminds me of Bangladesh and my culture. I like shopping there as people speak the same language and I feel comfortable and safe. Everyone there is from my community. ”

- Participant, Camden

The importance of social connections

Social connections for the older people in this research were about support, friendship and cultural identity.

These connections were developed and maintained in a variety of different spaces however this research found that the following spaces of social infrastructure were especially important within these communities:

- Religious buildings
- Green and outdoor spaces
- Specialist retail spaces
- Minority ethnic led-community and voluntary organisations

Older people reported having a variety of different social connections in their lives, but it was often the weaker connections, the acquaintances they made through informal and often fleeting interactions in shared spaces, that were found to be particularly important for maintaining their sense of cultural or religious identity and for feeling a sense of connection to the neighbourhoods in which they now lived. The research therefore demonstrates the importance for older people with a shared cultural identity to have places where they can meet together, not only to maintain their sense of identity but also for bonding social connections.

The benefits of minority ethnic led community and voluntary organisations



“ It's very important I come here, keeps me in touch with people and stops me from being lonely. ”

- Participant, Hackney.

Community and voluntary organisations that were led from within minority ethnic communities provided both formal and informal support as well as a space of social connection for older adults. These organisations, along with the other vital parts of neighbourhood social infrastructure such as parks and shopping spaces need investment and support to continue to exist.

Specialist funding and support is vital for organisations working with minority ethnic groups to be able to continue their work within their communities. This needs to go beyond funding for 'inclusive services' and instead provide targeted support for minority ethnic and equalities organisations who are best placed to reach and engage with different groups in society.

Developed appropriately, delivery partnerships can create significant social value and therefore funders should consider how all sizes of organisations contribute towards an equitable partnership working model. This should be through both the design of delivery opportunities and bid assessment. Funders and commissioners have a role to play in shaping market conditions and should take note of how larger organisations intend to manage and support partnership working.



“ We have found that South Asian elders are increasingly experiencing social isolation due to the loss of loved ones and changes in the support provided by families. ”
- Organisation, Leicester

Risks of social isolation

Changes in family structures and increasing health needs, were identified by organisations working in these communities as pressing concerns affecting older people.

Although multigenerational households remain prevalent they are neither the norm nor without their own challenges for older people and many of the staff interviewed for this research expressed concern at the increasingly complex health needs within the older populations of these communities and the additional stresses this placed on them as an organisations to respond to and accommodate these needs.

How the work of minority ethnic-led community organisations has changed over the years



By far the biggest change to how community and voluntary organisations worked over time was the extent to which they engaged in partnership working.

This includes working with other community and voluntary organisations as well as with public services and local authorities. Although respondents recognised the benefits of partnership working - including access to more financial resource, improved reach and knowledge, and improvements in ways of working as an organisation - they also reported issues in doing so.

Some organisations, particularly smaller ones felt there was a difficult issue of negotiating power dynamics within a partnership, whether due to being given less funds than larger organisations, or feeling ‘used’ in order to gain access to their contacts and members. Smaller organisations also stated that they didn’t always feel they had the time and resources to build effective partnerships, leaving them at a further disadvantage.

Organisations also spoke of the difficulty they sometimes had in negotiating roles and expectations within a partnership suggesting that this was often done on an ad hoc basis and with little structure.



The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting social distancing measures have added increasing pressures to already stretched community and voluntary organisations.

Death rates from COVID-19 in England have been highest amongst Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities and people of Bangladeshi ethnicity have been found to be twice as likely to die of the virus than people of White British ethnicity. Geographical disparities in the virus also have implications for the findings of this research as three of the study areas were identified as UK regions with the highest infection rate. In addition, deprived neighbourhoods, such as all those within this study, have been found to have at least double the mortality rates from COVID-19 than less deprived areas.

Conducted before the Coronavirus pandemic hit the UK, the findings from this research underline the importance of social infrastructure for older people. As lockdown restrictions begin to lift it is even more important that shared spaces are age-friendly. This means that the planning and re-design of public and shared space must meet both socially distancing guidelines and age-friendly principles. There needs to be support for social infrastructure to ensure these places are able to provide a social space for people as well as fulfilling their primary functions.

About the research

This research explored the opportunities for building and maintaining social connections for older South Asians living in Manchester, Birmingham, Leicester, and Camden and older people of Greek Cypriot, Turkish and Kurdish heritage living in Hackney.

Although the research involved older minority ethnic populations from across the UK, the sample was still small and therefore more research is needed to explore different ways of supporting communities and how the voluntary sector can meet the needs of older people from different minority ethnic backgrounds.

It was carried out by Ashiana Community Project, Camden Healthwatch, Community Advance Project, the Centre for Black and Minority Ethnic Health (University of Leicester) and The Manchester BAME Network, who also produced their own independent reports.

To read the full report or the reports from each area visit www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/ageinginplace



Led by Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation

St Thomas Centre
Ardwick Green North
Manchester M12 6FZ

www.ambitionforageing.org.uk

0161 277 1000
ambition@gmcvo.org.uk
@afageing

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