Older People's Engagement in the Local Governance of Neighbourhood Renewal: an exploration of facilitating and militating factors

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Background

Since 1997, Central Government has shown concerted efforts to regenerate the most deprived urban neighbourhoods in the United Kingdom, and have moved towards putting communities in control of local governance to shape these efforts. One of the most prominent themes of this policy was the wish to combat social exclusion, primarily by addressing social capital issues.

During an early review to examine older people's involvement, it was reported that they were "*often missing as beneficiaries and as participants in regeneration programmes... they appear to be overlooked... or they are given a marginal status*" (Riseborough and Sribjlanin, 2000, p2). Despite having a key leading role in understanding and reacting to older people's needs, ten years on "*most local authorities [still] do not appear to consider that listening to the views of older people is a priority*" (Elbourne, 2008, p28).

Aims

The study on which this paper draws, addressed three research questions: 1) what is the impact of urban regeneration policies on older people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods from the perspective of both older people and local professionals and policy-makers? 2) to what extent are older people involved in the process of urban regeneration? and, 3) how do older people perceive the potential benefits and disadvantages of neighbourhood renewal?

Method

Older people's participation in contemporary urban regeneration (2006 - 2008) in one local authority district undergoing such neighbourhood renewal was examined. Using this local authority as a case study, and guided by a narrative inquiry approach, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with twenty-one professionals and policy-makers implementing urban regeneration, and twenty older people living in three of the area's most deprived neighbourhoods.

Key Findings & Conclusions

• Many of those older people who were engaged with local governance, at all levels, were usually 'younger' old people who were 'white' and 'educated', and had held professional employment in the past. BME elders, older widowed women, those with financial or mobility difficulties, and lower levels of education were predominantly absent.

• At strategic levels, older people's engagement was relatively limited, unnecessarily restricted, and considerably diluted.

> The main aspect limiting engagement was the need for the local authority to address the mandatory priorities emphasised by Central Government, so as to meet social deprivation targets that mainly focused on employment, child development, and the health of the present and future workforces.

> Engagement was further marred by the way in which some policy-makers socially constructed older people as "*...Susceptible, vulnerable to health issues, to crime issues, safety in the home, and I think they have been identified as a vulnerable group in any community*" (Local Authority Officer). One outcome of such a view saw only health and social care aspects being addressed in policy and implementation.

> The short-termism of regeneration consultation turnaround, and the discontinuities of joined-up governance delivery, were also reported to debilitate and compound the difficulties of being able to deliver governance that successfully included older people and the organisations that represent them in the regeneration process.

• In comparison, although still hindered by the need to deliver mandatory targets, older people appeared to be more successfully engaged as service-users. Difficulties around the wish to (re)balance power to achieve deliberative democracy (Barnes, 2000) were, however, discussed by many participants.

> Third sector and older people participants, recognised the need for the (re)training of professionals and policy-makers to address the possible influence of age discrimination and ageism on proceedings.

> The use of jargon, alongside a lack of background information during meetings and feedback afterwards, was highlighted as problematic. As *intermediaries* and *advocates*, third sector and frontline workers negated some of these issues. As a result, many professionals called for those older people who were, and wished to be, engaged to be offered individual human management skills training; designed around, and built upon, the social skills and practical abilities each already possessed.

> This study questioned the way in which Central Government had, to date, focused on social capital as the "*foundation that social stability and a community's ability to help itself is usually built*" (SEU, 2000, p24). With training for older people to better engage being discussed, it seems that there is a need to address the role that older people's human capital plays. Extrapolating this line of reasoning in light of other aspects such as financial difficulties, this study stipulated that it was time for policy to uniformly address the role of all forms of capital in relation to deprivation, and engagement with local governance.

Large proportions of older people living in the studied neighbourhoods were also seen to now identify more with communities of interest, based within community groups such as luncheon clubs, than the 'community' once perceived within physical neighbourhoods. This changing identity dissuaded many from wanting to engage in what was seen to be neighbourhood regeneration *only* though demolition, and the building of expensive houses older people could not afford.

In juxtaposition to such regeneration, which Rogers (1995) suggests primarily focuses on selfishness and separation rather than contact and community, many older people called for investment in community centres and informal places where friends and neighbours could rebuild or bolster social networks. It was further believed that such community meeting places would provide a space were local authority officers could connect with residents.