

Urban Local Environments and the Promotion of Health and Wellbeing Among Older People: Dimensions from a Qualitative Study in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Demographic and social change in most European countries has meant that we have an increasing number of older people who are more likely to be living, and to want to live, independently in the community. However, older people have often been neglected in the planning process and in regeneration initiatives which have tended to focus on the needs of younger cohorts, particularly those in their economically more productive years. Whilst useful work has highlighted that older people's ability to function independently is a dynamic between their capabilities and the characteristics of their environment, these insights have mostly been applied to housing and the design of the immediate living space; little attention has been paid to the outdoor neighbourhood environment and how it accommodates older people. Further, a tendency to construct older people as passive and dependent has meant that the voices of older people themselves are seldom heard in research in this area.

This paper reports on a qualitative study that was carried out in the Glasgow region of Scotland. Older people in three different urban neighbourhoods were interviewed in depth regarding their experiences of their local environment, how they used it and how it affected their well-being. Interview data was combined with further data from observation. Analysis reveals the understanding of older people themselves of routes by which their health and wellbeing are affected by characteristics of the local outdoor environment. Several dimensions emerge including the extent to which physical activity and exercise are promoted, and the extent to which older people are able to socialise informally out of doors. Health impacts are potentially physical, emotional and mental. The paper will reflect on the implications of these findings for urban planning and design that aims to support older and mixed communities.

Key Words: older people, health, neighbourhood