Local Urban Environments and the Wellbeing of Older People

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# Contents

Executive Summary...............................................................................................................i

1. Introduction....................................................................................................................... 1
   Environmental equity and the distribution of environmental goods .............................. 1
   Older people and environmental equity / justice .............................................................. 2
   Procedural equity ............................................................................................................. 3
   Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 4
   Report structure ............................................................................................................. 4

2. Case Study Areas and Study Methodology.................................................................. 5
   Case Studies....................................................................................................................... 5
      Neighbourhood 1: inner city neighbourhood ............................................................. 6
      Neighbourhood 2: Suburban estate ........................................................................... 7
      Neighbourhood 3: small coastal town ....................................................................... 7
   Methodology ..................................................................................................................... 8

3. Cleanliness and Pollution.............................................................................................. 11
   Litter and Waste.............................................................................................................. 11
   Pollution........................................................................................................................... 12
   Summary points.............................................................................................................. 14

4. Peace and Quiet .............................................................................................................. 15
   Summary Points.............................................................................................................. 17

5. Physical Exercise and Walking..................................................................................... 18
   Benches and places to rest ............................................................................................. 20
   Services............................................................................................................................. 21
   Natural terrain ................................................................................................................ 22
   Overall attractiveness of the environment ..................................................................... 23
   Other issues ..................................................................................................................... 24
   Summary Points.............................................................................................................. 24

6. Social Interaction............................................................................................................. 26
   Summary Points.............................................................................................................. 26

7. The Sensory Environment and Emotional Wellbeing............................................... 32
   Summary points.............................................................................................................. 35

8. The Behaviour of Others in the Local Environment.................................................. 37
   Safety .............................................................................................................................. 37
   Vandalism........................................................................................................................ 39
   Intergenerational relations ............................................................................................ 40
   Treatment of older people ............................................................................................. 41
   The segregation of older people ................................................................................... 42
   Summary Points.............................................................................................................. 43

9. Participation and Decision-Making ............................................................................. 45
   Summary Points.............................................................................................................. 45

10. Conclusions ................................................................................................................... 49
    Aspects of the local environment that emerged as important to older people .... 49
    Environmental equity, justice and older people .......................................................... 50
    Policy implications and recommendations ................................................................. 52
    References..................................................................................................................... 56
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Executive Summary

This study set out to explore how older urban residents feel their wellbeing is affected by their outdoor local environments. In doing so, it was also concerned with potential environmental inequalities that might occur in several different ways: through local environments differentially impacting on older people as opposed to other residents; through spatial inequalities in the quality of local environments for older people; and through insufficient access for older people to procedures where decisions affecting local environments are made.

The research took a multi-case study approach, taking place in three urban neighbourhoods in the Strathclyde region of West Scotland. These three areas comprised a deprived inner city neighbourhood; a suburban estate slightly more deprived than the Scottish median; and a more affluent small town on the coast. The research approach was qualitative, with data collection using one-to-one in-depth interviews, a smaller number of group interviews, and additional observation of older people outdoors in each area. Analysis of data looked across the three areas to build a set of themes around the aspects of local environments that appeared to affect older people’s wellbeing.

From the accounts of participants in the three neighbourhoods, qualities of a positive urban environment for older residents were identified, as well as potential aspects that might impede older people’s enjoyment and wellbeing. Key requirements were that the urban environment should be clean and free of litter; that it should have low levels of pollution, especially air pollution; that it should be free from excessive noise, and relatively quiet in residential areas in particular; that it should be walkable including for those with mild to moderate mobility difficulties; that it should allow for and facilitate informal social interaction; and that it should provide positive visual and sensory experience. The benefits of such an environment would accrue through the facilitation of exercise, of social contact and support, of relaxation and enjoyment and a positive community self-image as well as low exposure to pathogens and environmental health hazards. Potential barriers to older people’s use of their local environment included poor traffic management; inaccessible positioning of key services such as shops, transport and toilets; the presence of physical obstacles and obstructions such as high kerbs and bins on pathways; unattractive landscaping; and poor cleansing and maintenance.

As well as the physical attributes of the neighbourhood, social dynamics and the behaviour of other people affected the way that older people used the local environment. Safety fears deterred older people from going to some places at some times, but on a more subtle level, the way that others treat and react to older people was also shown to be important.

Many of these aspects did appear to be potentially more salient to older people’s wellbeing than to other age groups, indicating that in locales that are poor on these dimensions, older people are likely to be more affected than others. Improving
these aspects however is likely to improve the environmental quality of life for many other residents as well.

The three study areas differed with respect to their overall quality, taken on these terms, with the inner city neighbourhood faring worst and the coastal small town faring best. This ranking however did not hold with respect to every one of the individual neighbourhood aspects as each of the neighbourhoods had some good features and some room for improvement. The study design does not allow conclusions to be drawn regarding the wider patterning of environmental quality for older people against deprivation but there is an indication that an inequality linked with relative deprivation may exist, though undoubtedly other factors are also important such as the nature of the inherited built form. Where the worst environments for older people are also in socio-economically deprived areas, however, the two forms of deprivation are likely to compound each other. This will have knock-on effects on health inequalities and wider older person exclusion.

In terms of their ability to influence decisions about the local environment and related concerns, the participants in this study had a range of views. Many were already active in their local communities and beyond. Others were not directly involved but felt able to be should they choose to. In the two more deprived areas though there was a feeling that older people are overlooked in regeneration and inclusion policies. In these areas, there was also a stronger view that some older people do not feel able to speak up or do not know the channels to go through to be heard. Some older people will not be up to active participation and strengthened advocacy channels will be needed as well as better access to consultative fora for older people generally.

Despite the range of levels of confidence and of active involvement in local issues, participants across the three areas largely felt that older people are generally viewed in society as incompetent and that this forms a barrier to their having influence or being listened to. This is symptomatic of a wider issue about the recognition of older people, their needs, and their potential contribution to society.

The findings of the study point to some policy recommendations that are detailed towards the end of this report. These include attention to aspects of design of the built environment to make it more walkable and conducive to social interaction; attention to maintenance and landscaping to make the environment more attractive, which confers emotional benefits as well as encouraging activity such as walking; and attention to both the locational and delivery aspects of key services. Potential inequalities linked with relative deprivation levels should be monitored and more resources may be needed in more deprived areas to avoid environmental impacts being much worse in such places. Policies and initiatives addressing social dynamics can also potentially improve older people’s use of local environments. In addition, consultation, participation and advocacy for older people need to be improved. In the turn towards mainstreaming equalities, adequate attention needs to be given to combating potential age discrimination across policy domains, including planning and related fields, to ensure that the interests of older people are adequately upheld.


1. Introduction

This study is concerned with the connections that may exist between the physical environmental characteristics of urban locales, and older residents’ wellbeing. It investigates these issues from the perspective of older people themselves, using three different Scottish urban neighbourhoods to build insights into the potential connections. The study was conceived as an environmental equity study, and underpinning the research questions and analysis are notions about environmental equity and justice with respect to the urban context, and about how inequity may be manifested.

Environmental equity and the distribution of environmental goods

Environmental equity studies have often focussed on the distribution of environmental hazards, and to some extent, environmental goods, showing such distribution to be not only unequal, but often burdening those already disadvantaged in other ways. Generally in the UK, interest has been in the extent to which the burden of environmental disadvantage falls on the poor, and in some research, ethnic minorities (e.g. Walker et al, 2003; Fairburn et al, 2004; Brainard et al, 2002). Studies of distribution have however not always found a clear picture, and patterns of distribution alongside deprivation have been shown to vary depending on the environmental characteristic of concern (Walker et al, ibid; Fairburn et al, ibid). Results of studies can also vary due to methodological issues and measurement of variables (King and Stedman, 2000).

It is not just environmental hazards such as pollutants that environmental equity should be concerned with however; urban environments vary in quality and are experienced as a whole, potentially encompassing many factors. Liveability issues such as litter, animal faeces, vandalism and graffiti are consistently felt more severely in deprived neighbourhoods (Brook Lyndhurst 2004a; Curtice et al, 2005). The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit defines environmental equity as encompassing three components: environmental protection (e.g. air and water quality, flooding); local place (including liveability, quality of public spaces); and access to goods (e.g. access to nature, shelter, food and transport) (NRU, 2005). This definition opens up somewhat the field of interest and usefully takes environmental equity concerns into policy arenas concerned with planning and the provision of services.

The experiential aspect is also important and has tended to be neglected by a dominant paradigm in environmental equity studies that focuses on mapping environmental hazards / goods against population characteristics. However we need to pay attention to how these various environmental features are experienced by individuals and population groups, within the context of localities. Work that has done this has shown for example that the relationships between deprivation and the experience of environmental quality may be complex and synergistic (Day, 2007), with experience of environmental hazards being potentially either compounded or mitigated by wider aspects of the socio-economic and material environment. It is also the case that the environment may be experienced
differently by different individuals and groups of individuals, for various reasons, and older people are likely to be such a group.

**Older people and environmental equity/justice**

An increasing proportion of the UK’s population is becoming ‘older’. In 2006, 18.72% of the UK population and 19.2% of the population of Scotland were estimated to be of or over state pensionable age (ONS, 2007a & b) and this proportion is set to grow through the first half of this century (ONS, 2007c). The vast majority of people prefer to ‘age in place’, remaining in their own homes and neighbourhoods of choice, for as much of their life as possible. It is therefore becoming increasingly imperative that not only is housing fit for or readily adapted for older peoples needs, but that cities and neighbourhoods are as well. As mobility tends to decline as people get older, there may be many benefits to individuals and to society from encouraging and enabling older people to live in more urbanised locations, closer to amenities and facilities.

Returning to environmental equity concerns, there are several reasons why older people may experience their neighbourhood environment differently from others, or why the local environment might have a greater impact on them than on other residents. Ageing, it must be said, is both a physical and a cultural phenomenon – our bodies change as we age, and so does the way that we are viewed and treated by society. There is no clear point at which people suddenly become ‘older people’ and certainly physical ageing varies from individual to individual in terms of both rate and the particular changes experienced. However, at population level, certain trends are clear. Older people (defined by the World Health Organisation as those over 60) are more likely to suffer from chronic illnesses such as those affecting the cardio-vascular and respiratory systems; immunity to infectious diseases generally decreases; senses including sight, smell and hearing can become impaired; the musculoskeletal system degenerates, strength decreases and mobility problems increase; gait disturbances are common, making older people more prone to falls (see WHO, 1998; WHO, 2003; Pawelec, 2006; Schultz, 1992; Lord et al, 2001). Cognitively, with age we normally become slower in processing information (Salthouse, 1996). It is important to note that many of these conditions are not necessarily an essential feature of ageing and may be ameliorated or prevented by attention to diet, physical activity and the social environment throughout the lifespan; however older cohorts in Scotland and the UK are likely to be experiencing similar issues for coming decades. All of these physical changes can make older people more sensitive to their surrounding environment in a number of ways. It is also the case that the physical environment is crucial in influencing the extent to which certain conditions and disabilities may be adapted to and ameliorated: functional ability for example is understood to be an outcome of the dynamic between an individual’s characteristics and the stresses and challenges imposed by the environment (Lawton, 1980; Glass and Balfour, 2003). Positive environments therefore can be enabling, rather than disabling (WHO, 2002), supporting functional capacity and thereby reducing the extent to which changes with age need be viewed as problematic or pathological.
Socially, and economically, an important change in the lifecourse generally occurs with retirement from work and reaching the age at which a state pension and various other benefits may be claimed – currently 65 for men and 60 for women in the UK, though some people may retire and receive private pensions before this time. At this point, older people often start to spend considerably more time in their residential neighbourhood – a pattern that may be reinforced by the onset of physical changes. It is well documented that with age, people spend more time close to their homes (Golant, 1984; Kellahe et al, 2004; Phillips et al, 2005) and this is a further reason why the residential environment may impact more on older cohorts than on younger.

Thus the impact of the local environment on older people’s quality of life is an important environmental equity concern. That older people may be disproportionately affected, or affected by different environmental features from other groups, is potentially in addition to any environmental inequities that exist between neighbourhoods by socio-economic status. Such dimensions of inequity potentially compound each other.

**Procedural equity**

Distributional equity is one way in which environmental equity is often understood, but a further component is often held to be that of procedural equity or justice. If decision-making procedures are equitable, it is argued, taking fair regard of the interests of all parties concerned, then distributional inequities are less likely to come about. Thus all groups of the population should be able to participate or be fairly represented in relevant decision-making processes, for example planning enquiries, or the drawing up of local air quality management plans.

Several researchers and commentators have pointed out that older people as a group are marginalised and under-represented in such arenas, especially with respect to planning, environmental design and regeneration policy (Riseborough and Sribjanin 2000; Help the Aged 2003; Glass and Balfour, 2003; Burton and Mitchell, 2006). This may be particularly the case in more deprived areas, as social exclusion policies tend to concentrate on the needs of families and those of working age (Scharf et al, 2004; Abbot and Sapsford, 2005). Older people, therefore, may be suffering from environmental inequity in, and through, this procedural dimension, and improvement in this sphere should lead to better outcomes for older people in terms of their environmental quality of life.

Not only are the voices of older people heard less than they should be in policy-making spheres, but relatively little research has engaged with older people themselves (Michael et al, 2006). This project aimed in part to contribute to redressing this lack, by employing a qualitative methodology and working with older residents of three different neighbourhoods. The case studies and the methodology of the study are described in the next section of this report.
Research Questions
Being of qualitative design, the study had some inbuilt flexibility in terms of the questions that it could concentrate on. Initial research questions however informed the design and focus of the interviews that were used for data collection. These research questions were:

1) How and in what ways do the older people participating in the study feel their local physical environment affects their health and well-being?
2) What could be done to improve well-being through the local environment and in what ways would these improvements provide benefits?
3) What are the differences between different localities with respect to these issues and why do these differences occur?
4) What are the links between these concerns and wider neighbourhood deprivation / relative affluence?
5) How far do the needs and experiences expressed appear to be specific to older people as a group?
6) Do participants feel that they have or could have input into decision-making procedures regarding the local environment?

‘Environment’ in this study is taken to mean the outdoor, physical surroundings, although it is important to note that this intercepts and interfaces with the social milieu and with various public indoor spaces, and so strict delimitation of interest was not considered helpful. However, the focus of interest set out to be on outdoor, public spaces, components of which may include the built form, natural elements and ambient constituents such as air and water. The social environment was of interest in the sense that it was enacted in these public spaces and affected how the outdoor environment might be experienced. The service environment was initially not of particular interest but again its role was discussed in that it influenced use of outdoor spaces.

Report structure
Section 2 of this report gives the backgroung to the case studies and describes the methodological approach used in the study. The results of the study are detailed in sections 3-10, with summary points given at the end of each. Sections 3 – 7 set out and discuss the physical dimensions of local environments that analysis across the three case studies found to be important to the older adults involved; they also give some reflection on differences between the three areas with respect to these important aspects. Section 8 discusses how social dimensions also affected older people’s local environmental experiences and section 9 goes on to discuss participants’ views on older people’s participation in decision-making arenas related to neighbourhood issues. Chapter 10 draws conclusions and makes recommendations for policy attention.
2. Case Study Areas and Study Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach, working with older people in three case study neighbourhoods in the Strathclyde region of Scotland. Interviews were used as the basis of data collection, with further observation in each area adding supplementary material. The study design and methodology was given ethical approval by the University of Glasgow Faculty of Law, Business and Social Sciences.

The methodology is explained in more detail later in the section; below is further information on the three case study areas.

Case Studies
Three case study neighbourhoods were selected for this study, in the Glasgow city-region of Scotland. In choosing the neighbourhoods, the aim was to cover three different qualitative types of local urban environment, and also to cover a range in terms of neighbourhood levels of deprivation. Each of the case studies are also neighbourhoods where older people most certainly live – at the time of their selection, each had a population at or over retirement age above the average for Scotland, which was estimated at 19.4% for 2005 (General Register Office for Scotland, 2006). They are also all located in the same region, dominated by the urban centre of Glasgow, and as such residents of each would tend to use the same services at this regional level. Being relatively close to each other, all three neighbourhoods were also to some extent known to each other – many residents of each had visited the others and one or two participants had even previously lived in one of the other neighbourhoods. Although participants were not asked to make comparisons, and indeed were only told the location of the other case studies in quite broad terms, interesting comments and reflections did sometimes spontaneously emerge.

With three case studies the coverage on criteria such as urban form and level of deprivation is not representative and there are no ‘control’ areas. Different factors such as deprivation and population density therefore cannot be isolated for analysis as many will come together. However using the case study approach, the different place characteristics covered in the overall set can be explored and the potential effects of these considered – a process that occurred both with the participants and in later analysis. Thus the overall aim is to use the case studies to explore how older residents experienced these different environments, what the key features that affected them the most appeared to be, and how the positive impact of the local environments may be maximised. Analysis in the main has taken the approach of looking across the cases to understand key themes regarding older people and their local environments, and then to consider these with respect to the different neighbourhoods where appropriate. Whilst inevitably, many of the specific observations made and examples given are context specific, it is hoped that the thematic analysis will have applicability beyond the three neighbourhoods involved. This should occur through identifying key themes, exploring why these
features are important to older people, and considering how different
neighbourhoods might fare with respect to these themes, and how they could fare
better.

In writing the main report, the identities of the three neighbourhoods have not been
made explicit and instead they will be referred to by descriptive names. The
primary reason for this is a matter of research ethics. In carrying out the fieldwork,
a number of individual participants were recruited for in-depth work and
agreement was made with each participant that their contribution would be
anonymous. Whilst quotes from individuals have been used, with their consent,
names have generally not been given, and where names do appear they have been
changed. However as the neighbourhoods are reasonably small, it is quite possible
that individual older residents would be identifiable from their contributions if the
places were to be identified. A further ethical concern is to avoid contributing to
any negative image or stigma that any of the neighbourhoods might experience.
Such a negative impact could come about by means of an analysis that is
necessarily focussed on only some aspects of each neighbourhood – this report
cannot do justice to the full nature and character of any of the three places and
communities involved. Moreover, because this report aims to be of interest beyond
the case studies involved, providing identification to a wider audience would be of
little instrumental value, and indeed the use of descriptive names may be more
helpful in this respect, helping instead to focus on the characteristics of interest.

Contextual information about each neighbourhood is however important for
interpretation and descriptions of each are given below.

**Neighbourhood 1: inner city neighbourhood.**
This neighbourhood is located at the heart of the city of Glasgow and for many
decades its residents were working class families largely employed in local heavy
manufacturing industries. Since industrial times it has been the location of high
levels of deprivation and post-industrial decline has led to deprivation being still
entrenched. The (at the time) ward\(^1\), of which the neighbourhood encompasses a
large part, is within the most deprived 20% in Scotland, with some parts within the
most deprived 5% measured at datazone\(^2\) level (Scottish Executive 2006a). The built
form largely comprises tenement housing built in the late 19\(^{th}\) century, interspersed
with some commercial and retail development, warehousing and vacant / derelict
sites. Tenement style flats are arranged in four storeys with communal entry hall
and stairs and typically a communal drying green and bin area at the back. Although
less densely populated than in the past, by today’s standards they
represent quite high density housing. In total, in 2005 almost 80% of the ward’s
housing was recorded as flats, with only 30% of housing owner occupied; over 60% was socially rented (Glasgow City Council, 2005). The neighbourhood has one local

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1 Glasgow ward boundaries were redrawn to form multi-member wards subsequent to the time of case study selection. Figures given here relate to the information used at the time study commenced in 2005, when wards were smaller, single member wards, and is therefore more indicative of the localities as studied than later ward statistics would be.

2 A spatial unit for Scottish neighbourhood data collection, with a population of 500-1000.
park, of about a quarter mile by a quarter mile in size. There is a busy high street with various shops, pubs and substantial local traffic. The neighbourhood is also very close to the urban motorway at one side. In 2004, a little over 20% of the population were estimated to be of retirement age and over (Glasgow City Council, ibid.)

Neighbourhood 2: Suburban estate
This neighbourhood is located on the outskirts of the city of Glasgow and one side faces onto open fields. It was built in the mid 20th century and largely housed workers for the industries locating on the newer peripheral industrial estates. The estate comprises a distinct clustered pattern of streets and roads and has little through traffic. Housing in the main is in the form of low-rise flats and terraces, many with gardens. Density is much lower than in the inner city neighbourhood, although there are several blocks of medium to high rise flats within the estate, and some of the participants lived in these. Around 60% of housing was owner-occupied in 2005, with most of the rest socially rented (Glasgow City Council, ibid). Starting in 2005 however, some of the poorest quality flats were being demolished and a new development of housing was being built, most of which would be owner-occupied houses. At the centre of the estate are a few shops, and a green with a play area for children – the new development has cut into the green space and had already put paid to the neighbourhood bowling green. Scattered through the estate are other substantial blocks of open grass though generally unlandscaped and sometimes sitting electricity pylons. The estate is socio-economically a little below (median) average, falling within the most deprived 40% of Scottish areas, with some datazones in the most deprived 10% (Scottish Executive, 2006a). In 2004, nearly 25% of the ward’s population were estimated to be pensioners (Glasgow City Council, ibid.).

Neighbourhood 3: small coastal town.
The third case study neighbourhood lies some distance out of the city of Glasgow and is situated on the coast, with a rural hinterland. Its population is around 11,000, keeping it within an urban classification (Scottish Executive 2006b). It cuts across more than one ward, but corresponds to a census ‘settlement’ for the sake of descriptive statistics. The town has an older centre which includes housing and quite compactly arranged shops and services; and newer, 20th century peripheral mainly residential development of various styles, both flats and houses. The 2001 census shows that over 80% of households were then owner-occupiers of their residence; only around 10% were social renters (General Register Office for Scotland, 2003). In the centre of the town, traffic can become congested and tends to move slowly through the narrower streets. Along the seafront of the town and beyond is a pedestrianised walkway with landscaped beds and seating. From here, the view across the water is very scenic, taking in some of the inner Scottish islands. Behind the town is rising moorland and farmland. The area is popular with older people relocating after retirement as well as retaining older locals – the last census
found over 25% of the population of the settlement to be 65 or over (General Register Office for Scotland, 2003).

**Methodology**

Data collection for this study took place between July 2005 and June 2006. Data collection methods were qualitative and included in-depth individual and group interviews; and unstructured observation. The interview data formed the bulk of the data used for analysis in this report. In total, 45 individuals took part in interviews. Individuals were aged from 62 to over 90, with the majority being aged over 70. Two lived in sheltered accommodation, and the rest lived fully independently. All participants were retired. All except one were able to go out of doors to some extent, though some were limited in their mobility. One individual had recently become housebound for an indefinite period, for medical reasons.

In each of the three areas, after making an initial exploratory field visit, the author (who was also the researcher) contacted specific senior citizens’ community groups in the area, as well as other groups where many of the members were likely to be retired people. Groups were found by internet searching and through local advertising collected during field visits. In addition, in two of the three areas, individual contacts, whose name had been passed to the author but who were not personally known, were approached. On contact, individuals were told about the project and asked if they would be prepared to take part in a one-to-one interview either at their home or in another place of their choosing. Those who were co-ordinators of groups were asked if group members might be approached either by them or by the researcher directly. In each area, more than one such entry point was used, so that interviewees were not all members of the same social network. Effort was also made in each area to recruit both males and females, couples and people living alone, and this was successful. Those that did participate in interviews were also asked if they could suggest others – friends and neighbours who might also agree to be interviewed. A notional payment or equivalent charity donation of £10 was offered as an incentive and as an acknowledgement of interviewee’s time and input.

One-to-one interviews averaged around an hour in length and were informal and conversational in style. A topic guide was used with questions to be covered by the researcher but the interview was flexible with respect to ordering of questions, digressions and so on. Topics that were covered included the participant’s likes and dislikes about the neighbourhood; whether they thought it was a healthy place to live; their use of the neighbourhood; out of doors habits and activities; people they met when out of the house; favourite places and places they avoided; improvements they would like to see; and other places they visited beyond the locality. Interviewees were also asked about having input in decision-making and whether they felt that they, and older people in general, were listened to with respect to their views regarding the local neighbourhood. Although in the main these interviews were one-to-one, on two occasions the interview involved a married couple.
In the case of the inner city and suburban estate areas, fewer individuals volunteered for one-to-one interviews and recruitment proved quite difficult, as is often the case in more deprived areas (see e.g. Michael et al 2006). In these neighbourhoods therefore, the researcher visited senior citizens groups, with the agreement of the relevant group co-ordinator. At these groups, some interviews took place with 3+ individuals at once. For these interviews, a small donation was made to the wider group. The same topics were covered as far as possible as in the one-to-one interviews but in the group format there was rather less discussion of individual habits and preferences in depth, although participants were always well known to each other and so personal disclosure did occur. In all three study areas however, the majority of the data was ultimately collected through one-to-one interviews.

All interviews were taped with the interviewees’ consent, and were transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts from all three areas were then analysed thematically, as one set. This was done with the aid of Atlas Ti software and first involved ascribing portions of text to ‘codes’, i.e. categories, for later analysis of content and meaning. An initial ‘coding frame’ was devised from the initial research questions and areas of interest. As the interview transcripts were read and re-read, other themes emerged through the researcher’s interpretation; these were added to the coding frame and transcripts revisited for further assigning of text to codes. After iterative coding, the text assigned to each code was considered as a whole and interpretations of meaning and significance made. Comparisons were made where appropriate. Thus the result is an interpretive thematic analysis that has been directed by the initial research questions but with themes grounded in the emerging data.

In each area, the author also undertook several hours of observation, in multiples of 30 minute blocks, at different times of day and on different days of the week. During observation, different parts of the study area were visited, mainly outdoors but including some public indoor areas such as cafes. Information was recorded in fieldnotes, rather than using a structured format such as a checklist or grid. Any relevant information was recorded and included the number of older people seen, what they were doing, and how others interacted with them. Attention was also paid to times and places where older people were not seen, and activities they were not often engaged in. Other information about the areas was recorded such as the quality and condition of relevant places and facilities. In general, interaction with older people was not instigated as part of the exercise although on occasion it happened naturalistically. The observation took place over the same time period as the rounds of interviews, and so insights and questions to arise from observation were sometimes raised with later interviewees. Likewise, issues raised by interviewees were paid attention to during observation.

The fieldnotes from observation were related to the thematic framework used in analysis of the interviews, adding extra material within the themes. At times the fieldnotes were the instigators of new themes.
The results that follow are the interpretation of some of the key themes to arise from the analysis of the data, across the three study areas. They are also related to other literature on the subject. The approach taken has been to present dimensions that were relevant to older people and their local environments across the neighbourhoods, with consideration then of how these might play out in the different places. In this way, the analysis aims to make points that are illustrated by the data, but which should have relevance beyond these specific case studies.
3. Cleanliness and Pollution

Litter and Waste
All the research participants disliked unclean and littered streets. Litter was believed to be a health hazard, encouraging rats and vermin. It also spoiled the aesthetic enjoyment of the neighbourhood and the pleasure that people might get from being outside and walking around the neighbourhood. It was important for these residents of all three study areas to see their neighbourhood clean and tidy and well maintained – a view also expressed by older participants in other neighbourhood studies (Brook Lyndhurst 2004b; Abbot and Sapsford, 2005). Excessive litter appeared to offend a sense of pride in the neighbourhood and community, and to symbolise a loss of collective self-esteem. Keeping the neighbourhood tidy, some explained, is like keeping your house tidy – it is something that makes the residents feel better, and it is also important to present a good face and a nice environment for visitors.

Litter was not necessarily felt to be something that affected older people more than other age groups, although several interviewees did lament that younger people did not care as much about what the place looked like. One or two did point out that they had seen older people dropping litter too. One possibility regarding the greater vulnerability of older people is that the more elderly might be more susceptible to any resulting health hazard such as the greater risk of infectious or vermin-borne diseases. Perhaps more importantly, litter interfered with the aesthetic quality of the environment in a way that then impinged on other qualities that were likely to be important to older people, such as its walkability (see section 5) and the sensory enjoyment they might derive (see section 7).

Healthy? Not really, because we are known to have rats running around and that's just with people throwing rubbish, food and all the rest you know. They come along here with these polystyrene things or they dump them in these planters. I mean I have seen a fox in the planter at night. It comes out of the park and into the planter so it's not healthy when you have got rats. […] Street had rats for a while as well. So there is a lot of dirt about when the rats are about. [Woman, 70s, inner city neighbourhood].

Litter. Dreadful. This place looks like a slum. Time and time again. And it’s not the people, ourselves, it’s people passing through. And it gets filthy. So I think that erm, they need a much better policy, for getting litter picked up, but it really starts, with people with their own children, and at schools, but it's a great big problem. Really big. Really nasty, really dirty. [Woman, 70s, suburban estate].

In line with the findings of the 2004 Scottish Household Survey (Curtice et al 2005), litter was perceived as a greater problem in the more deprived inner city, and the smallest problem in the most affluent area, the coastal town. In the coastal town, rubbish was known to accumulate pretty quickly along the central and seafront areas, due largely to the number of visitors to the town. The residents interviewed
were however happy with the speed that the cleansing services generally cleaned up, for example after bank holidays and busy weekends. In the suburban estate, residents were less satisfied. Here, the largest problem was identified as being around local take-away food outlets. The quite severe accumulations of litter described were put down to the behaviour of people in dropping wrappers constantly and also the poor number of bins and insufficient emptying of bins. In the inner city neighbourhood, litter was felt to be severe. The cleansing services were however praised to some extent, in that a new responsive service was found to be quick at coming out to empty bins when a complaint was made, and in addition wardens were felt to be helpful in reporting problems and getting them sorted out. A recent initiative to clean up the neighbourhood by involving residents that had been co-ordinated by the police service was also very much approved of. In other ways though, cleansing practices were not felt to be working well enough.

Well the cleansing doesn't help. I don't think...where is the man with the brush nowadays? He came along here the other day with a wee truck, the wee thing with a sweeper on it. I mean he's in the middle of the road. That's not where the junk is, its all in at the pavement. OK I know there are cars there, but all they need is a hard brush to go along the edge of the pavement. There are weeds growing out of there, we never used to have that. [Woman, 70s, inner city neighbourhood].

As well as litter originating from pedestrians and through traffic, residents in the inner city area complained about the amount of business waste that was left on the streets outside shops, at the wrong time for collection, resulting in bags breaking and litter being strewn. A further problem in the area was the amount of domestic bulk waste left on streets, due to a change in policy which meant that bulk waste was no longer collected from back courts. In tenement areas, due to the high housing density, this can result in quite large obstacles being on the pavement for several days at a time, during most weeks. The weekly free bulk uplift policy does request people to put out the waste only on or just before the day of collection but in many neighbourhoods residents often either do not wish, or in small flats are unable, to store bulk waste indoors until collection day. Several of the participants in this neighbourhood wished strongly for a return to a policy of bulk uplift from the back courts where possible.

A further cleanliness issue to emerge was dog faeces – a problem mostly in the suburban estate. Here, people from within and outside the estate would exercise their dogs in the green spaces and frequently not pick up after the dog. Again this spoiled enjoyment and caused a health hazard, though participants saw this risk as being more to children, including their own grandchildren, who might like to play on the grass.

Pollution
Air pollution is a pervasive urban health hazard that older people are medically known to be vulnerable to especially if they have pulmonary or cardio-vascular complaints (Department of Health 1998; DEFRA 2002; British Lung foundation
Traffic pollution can exacerbate breathing difficulties and affect the heart rate and rhythm. In this study, participants did feel that air quality was important to them and it was often spontaneously mentioned as one of the core components of a healthy environment.

In the coastal town, the sea air was felt to provide a particular health benefit. Even residents of the other neighbourhoods liked to visit the coast, for the benefits of the sea air.

As a healthy place ...erm, I suppose clean fresh air, all right, you can think of all the rain and the winds and that, but, clean, I think that is the important thing. [Woman, 80s, coastal town].

I sometimes pack a wee packed lunch and I toddle away, I have taken my granddaughters, they loved it... I don’t mind walking along the prom but not on that sand or pebbles that it is there, no. I like - I like the bracing air. [Woman, 60s, suburban estate].

The suburban estate was believed to have quite good quality air, because it is located away from any heavy industry, because the housing is not densely spaced, and because there is little through traffic. Also, many of the older residents had lived as children in much more polluted and crowded areas of the city, and so in contrast they felt the suburban environment to be healthy.

In the inner city neighbourhood, participants did complain about the traffic and the resultant fumes. Some also felt that the relatively high density housing contributed to the uncleanliness of the air – so many people producing emissions of various kinds and less room for air to circulate. Traffic however was pinpointed as the main source of pollution, from the high street, the bus interchange and the nearby urban motorway. Some felt that this definitely influenced the health of the population, especially the older population.

Participant: I think the health of the people in [this] area has suffered greatly.

Interviewer: tell me about that?

Participant: Definitely because I know so many people like myself that have taken chest infections, and asthma, and other related lung problems and I think its because of the pollution that is coming over the [motorway] and it was supposed to help us in [...] Road reduce the traffic but that has not happened....I could barely get on to a bus to come down because of the big vans that were parked there...and I am thinking well you are right because I have been on about the pollution, and so was my friend who passed away. She was terribly bad with...since she came up there...very bad breathing, my neighbour next door to me, she is just out of hospital again, I think this will be her third or fourth time this year. [Woman, 80s, inner city neighbourhood].
Air quality therefore was clearly felt as a health issue in all three areas, for all residents but perhaps especially for older residents or those with respiratory problems. Clean air was a plus point that would encourage people to visit and make use of a locale, whilst noticeably poor air detracted from enjoyment, made people feel the area was unhealthy, and might discourage them from walking down or using certain routes (see also section 5).

Summary points

- Participants in all areas disliked litter and felt it to convey a strong symbolic message about an area if it was present - communicating a lack of care and low collective self esteem to both residents and visitors.
- Litter was thought to present a health hazard by encouraging germs and vermin and also interfered with the quality of life of older residents by reducing enjoyment of the local environment.
- Business and domestic bulk waste could also contribute to problems of waste on the streets especially in the higher density inner city.
- Good air quality was felt to be a crucial component of a healthy environment and poor air was thought to cause problems for older people especially if they had existing respiratory problems.
- Both waste and air pollution (from traffic) were felt to be greater problems in the inner city neighbourhood; the coastal town was perceived as best in terms of litter and pollution.
4. Peace and Quiet

Many of the older people interviewed in the course of this study expressed a definite preference for ‘peace and quiet’. In general, they avoided places that were too noisy, and they also preferred their residential environment to be quiet. The immediate residential environment in fact was probably the most important in this respect; for example in the seaside town, several people liked that they could go into the town centre for a more lively atmosphere, with things happening, but that they could retreat from there to more quiet residential streets.

it's got a nice ambience in the sense that it can be busy but you can always retreat to this area ...you find it quiet. [Man, 80s, coastal town].

Those in the coastal town probably expressed this feeling the most strongly, and were the most in favour of quiet. This might be because they had self-selected to live in a quiet environment, because it was important to them. It might also be because having had the opportunity to live in a quiet place, they appreciated the value of this, whilst those who lived in noisier places grew more accustomed to the sound levels and did not tend to complain about them so much, i.e. they were acclimatised.

It was the case that although many expressed a liking for quiet, several interviewees did also say that it was possible to be too quiet, and that they liked to hear (as well as see) some life going on around them – to be aware of the activity of others and perhaps have some scene to watch or listen to. This was probably more the case with those who spent more time indoors and who had least company. However, there were certain kinds of noise that most would probably agree were disturbing to them.

Some of the sources of noise that raised complaints were neighbours – perhaps going about daily activities but in an unnecessarily loud way or at inappropriate times. Some interviewees had had particular problems with neighbours, largely over extreme levels of noise.

There were other sources of noise in the environment more generally that were disturbing to these older interviewees. One of these was traffic – most did not like excessive traffic noise either when out walking or when indoors, and if they encountered it, they found it very stressful (also found in Brook Lyndhurst, 2004b). Another important source of disturbing noise was other people (not only immediate neighbours) – examples were groups of children and young people making excessive noise when playing or gathering on the street; young people congregating very close to the interviewee’s house; and people passing by at night after pubs had closed or after leaving the night bus. In this sense, noise that was overly boisterous, possibly aggressive, and / or late at night seemed to bother the interviewees the most.

On the whole, the agreement was that participants liked to live in peaceful surroundings, but to have the opportunity to experience more active and social
scenarios, either actively, or as a bystander – without these being overly noisy or too stressful on the senses.

Interviewer: is the quietness something that –

Participant: oh, very much so. I wouldn't like to be in a noisy road......oh yes, that's a good thing, yes, peace of mind and quietness. Although I've friends [that I see] and that makes a lot of difference. [Man, 80s, coastal town].

Quiet yeah, but I like to hear some sort of, something, you know. [Man, 70s, suburban estate, living alone].

The extent to which noise was a particular issue for older people, as opposed to any other age group, was debated. Most interviewees felt that it could be an issue at all ages, but there was feeling that as people got older, they were more inclined to prefer quiet.

Some of the older individuals among the interviewees felt that physical ageing meant that they coped less well with loud noise, even that from non-threatening sources, for example boisterous (great)grandchildren. Ageing, it was implied, might lead to greater noise sensitivity. A further insight from one participant in the suburban estate was that people who are older now had been brought up in quieter times, but also, importantly, that older people were more inclined to feel anxious if they were startled by noise, perhaps because they felt more vulnerable and anxious in general:

Participant: one of the problems with noise, is the sudden effect, if someone slams the door, you wouldn't jump when you're young, but an older person, especially in their 80s, gets, 'what was that?' and I think that has a lot to do with it.

Interviewer: Oh, OK. So you’re saying you think it maybe makes people more anxious?

Participant: Yes. Yes. I think there, are threats now, [Woman, 70s, suburban estate].

On the whole then it seemed that the participants did not like to live in cloistered, overly quiet surroundings, but that as they got older they found excessive noise stressful. Noise at night was more disturbing to sleep, which tended to become lighter with age, and some kinds of noise from other people made them more anxious. Those that lived alone might be more inclined to like to hear others around them, and those that lived in the city were perhaps more used to and accepting of a certain level of environmental noise. The Brook Lyndhurst (2004b) report also found that their older interviewees felt that they got less tolerant of others’ noise as they got older, but the reasons behind this were not made clear.

On a more positive note, there were sounds that interviewees enjoyed in their environment – as discussed, the sound of other people going about their lives to
some extent, especially younger children playing. Others talked about enjoying the
sound of birdsong, and the sound of the sea. In an ideal environment, these kinds
of sound would be present and audible, but not masked by excessive noise from
traffic, businesses or other people.

Summary Points

- Participants on the whole liked quiet in their immediate residential
environment, although those that lived in the city seemed more tolerant
of background noise.
- Interviewees felt most disturbed by traffic noise, either at home or on
heavily trafficked streets, and by loud, boisterous or aggressive noise
from other people.
- Participants however did enjoy hearing some noise around them, such
as children playing and natural noises like birdsong.
- Some thought that with age people became less noise tolerant partly
because they were more easily physically stressed and tired by it and
partly because sudden noise could provoke an anxious reaction.
- Residents of the coastal town and suburban estate had greater access to
quiet environments; noise levels were highest in the inner city
neighbourhood but inner city residents also seemed the most
acclimatised to environmental noise.
5. Physical Exercise and Walking

An extremely important aspect of the way older people participating in this research used their local environment involved them getting exercise. This is a crucial issue for older adults’ health as physical exercise such as walking or cycling has a number of health benefits including improved strength, flexibility and balance; mitigation of symptoms of cardiovascular disease, arthritis and osteoporosis; and improved mental health (WHO, 2007). Survey evidence from 2000-2002 in Scotland however showed that people over 65, especially women, were less likely than younger people to reach recommended levels of exercise. The majority were not reaching the target levels of 30 minutes of walking or cycling on at least 5 days a week and indeed substantial proportions were not exercising significantly at all (Raab and Macdonald, 2004).

Participants in all three neighbourhoods in this study recognised the need for exercise and the majority of them made sure they took some form of exercise out of doors, to varying degrees depending on their physical capabilities. Many of them explicitly recognised that they needed to do so in order to retain their health and mobility:

I mean, I do believe that I've got to, no matter how difficult it is - I've got to keep walking. [Woman, 80s, coastal town].

I have seen me walking from here to [...] . It's a good half a mile's walk. I walk there and see a friend, have a coffee and walk back again you know. I try to walk as much as possible because I am bad with arthritis. [Woman, 80s, inner city neighbourhood].

Some interviewees took walks for their own sake, for pleasure or purely to get exercise, whilst for others walking was incorporated into trips for shopping or other personal business. Walking was by far the most popular form of exercise, but one or two interviewees did cycle around their local neighbourhood. Several participants also visited local sports facilities where they took part in a variety of indoor and outdoor sports or classes.

In terms of promoting wellbeing through physical exercise, therefore, the walkability of the local neighbourhood for its older residents was key. However, across the three areas, the older people interviewed identified a number of ways in which features of the local environment might contribute to, or detract from, its walkability.

One of these was the general condition and quality of pavements and walking surfaces – an issue also raised in other studies with older people internationally (Brook Lyndhurst, 2004b; Richard et al, 2005; Valdemarsson et al, 2005; Föbker and Grotz, 2006). Uneven pavements can be hard for older people to walk on because they can disturb the gait and balance, as well as causing tripping – risk of falls, already raised among older people, is thus increased. Unevenness could come
about as a result of poorly laid and maintained paving, weathering, the presence of drainage sinks, or quite commonly, through frequent digging up and infilling of sections of pathways by various utility companies.

Our pavements, like every other place, are shocking. I once did battle with [the authority] because I tripped and I broke 2 fingers. [Woman, 80s, coastal town].

But I mean certain parts, they keep digging them up and you know they never seem to go down again properly. I am not so bad, I am still all right on my feet, but you get some people...I mean you get some poor souls walking around with sticks you know. [Woman, 70s, suburban estate].

A further obstacle was posed in places by high kerbs, which older people who were experiencing diminished strength or balance, or joint stiffness, found hard to negotiate:

And the high kerbs, so if we are going to a certain place we have got to say now we have got to go along there and there’s a low kerb there and go down here, but I have got to cross there and move along there. You can't just go from A to B. [couple, 80s/90s, coastal town].

Several people also pointed out the number of further physical obstructions to walking they often encountered in the form of more moveable objects that were placed on walkways. These included shop display rails, advertising boards – particularly the type placed outside pubs and cafes to display food menus – and
rubbish bins. In the inner city neighbourhood, domestic bulk waste placed outside houses could also be a problem in this way. These obstructions could be a particular nuisance where pavements were narrow, for example in the older streets around the centre of the seaside town, sometimes obliging people to step into the roadway to pass. As well as impeding pedestrians, such obstructions caused problems for older people using wheelchairs or electric buggies.

Another kind of deterrent to people taking walks in their locality was the amount of traffic that they might encounter (another point made in a number of different contexts: see also Balfour and Kaplan, 2002; Brook Lyndhurst, 2004b; Michael et al, 2006; Hanson and Emlet, 2006). Traffic posed a safety issue and made it difficult to cross roads, thus often making older people feel vulnerable or insecure. It also made the overall experience of walking on pavements adjoining busy roads less pleasant, as heavy traffic would be a source of noise and pollution, making the environment stressful. Interviewees therefore were much more likely to choose to walk where they could avoid traffic:

Again, because you have ... low traffic density, you can walk into town, when you do that, it's not a hassle.  [Man, 80s, coastal town].

Benches and places to rest
One provided feature that helped several older people get out was benches. This initially became quite apparent from observation in spending time in all three of the areas. After observing this, some later interviewees were asked more about their use of benches and so were able to explain this further.

They have got a bit in the centre and it's going to be a garden, with seating inside it. And that's where the people are going to sit, providing they've got peace to gae in and sit.... if [the older people] are out round to the shops, the community centre here, they could always walk back and sit in there in the summer for half an hour if you like and have a rest. You have always got to remember that the older ones like us, you can get tired.  [Member of men's group, 80s, suburban estate].

Older people were often seen using benches in all three of the neighbourhoods. At times, it was clear that they were providing important points for rest and that this aided older people to make excursions on foot (also found by Valdemarsson et al, 2005; Burton and Mitchell, 2006; Biggs and Tinker 2007). In this sense, benches in shopping areas and by roadsides were as important as those placed to give more scenic views.

In some places however, for example in the park in the inner city area, benches had been vandalised and were rarely used by older people. In the suburban estate as well, benches were graffitied and surrounded by broken glass, and the landscaping spoken of in the above quote had not been maintained. As this quote also illustrates, there was sometimes a fear associated with the behaviour of other people around areas of benches, depending on their location. Nevertheless, in
general, public seating was quite crucial for many older people who had difficulty walking to make even quite short trips outside the home. Their presence and maintenance is therefore vital for older residents and users of neighbourhoods.

**Services**

Various local services played a key role in the older people interviewed getting out of doors and being active. Where these services were present, participants were more likely to get around outside, and especially to walk and exercise.

Not surprisingly perhaps, where there were several local shops and services catering for everyday needs, such as grocers, butchers, newsagents and a post office, people were more likely to walk to them, and/or between them – this was certainly the case in the small town. It helped if the roads around which they were located were also relatively easy to negotiate for the reasons listed above. The quality of the shops and their goods was also inevitably an issue – people would not be so inclined to use a local shop if it was poor quality and expensive. As the Brook Lyndhurst (2004b) report noted, older people do also use larger supermarkets and often actively choose to do so largely for reasons of economy. However participants in the Brook Lyndhurst study were all aged under 75, residents of averagely affluent suburbs, and heavily car-reliant. In this Scottish study, many participants were older and many were also not car drivers. There seemed little doubt that residents of these three neighbourhoods did, or would, enjoy using smaller local shops and services quite frequently, provided there were enough of them of sufficient quality for a local shopping trip to be enjoyable and a viable way to shop day-to-day. Trips to larger supermarkets, perhaps by car or on the bus, could then be made less frequently. Being able to shop closer and more frequently was important to the less well-off participants without their own car,
who otherwise had to carry their shopping on a bus and hence did not benefit so much from bulk shopping at larger, more distant outlets.

Shops provided places for people to walk to, but other services helped older people stay out longer and go further. Public transport was clearly crucial in this regard (see also Michael et al, 2006). Rather than removing the need to walk, transport helped people to go further distances to reach pleasant places where they might prefer to walk, without them needing to make the whole journey on foot. Several people described how they might make the round trip to a favourite place or perhaps to shops, partly by public transport and partly on foot, thus getting some exercise and pleasant outdoor experience whilst not being confined to the immediate area round their houses.

So I have seen me either getting the bus from here and walking back, or walking there and getting the bus back, if I knew I was going to get quite a lot of messages [i.e. groceries]. [Man, 70s, suburban estate].

Cafes and similar places were also much used by many older people as places to meet friends and to take a break whilst out and about. This was most evident in the small coastal town, where people often went for a coffee after a walk along the sea front, for example. Again, the opportunity for physical rest and refreshment was key, as well as the social setting and the overall enjoyableness of the experience. However it is important to note as well that not all the participants in the study felt financially able to develop such a habit; in the inner city area for example, several people felt aggrieved that the only toilet in the neighbourhood was in a tea room, where they would be obliged to spend money they might prefer not to, even though they found the tea room perfectly pleasant.

Public toilets were indeed another service that older people felt the lack of. In all three of the neighbourhoods studied, interviewees complained that there were not enough public toilets, at suitably spaced locations, and that this was a worry for them when they were out of the house for any length of time (see also Biggs and Tinker, 2007). Many felt that this was more of an issue as they had got older and needed to use the toilet more frequently (also found by Burton and Mitchell, 2006). Knowing that there were public toilets available therefore would give them far more confidence in making longer and more distant trips from home. Toilets also needed to be accessible to people with mobility difficulties – one participant for example explained how he found basement or underground toilets difficult to use.

Natural terrain
As well as the built environment being a potential source of obstacles to mobility, so could the natural topography affect older people’s preferences for walking (or cycling). Because of respiratory, cardio-vascular, joint and strength issues that developed with age, many participants found it difficult to walk up slopes and in general there was a strong preference for flat places in choosing where to take walks. The seafront of the coastal town was particularly popular partly for this reason – as well as for the sea air and views.
and I feel it now because I stay in [...] Road which has got a very small incline, and before when my wife said to me, when she developed angina, she said ‘see that hill’, I said ‘what hill?’ Now I say, ‘see that hill?’ [laughter]

[Man, 70s, member of men’s group, suburban estate].

Down the front, it's flat where the old folk – I keep forgetting I'm old, but you know, you never think of yourself as old – but for the old folk down there, it's flat. [Woman, 60s, coastal town]

Clearly the natural topography cannot be easily altered and older people largely make their own choices about where they live. However, the terrain can be taken into account in some important situations, for example in planning decisions regarding the siting of residential homes or other facilities to be used largely by older people (residents of a sheltered housing complex in the coastal town for example joked about so many residents having heart attacks due to the walk up the hill to get home). As well, it is important to provide pleasant places for older people to walk where the terrain is flat, and effort could be made to make such opportune locations as attractive for walking as possible.

**Overall attractiveness of the environment**

There is no doubt that the older people interviewed were more inclined to take walks and exercise in places where the surroundings were attractive (see also Michael et al, 2006). The elements of an attractive environment, to them, most often consisted of natural features, such as a nice view, trees, flowers, greenery, or water. Parks were therefore potentially popular, where they were well maintained and where older people felt safe. The coastal town’s seafront was optimal, as it offered magnificent views, as well as pleasant landscaping with planted flowerbeds, and, as already discussed, flat terrain, no vehicular traffic and frequent seats.

However, in less naturally blessed locations participants enjoyed other kinds of features, which included streets with gardens, and attractive or varied housing styles; and well maintained and historic public and civic buildings that gave the neighbourhood a sense of identity and history.

Interviewer: Do you ever walk around the neighbourhood; do you ever go walking just for pleasure or for exercise?

Participant: I walk to the park, thank goodness for that wee park. [Woman, 80s, inner city neighbourhood].

but I like going out, you know, this kind of thing, and you see some lovely gardens, that I enjoy, uh-huh. [Woman, 70s, suburban estate].

Where the environment was attractive, participants were far more likely actively to take walks for pleasure. In places where attractive features were in short supply and where there were often other stressors such as heavy traffic, participants had to
be strongly motivated or obliged to walk for other reasons, such as the need to get somewhere, or a determination to keep mobile.

Schemes such as the accompanied ‘health walks’ that were arranged in parks were mentioned, and both the setting and the arrangement seemed likely to motivate some people in the more built up areas to take part and exercise:

I feel myself that I would like to walk more so I have looked up the times for [the health walk] …I got that in here, the wee booklet. And I said oh that will be fine. So hopefully, I hope that the weather doesn't break down before I start my walk but I think that's quite a good thing they are doing in the parks, I think that's quite good. [Woman, 80s, inner city neighbourhood].

Other issues
In using outdoor space, safety was a key concern (see section 8). Perceptions of not being safe prevented some older people from going to certain areas that they might otherwise enjoy walking in, for example parks, even in the daytime:

Well the only places I see you could walk [in this neighbourhood] would be these two parks. And they are not very… and when you are worried about who is going to be there that puts you off you know. [Woman, 80s, inner city neighbourhood].

Issues concerning the behaviour of others are discussed at greater length in section 8. There were also issues to arise regarding people having company for undertaking walks and exercise: several people said that they would be more inclined to take walks if they had someone to walk with:

Interviewer: I was just asking you if you walk around the neighbourhood?

Participant: Oh well I would if had somebody to walk around with, I haven't. If I feel like it I do. [Woman, 70s, suburban estate].

The relationship between getting out, exercise and social contact is discussed further in section 6.

Summary Points
- Interviewees knew that physical exercise was important for their health and the majority made a conscious effort to do at least some walking
- Barriers to easy walking occurred frequently and included high kerbs and objects in the path such as display rails, advertising stands and bins.
- Uneven pavements caused a problem for many participants, increasing the risk of falls.
- Natural topography could also make walking difficult and flat places were better for older people to take walks.
- Participants disliked walking in areas of heavy traffic and were more inclined to walk if traffic was light.
• Benches provided crucial places to rest for many older people who tired quickly and so enabled them still to make trips on foot.
• Local shops, cafes and other services provided places for people to walk to and so encouraged exercise if they were attractive enough.
• Public transport was also important so that people did not have to make entire round trips on foot, but could walk part of a trip.
• Toilets were identified as lacking in all areas and this made many older people less confident about being far from home.
• Attractive environments with natural features and / or interesting and historic buildings encouraged people to take walks.
• Safety concerns and lack of company deterred some participants from taking walks especially in certain locations such as some parks.
• Overall the coastal town was the most conducive to walking but all three neighbourhood environments presented some problems in this respect. The exact nature of the problems differed between places.
6. Social Interaction

For the older people involved in this study, and in their view, for older people more widely, social interaction was vital for their well-being, health and quality of life (see also e.g. Feldman and Oberlink 2003; Scharf et al 2004; Richard et al 2005; Hanson and Emlet 2006; Walker 2006). Individual participants varied in the amount of interaction that they experienced: some were married, with family living close by, and involved in several community groups, whilst at the other extreme were some who lived alone, with family more distant, and who might go several days at a time without any significant face-to-face social interaction.

When talking with interviewees about how they used their local neighbourhood and when they went outdoors either locally or to more distant places, their accounts of being out often involved some kind of social interaction as a significant part. Often, the enjoyment involved both a social element and an element of being outdoors in a pleasant environment. This might be with people that they already knew – friends, family or neighbours with whom they went for a walk or sat in a favourite spot; sometimes social clubs organised trips further afield, for example from the inner city neighbourhood to the coast, so that members could enjoy a social day in scenic surroundings. In this way, the environment could provide a focus for socialising, and conversely the social element would provide a motivation for people to get out and perhaps get some exercise.

Just as important, indeed crucial to many, however, was having the opportunity to meet people and interact in an unplanned way, when going around the local neighbourhood. Of the three study areas, this happened most in the small local town, and it was something that people clearly valued:

You meet a lot of people and although you don't know who they are, you recognise them. So you walk down the street, 'good morning, lovely day, how are you keeping, you've got a stick, what happened?' – that kind of thing. And people talk to you. They never pass you on the street, they always talk and if you're walking in a street where there's just 2 people and you don't even know them, they'll say good morning … which you don't always get.

[Woman, 80s, small coastal town.]

Oh yes…If I go out…we used to go out on messages [i.e. shopping], it took us more time stopping and talking to people than actually doing the shopping because when you meet so many people…I was out this morning and I met 4 people. And they were asking how is [wife] getting on?

Wife: You feel it's a very caring community. [Couple, 80s / 90s, small coastal town.]

This culture came about partly through the existence of good social networks, active churches that many older people attended, and the small size of the town meaning that people tended to recognise each other even if they did not know each
other well. However, the fact that people saw each other often this way and that they were inclined to stop and talk when they did, meant that networks could more easily be maintained and strengthened, and that someone who did now know many people, such as a newcomer to the town, could get to know others and feel integrated quite quickly.

In both the suburban estate and the inner city area, such interaction seemed to happen less, and a higher proportion of participants seemed to feel isolated; as a result they were less inclined to go out, which perpetuated the situation. These two neighbourhoods did also have active churches that many older people attended, and various other activity groups and networks, though perhaps not to the extent of the coastal town; they were also smaller than the town. Through discussion and observation, it appeared that there were some neighbourhood features that might be important in influencing the level of interaction that might take place for older residents when they went outside.

The section on physical exercise has already discussed the features of neighbourhoods that make them more or less walkable for older people. Where places were walkable, it is not surprising that interaction was more likely to take place, and this helped in a large measure in the coastal town, which was the most walkable of the three areas. Because there were a number of good shops arranged around central streets in proximity to each other, with relatively well controlled traffic, older residents of the town were more inclined to do their shopping on foot, more likely to meet each other when doing so, and more inclined to stop and chat as the streets were quiet enough to do so. As well, people would meet when out for
pleasurable walks on the seafront or in the environs. Because the environment was pleasant and encouraged people out, they were of course more likely to see others, and this critical mass meant older residents felt safe and connected to others.

It's amazing the number of people you find out walking, you know, if they can get out. [Man, 80s, small coastal town].

In the inner city area, by contrast, interviewees talked of a time when the situation was more like this, but for various reasons, this was not the case any more. One reason was the decline in number and quality of local shops, which meant that people no longer met when doing their shopping:

Participant: When I go down to [...] for shopping I could maybe not meet anybody I know. Maybe another day I meet one person.

Interviewer: Is that something that is different from how it used to be?

Participant: Yes. Oh I think so. I think so. Because I think people are going out to the supermarkets. [...] Road was a lovely shopping area. Both sides had every kind of shop, shoe shop, baker's, butcher's, every type of shop, fishmonger's, on both sides of the road...each area had all these shops that you could buy here and there, and cross the road and get so many things on the other side. It was lovely, it was an outing. Everybody used the local shops and that's... you met people practically every other day... you could meet and stand and blether to people for as long as you liked. But that's what I am saying, the companionship...that's gone now I think. People go to the supermarkets if they can get there by bus, if not like myself, I have to rely on my daughter to come on a Saturday and take me for a decent bit of shopping. [Woman, 80s, inner city neighbourhood].

Another practice that had declined in the inner city neighbourhood was that of going into the local park to stroll or sit – this was another place where in the past, neighbourhood residents, especially older residents, had been able to go and find social contact as well as a pleasant environment. At the time of study, however, many older residents would not go into the park at all, as they felt unsafe and apprehensive of others (of varying ages) there.

Participant: But you wouldn't sit in [the park] now.

Interviewer: You would be too worried?

Participant: You don't know who is going to be sitting there beside you, you know. It's a crying shame because it's a good area and it was always a place you could go and sit, and you wouldn't be 10 minutes until somebody came along that you would know, or just say hello to. And there you go – you were sitting and talking for an hour or so. [Woman, 70s, inner city neighbourhood].
Benches in other, safer feeling, places were however used by older people, and turned out to be important sites of socialising as well as places for older people to rest (Teo 1997’s study noted that older people often opted to use such informal spaces for social interaction). In the inner city area, several benches outside a small supermarket appeared almost continually occupied by older people (not always the same individuals), talking to each other. In the coastal town as well, older people were often socialising while resting or taking in the view.

In the suburban estate, older people were less visible in general and there seemed to be little interaction for them in the neighbourhood. Several wished for more opportunities for unstructured socialising and some said they would be more inclined to go outside if they had company. Few walked around the local neighbourhood much, as neither the local shops nor green spaces were of sufficient quality to motivate them to do so. For walks and shopping, most travelled outside the neighbourhood either by bus or car, to further parks and shopping areas or supermarkets, where they were less likely casually to meet people they knew. Many older people in this area were also apprehensive when outside and particularly nervous of younger people; conflict between local gangs was something of an ongoing issue generally at night, and this knowledge as well as other encounters they or their acquaintances might have had, made older people feel generally quite vulnerable and apprehensive of all younger people. The lack of visibility of older people, despite there being a relatively high proportion in the area, perhaps added to this, creating something of a vicious circle. In general, older people were more likely to be seen sitting in their own gardens, if they had them, and less in public spaces. The relatively poor maintenance and landscaping of the local public spaces did not help.

A further neighbourhood physical feature that emerged in discussion as influencing the degree of social interaction was the design of housing and neighbourhood layout. In the coastal town, again, streets and small housing developments tended to have areas of open and/or shared space and neighbours thus tended to see each other come and go regularly:

We have a little neighbourhood watch…we look out…if you haven't been out for several days the phone will ring, are you all right? And so we keep an eye on each other for that matter. [Man, 90s, coastal town].

Whilst the neighbourhood design cannot create the neighbourly spirit, it did seem to facilitate its enactment. In the other areas, with other building styles, especially flats with little shared space, interviewees complained that they rarely saw their neighbours:

Well I have known for a long time these types of buildings and the bigger ones, there can be people living in them that…for example, my neighbour next door, I seen him in December, and I didn't see him again until…Thursday last week [this was April]. That's the first time I have seen
him since December and he's living next door! The way you bump into people, you know. [Man, 70s, suburban estate, in one of the blocks of flats].

Two residents of the flats in the suburban estate separately suggested a communal ‘open’ flat where all residents could drop in, as they felt the need for more opportunities for informal social interaction, without having to attend a club or formal activity group.

In general, across the three areas, the importance of social interaction outside of the home environment should not be underestimated – this, combined with a need to get out, for a change of scene and to spend time in pleasant places, was absolutely critical for older people’s wellbeing. In the suburban estate and especially in the inner city neighbourhood, a lack of day-to-day social interaction on the street, a sense of older people being vulnerable, and a shortage of services to take less mobile people out, were sorely felt, and believed to have severe consequences:

I really feel that there is an awful lot of people…and I do know from the experience that I had for four years working with senile dementia that a lot of it was brought on with loneliness. I do know that. I mean I knew their circumstances and I knew that these were people that had nobody to come and take them about, and it was just a build up of imagination.

(continuing later) If you don't have a family who has a car that they will come and take you away to the seaside for two or three hours, I feel terribly, terribly angry that there is not that facility for elderly people. There should be more community transport... I mean we did try, we had a business plan drawn up and there was a pilot scheme and it was for the use for the elderly, but when it was worked out, it was [not economical]. [Woman 80s, inner city neighbourhood].

Other work has also suggested that neighbourhood characteristics can shape social interaction, and in this way, the wellbeing of older residents. Krause (1996) argued that symbolic meaning and fear of crime both influence the degree of social interaction that will take place, and that in dilapidated neighbourhoods, older adults’ health is worsened due to strain on social relationships. In a Norwegian study, Dalgard and Tambs (1997) found that physical and service improvements in a small town were accompanied by an improvement in the mental health of the older residents in particular and they attributed this to the improved social environment, linked with the improved physical and infrastructural environment. The Social Exclusion Unit (2006) in the Sure Start to Later Life document acknowledge the need to design public spaces in ways that are conducive to the development of social networks, including pleasant and secure public spaces, and shopping areas with places to sit.

Summary Points
- Social interaction was frequently a crucial element of older people’s out of doors activities and was felt to be vital for health and well-being.
• As well as planned trips and activities with friends and family, opportunities for impromptu social interaction were very important.

• Neighbourhood features that encouraged walking also promoted such interaction as they promoted a critical mass of older people being out and about. These included good local shops and services and pleasant areas to walk with low volumes of traffic.

• Benches provided important informal sites of socialising as well as places to rest, although participants did not use them in some places because they were afraid of getting harassed.

• The design and layout of residential neighbourhoods and locales affected the extent to which people saw and communicated with their neighbours. Large blocks of flats were the worst in this sense, with residents often not knowing each other by sight.

• Informal outdoor social interaction involving older people was highest in the coastal town where the locale was more walkable and larger numbers of older people were visible. In the other neighbourhoods, fear as well as a shortage of the above features led to generally fewer opportunities for such interaction.
7. The Sensory Environment and Emotional Wellbeing

The participants’ environment was appreciated and experienced through the senses: largely visual, but also incorporating other senses. Where these experiences were positive, environmental conditions had a lot of power to improve well-being and quality of life.

Positive sensory environments were largely associated with natural elements. These included water, seascapes, trees, flowers, green spaces, birds and other wildlife. Of the three environments explored, the coastal town contained the most such natural elements and these were very highly valued. The view out to sea and across to the islands was a particular asset that all interviewees appreciated and talked of enthusiastically:

Well, it's wonderful to be beside the sea. I love that and it's wonderful to be … to see the views that we see or the islands if we go up the hill and we see the whole Firth. It's absolutely beautiful. [Woman, 80s, coastal town].

Some nights, when we're coming back from social bridge, we come along the front and the sky is a sort of a … bluey golden creamy red, pink, black, grey … it's every colour and it's just the setting sun and it's absolutely wonderful and never twice the same and it's beautiful to watch. It's like looking at … it's like being in the art gallery where you see all the paintings. [Woman, 80s, coastal town].
Such views of nature however were not only enjoyable, they were felt to be distinctly therapeutic (see also Hartig, Mang and Evans, 1991; Otoson, 2001; Korpela 2001; Korpela and Ylen, 2007). One woman in the coastal town who lived alone described how the view from the window of her flat gave her an emotional boost:

I think it makes all the difference, I mean I can sit here, feeling not too well, or, maybe just inside myself, and I can sit and look out there….whereas if I was in a flat in a city, and looking out at somebody else's house, or the traffic, I think I'd be depressed. [Woman, 80s, coastal town].

Another participant who had been twice bereaved described how finding a spot to sit and look out over the coastal landscape gave him some comfort and emotional relief. In general, the scenic views seemed to instil in people a sense of peace and transcendence that they found soothing and uplifting:

up the hill, as I was saying, and that's beautiful. It's a wonderful feeling of being up there looking down and you don't see a human person. It could be totally barren and you think … that's been here for hundreds of years and it's going to be here long after me and it is a wonderful feeling when you look down on […] and over to [the islands]. [Woman, 80s, coastal town.]

Good views however were not all about the seascape; others enjoyed views of the hills, of gardens, even of particular trees and plants.

The coastal town was perhaps the most blessed with respect to the aesthetics of the environment, but the other two study areas also had such elements that the interviewees enjoyed. The suburban estate had green areas, flower beds in places, and views of the mountains beyond the city, especially from one side which faced onto open fields. These were all enjoyed by the older residents:

Interviewer: So why is it do you think that it's nice to have greenery and views and so on?

Participant: Och well…well with these type of buildings you can't have a garden, you know and to me there is nothing nicer than a bit of grass, trees. [Man, 70s, suburban estate].

At the same time, though, those interviewed did not spend much time using the public green areas, and observation showed that such areas were often empty – few older people in particular were ever seen there. This appeared to be largely because the green areas in this estate tended to be unlandscaped blocks of plain grass, and poorly maintained – thus there was a lack of anything much to engage with. Interestingly, a study by Ulrich and Addoms (1981) found similarly that urban residents did not especially like empty grass covered spaces lacking vegetation and trees. Nevertheless, the greenness in itself can be an appreciated part of the landscape: as the above quote shows however, for people without gardens, such public green areas take on increased importance.
In the inner city area, interviewees valued natural elements of the landscape as much as anywhere else – but in this type of built up area, the kinds of resources available in this respect were often on a different scale. The neighbourhood park aside, what was valued by many interviewees were small areas of greenery, plants and flowers, which again were felt to have an important emotional effect:

I would imagine everybody wants to look at a thing of beauty. It kind of lifts your spirit to see… [Woman, 80s, inner city neighbourhood].

Planted beds near the bus interchange, and flower tubs and displays that had been positioned by the council at points along the main high street were for this reason very popular. Interestingly, interviewees often felt that because the neighbourhood was generally quite a stressful environment, both physically and socio-economically, such uplifting elements were in fact more needed and became even more important (see also Kuo 2001):

When I was young it was just all dirt and grime if you like because of the chimney pots and I mean we all burnt coal. You had the [industry] ...even the hospital used to be full of smoke and all that, but even then we still had nice flowers. And I think it brings you back to nature and makes you realise that there is more to life. Even just sitting watching flowers, looking at the flowers, the different colours, the different shapes or petals and all that, you could spend ages. [Woman, 70s, inner city neighbourhood]

Participant: I was just thinking even if I lived in [the inner city neighbourhood], what is it about these streets, they are so damned depressing you know. And all of a sudden it just got to me there wasn't a blessed window box, there was nothing, they are all grey, there is no greenery anywhere. You can walk up to [the park], but I mean actually in the street itself and it does make a difference, it really does. In my opinion it really does.

Interviewer: How does it make you feel?

Participant: It just makes you...it really makes you feel better, seeing a bit of greenery, it needn't be great big trees, it could be, something to take away the greyness you know? [Woman, 70s, suburban estate, former resident of the inner city neighbourhood.]

Again, the power of natural elements of the landscape to provoke a feeling of transcendence from everyday stresses seemed to be a crucial quality (see Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Korpela 2001). As the last speaker quoted above said, these elements could even be quite small – in a built-up area, street level details like window boxes could be crucial.

For those that were less mobile especially, the view from their windows became very important, and again, green, natural views were prized. Through looking frequently at the same view, participants got to know it intimately; one woman in the inner city area whose tenement flat overlooked the park described in detail the
order in which different trees and plants in the park came in to leaf and bloom during spring and summer. Others had particular favourite trees and plants that they enjoyed from their window:

When I first moved here that table was there and I would sit and write letters and tell them about this tree that was outside my window. [Woman, 60s, suburban estate].

Previous research has found evidence of measurable health benefits from pleasant views to people confined indoors, although not specifically elderly people (Moore 1981; Ulrich 1984).

As noted at the beginning of this section, although the visual experience of surroundings was the dominant and probably most important sensory way in which they were perceived, the participants did enjoy other sensory experiences from their environment, including listening to birds, smelling flowers, and sitting in the sun. These are all relatively simple pleasures that could be easily promoted, and yet which added much to older people’s quality of life.

The other nice thing about living here is sitting out in the garden and at the right time of day you can hear the birds chirping... and you can smell the roses in your neighbour's garden. [Man, 80s, coastal town].

Although this section has concentrated on the natural elements that people found therapeutic and emotionally uplifting in their environments, other more anthropogenic elements could also be attractive. In the coastal town again, many people enjoyed watching boats and shipping traffic on the water and found this a source of enjoyable distraction – one participant made quite a structured hobby out of it. Other features that were enjoyed in other areas as well were attractive and historic buildings, at least partly for the sense of identity they conveyed especially to those that had lived in the area for a long time and perhaps grown up there. However, although enjoyed, these had a less clearly therapeutic power than the more natural surroundings.

Summary points
- Positive sensory environments were emotionally uplifting and important in imparting a sense of well-being.
- Natural elements were the most enjoyed by most participants, and these included trees, grass, flowers, water, birds and other wildlife. Environments with such elements were felt to be therapeutic, helping people transcend everyday worries and also to cope with more extreme stresses and emotions.
- Participants also enjoyed certain interesting anthropogenic elements of landscapes and scenes, such as watching shipping traffic.
- Small resources could be important especially in built up areas – window boxes, flower tubs and so on provided much appreciated
natural elements and were felt to be uplifting. They were also important to people who perhaps could not walk far and so might not reach a local park.

- Natural and aesthetically pleasant elements may be more important in stressful environments such as polluted, densely built up and / or deprived areas, where people’s levels of everyday stress are higher.
- Views were very important for people who spent a lot of time indoors.
- Participants talked of visual enjoyment most, but the environment was enjoyed in important ways through other senses as well.
8. The Behaviour of Others in the Local Environment

Previous sections have described the qualities of the local environment that this study found to be important to the older people who participated across the three neighbourhoods. Whatever the physical qualities of a locale might or might not be however, the ways that [older] people use that environment are clearly affected by the social dynamics within the place: by the behaviour of others, both in the way they use the environment and public spaces, and in the way they respond directly to the older people themselves.

Safety

It would be surprising if safety in public spaces had not emerged as a concern for the older people interviewed. Personal safety was, indeed, a concern across the three neighbourhoods; most participants felt nervous at times when outdoors or had particular places they avoided or times of day that they would not go out. Most individuals had not themselves experienced any significant problems, although two male participants had in the past been mugged quite aggressively, one of them on two separate occasions, all outside of their current local residential neighbourhood.

Fear centred on fear of being attacked, either for robbery or in a more randomly violent fashion; and fear of being harassed and verbally, perhaps physically, abused for the amusement of others. Participants also wished to avoid places where they felt violence might occur between others, for example between young people at weekends. The safety of their property including cars and garden accessories was also often a concern.

In the coastal town, all participants would go to almost all places during the daytime without anxiety, although there were a couple of streets that some avoided as that was generally understood to be the area where drug dealers and other ‘undesirables’ lived. One participant in fact lived in this area and was perfectly happy there, though his car had recently been damaged – through vandalism-which had clearly caused him a lot of upset and anxiety. All participants however said that they would avoid the town centre on Friday and Saturday evenings, and indeed most would generally not go far on foot in the evenings at all. Fridays and Saturdays were considered to be the times when groups of young people were out drinking excessively and perhaps taking drugs, and becoming violent. Often those involved in this kind of behaviour were believed to be people coming in from out of town, rather than locals. In general, participants had not personally witnessed such violent behaviour, but had read accounts in the local press. As well as avoiding the town centre at night, several interviewees said that they would not take late trains, especially a late train home from Glasgow, as these were not policed and were believed to be full of drunk and rowdy people who caused a lot of trouble – some interviewees had acquaintances who had been harassed on these trains. Even in the daytime, many participants were nervous if encountering teenagers in groups, but did not avoid any specific places as a result.
In the suburban estate, most participants again did not like to go out after dark although as several of them were not car owners they sometimes had little choice if they were returning from an evening activity in winter. Anxiety and fear appeared stronger here than in the coastal town. Fear of going out after dark had curtailed the activities of some older people in the neighbourhood:

As Bob was saying, we have a ladies [group], my wife is the treasurer, on a [...] afternoon ....they have about forty members right, maybe more. But they will not come out at night and the majority of them used to be members of the Women's Guild. So they had to transfer more or less to an afternoon. Now again, this is not a good thing because as Bob says people are frightened to go out. [Man, 80s, men’s group discussion, suburban estate.]

There was a lot of concern about the behaviour of young people, with many anecdotes about underage drinking in public spaces, aggressive behaviour, and vandalism. Some ongoing issues with local gangs – whose presence was evident through graffiti – had involved recent violent clashes and had greatly increased the anxiety of older residents regarding general security, especially in public spaces in the evenings. Most participants were afraid to remonstrate with any young people whom they saw engaging in vandalism or aggressive behaviour.

Safety concerns were probably greatest in the inner city area where again participants were generally afraid to go out at night. Few here were car owners and their evening activities were therefore quite limited; some would sometimes take taxis but most relied on lifts from others if going out after dark. Older people here often attended meetings and events in groups and would see each other home – in such a way they had developed practices to cope with their feelings of vulnerability. Other practices included not taking handbags at night, and carrying their keys in their hands as something they could potentially defend themselves with in case of attack. Many were determined not to succumb too much to fear, but took these precautions.

A lot of inner city neighbourhood participants felt vulnerable even in the daytime and there were places that they avoided. Some streets were almost entirely avoided because they were known to house the more problematic local residents. One significant place that was largely avoided, sadly, was the neighbourhood park – as well as other parks in the wider vicinity. The behaviour of others in the local park led to the older residents feeling decidedly unsafe. Such behaviour anecdotally included fighting, drinking, drug taking and vandalism (see also Brook Lyndhurst 2004b).

It’s like Bannockburn out there in the summer. I mean Bannockburn has got nothing on this lot. They have got a battle of their own and they throw bottles and they bang one another with sticks and whatever. [Woman, 70s, inner city neighbourhood].

I don't go to that wee park because sometimes there is alcoholics, they sometimes go in and it’s not, no, its not a nice thing to be sitting with somebody who is loaded with alcohol who comes up and tries to talk to you
and that, you don't feel very comfortable. In fact it happened to me just…the day that I was looking for this place I ended up in the park because I was absolutely exhausted … so I went down and I sat there enjoying watching the kids romping about and I was quite enjoying the sun and thinking well I will just pass the time. But I was only there about maybe half an hour when this drunk man came up and was quite abusive because I didn't answer him. [Woman, 80s, inner city neighbourhood].

Certainly the observation part of this study confirmed that the benches in the locale, especially the park, were often populated by people who were drinking. People drinking and begging also led to older people not using benches in other parts of the neighbourhood including around the flower beds that they liked, near the transport interchange.

Because of such issues about how others used public space, therefore, some places that had the right physical elements to be advantageous environments were not in fact enjoyed by the older residents.

**Vandalism**

Another related issue that curtailed the benefit older residents got from their local environment, again, particularly in the inner city neighbourhood, was vandalism. Not only had the park benches been vandalised so that they were barely useable, but vandalism and arson had led to facilities, including a social hut that was used by local older people in the park, being destroyed and they had not been replaced.

Participant: Now it's quite an effort for me to [walk far], I thought you can walk home, and take a taxi up, you can walk home. And when I got to the top of […] Road there, and I went to the park and I said now I will get a wee seat for 5 minutes. There weren't any seats.

Interviewer: No seats?

Participant: They have all been vandalised. You know…older folk used to just go over and sit there. My dad went over every day….And I mean any day you could go into that park and it was full. ‘Oh come on there is a wee seat here’ and you know another one in, and sit and blether it was great.

Interviewer: What happened?

Participant: It was always full. I mean they put new seats in and they set them on fire. They tried metal ones and they just put them all out of shape and that.

[Woman, 70s, inner city neighbourhood]

As this quote illustrates well, the walkability, sociability and aesthetic enjoyment of the environment for older people is severely affected by such acts of vandalism.
Vandalism also led to trees and plants being destroyed. This was also an issue in the suburban estate, again reducing the benefits of a pleasant visual environment for others:

the unfortunate thing again when the daffodils come up in places, the kids pick them up. Fair enough if they are taking them home to their mum or dad or anything like that. You see them further up the path, discarded you know. It's sheer vandalism that. [Man, 70s, suburban estate].

In the suburban estate, vandalism of benches was also something of an issue, although not as severely as in the inner city neighbourhood. No participants complained of this, but observation showed that the public benches were often graffitied and there was a lot of broken glass around them. In the suburban area graffiti was a problem interfering with the aesthetic quality of the locale. Only in the coastal town did graffiti and vandalism appear to be at a relatively low level. The observation exercise found little obvious evidence of these, and only one participant there complained of vandalism - the individual whose car had been damaged.

**Intergenerational relations**

As the above discussion shows, issues regarding the behaviour of others were often, though not exclusively, attributed to young people and teenagers. As a result, many participants acknowledged that they often felt nervous encountering teenagers and young people in general, especially if the teenagers were in groups, regardless of whether they seemed actively engaged in any undesirable behaviour (also noted in Brook Lyndhurst 2004b). Several participants acknowledged that this was a problem among older people: that older people found it hard to know when they should feel threatened and when they need not; that they sometimes just assumed all teenagers and young people were aggressive and badly behaved; and that older people themselves might sometimes even be partly to blame for problematic interactions:

My old age group, I find a lot of people, when they see a gang of youths, they get a scowly grumpy face, you know? And the youngsters notice it, and some of them take it a bit, to themselves - but it’s fear. You know, it’s fear….some of the young ones give you a very hard stare, but, I do feel with youngsters that, they get glared at an awful lot, which isn't really fair, all right they're walking past, they're a wee bit noisy, they're young. And I've found quite often if they're walking past and I give them a smile, I get a smile back – size it up, I mean you can see that there's some that, you just don't see them, you know you think oh.....but a lot of them it's just, they're young. [Woman, 70s, suburban estate].

when I took my grandson down to see, there was a concert, and it didn't finish until quarter past ten, and we were walking back up, and he of course wanted some chips, and we were walking back up and there was a group of people and I must admit I sort of tensed up a bit thinking, you know... but no
they were fine, it was just me listening to all this talk… but they can be, erm, threatening. [Woman, 80s, coastal town].

Interviewer: Anything that would make it better for older people?

Participant: Make it more safer for people that are afraid you know because it is true if you see a gang of youths you do get frightened you know. Make it that they know they are safe. [Woman, 70s, inner city neighbourhood].

In order to tackle the kinds of problems described above, several kinds of initiative are likely to be necessary. Very popular with the older people interviewed was the suggestion of reinstating wardens in the smaller local parks. Certainly, some kind of overseeing of parks would seem necessary to regulate some of the behaviour of others sufficiently and give older people in the more deprived neighbourhoods the confidence to use these spaces again, even in the daytime. A second clear opportunity for further work is regarding intergenerational relations. Several neighbourhoods have seen schemes that have brought older and younger people together either in mediated discussion or actively to work on local projects. In this study there would appear to be clear scope for the further development of such projects to yield important benefits, given that many older people acknowledged that their anxiety around young people in general was defensive and potentially unwarranted in at least in some cases. Ultimately, attention to wider socio-economic concerns is likely to be necessary to address some of the more extreme kinds of behaviour and problematic social dynamics encountered in some of these spaces.

**Treatment of older people**

The issue of general recognition of older people as positive members of society is discussed in section 9, in relation to their input in decision-making spheres. The way that older people are treated by others also extends to and affects their use of public space and local environments (see also Biggs and Tinker, 2007). Intimidation could be one aspect of this; although as discussed above it might often be unintentional, there is no doubt that all younger generations – not exclusively teenagers – could understand older people’s anxiety better and do more to lessen it.

More subtle and more frequent were problems and difficulties that arose from others failing to take into account the needs of older people that might arise as a result of physical ageing. This was occasionally mentioned in interviews but also often picked up in observation. Others around older people regularly became impatient for example if the older person was obstructing their way, or if they needed to be given information more than once. An important and frequent instance of this kind of impatience can occur when older people are crossing roads: traffic signals often do not leave enough time for some older people with slow walking speeds to cross the road fully before the lights change (see also Michael et al, 2006; Hanson and Emlet, 2006). Drivers can be inconsiderate and keen to move at the change of lights, making the older person feel harassed and scared by traffic
bearing down on them. Anxiety about such situations can reduce the walkability of the local environment and make the older person much less inclined to use the outdoor neighbourhood.

Interestingly in this study, there appeared to be fewer impatient interactions and far more tolerance of older people in general, in the coastal town – although the observation was not carried out or analysed in a manner to be conclusive on degrees of difference on this point. However such a difference is likely explained at least in part by the relatively high proportion and crucially the greater visibility of older people in this neighbourhood compared to the others. Younger residents of the town, including young people and children, were clearly quite used to older people being around, and generally appeared to have a greater physical awareness of them. Drivers also seemed more aware, something that was helped by road signage that both indicated the likely presence of older people to drivers, and gave clear indications and warnings to pedestrians. Thus, having an environment that facilitates older people getting out can help to give them greater visibility and a more positive reception – creating a virtuous circle. A further possible partial explanation of the different interaction dynamics is that levels of short- and long-term stress in the more deprived neighbourhoods are generally higher, leading to more problematic interactions between individuals and groups of many kinds.

The segregation of older people
It did seem apparent in this study that older people were often happier surrounded by other older people. Levels of fear and anxiety regarding younger people certainly contributed to this. The degree of harassment and nuisance that some felt
they suffered from younger people also did, along with issues such as noise where preferences clearly differed. In the suburban estate, the flats where some interviewees lived had originally been designated for older people (aged over 48 according to one resident) but more recently the housing association had allocated flats to younger people including some with children. More than one interviewee there felt that they would prefer the original policy to stay in place and they would prefer to live around only other older people:

Maybe we are right in thinking that these blocks of flats that were intended for older people should be kept for older people. Do you know what I mean? That’s commonsense to me. And we are not being ghettoised, we feel safe, we feel secure, with people our own age. [Woman, 60s, suburban estate].

This is the opposite to the view that was described in the Brook Lyndhurst report (2004b) where the older participants felt they did not want to be ‘ghettoised’, but a report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2006 (Croucher, 2006) reported that retirement villages are becoming a popular choice for older people partly for the sense of security and companionship derived from being with other older people.

Even in the coastal town in this study where older people were most visible and had the least problematic view of local social dynamics, older people tended to segregate themselves in time, if not in space. Older people were visibly engaged in outdoor activities in the town to a far greater degree in the relatively early mornings around 9-10.30am, and at this time interaction between older people was very high. This could of course be due to a generational preference for early rising, and organising the day according to certain routines, but a liking among older people for meeting and being around other older people almost certainly contributed to this synchronisation and maintenance of this pattern. Whilst not problematic in itself, together pieces of evidence suggest that there may be a significant trend for some older people to prefer segregation in space and / or time; they thus may be reluctant to buy into government visions for mixed communities.

**Summary Points**

- All participants were concerned about their personal safety outdoors to some degree and this affected their use of the neighbourhoods. Fears centred around being mugged or harassed or being caught up in violence between others.
- Fears were greatest in the inner city neighbourhood where most participants would not go out at night and avoided some parts even in the daytime.
- Safety concerns were lowest in the coastal town but even here most participants would not go to the town centre at night on weekends.
- Many had concerns about using public transport at night.
- In the inner city neighbourhood, many interviewees avoided local parks for fear of being mugged or harassed, and feared people drinking and
taking drugs there. Participants were strongly in favour of having park-keepers in these parks.

- Vandalism had curtailed the enjoyment and use of some facilities, again mainly in the inner city neighbourhood but also to some extent in the suburban estate.
- Participants were generally nervous of teenagers and young people, though some felt this ‘blanket’ fear to be unwarranted.
- An important factor in older people’s experience and use of the local environment in general is the way that they are treated and responded to by other people. Others of all ages could be more aware of older people’s needs and of their anxieties.
- Many older people felt most secure and comfortable around other older people and a degree of self-segregation in time and space was apparent.
9. Participation and Decision-Making

Involvement in policy formulation and decision-making regarding issues that impact on the local environment is one way in which the interests of older people in this sphere might be upheld. In environmental justice terms, this is the element usually termed ‘procedural justice’ i.e. access to adequate involvement and / or representation in the policy- and decision-making procedures that lead to outcomes on the ground. Theoretically, adequate procedural justice should militate against distributive injustice occurring with respect to environmental goods and risks. This is clearly important for all sectors of the population, not just older people, but in this instance we are concerned with the suitability of environments for older people, with a cross-cutting interest in how this might vary with different types of area and levels of deprivation.

In the interviews, all participants were asked about these issues: whether they thought older people in general were listened to by policy-makers, and whether they felt able to make their voice heard regarding issues that would affect their local neighbourhood and environment. The views that they expressed were quite mixed, with some main themes emerging and some interesting subtle distinctions at times being made.

Very positively, several of the study participants felt that older people were better at getting their voices heard than were some others, partly because they had the time but largely because they made the effort and took enough interest in local affairs to do so. This was an opinion that was expressed in all three areas, and if anything, was most strong in the more deprived inner city area. However along with this came a frustration that they felt others were not getting involved – either other older people, or younger people. It seemed the case then that they felt the most active people in pressing for local interests were older, but that did not mean that all older people in the area were taking an interest.

Participant: [Older people] are the worst people! [i.e. for being vociferous]. (Laughs) Well most of the committees we are in it’s all older people and we say what are the young people doing? Where are they?

Interviewer: So you feel like you can make your voice heard if you want to?

Participant: Oh yes. Uh-huh. I think that’s a lot of rubbish that old people are neglected. I will tell you something, we might not be appreciated… [Woman, 80s, inner city neighbourhood].

Whilst their work is admirable and should be supported, this does highlight a potential danger regarding the promotion of procedural justice for older people. Care needs to be taken in such situations that consultation is wide-reaching and is not relying on the effort and input of a few. As the Brook Lyndhurst (2004b) report noted, situations can arise where a more vociferous group of older people who are relatively easy to engage are taken as representing the interests of older people in general – whereas older people are, of course, a highly diverse group.
As well as the active older people, many others in all areas felt that although they might not be so active on local affairs themselves, they knew who to contact and what to do if there was an issue that they wanted to voice an opinion or push for action on, and that they would be quite happy to do so. Several of those in the coastal town seemed to be of this view – quite confident, but not feeling the need to spend much time actively involved themselves. In this respect, they mostly felt that their interests appeared to be adequately upheld in the status quo – in contrast to some of the more active older people in the inner city area who felt that the interests of the local community and the neighbourhood in general, not necessarily older residents in particular, needed to be fought for.

Another slightly different set of participants also said they could probably make their voice heard if they wanted to, but they appeared much more passive, and the impression given was that it was quite unlikely that such a situation would arise, where they felt moved to take action or make a complaint. Several, though not all, of the suburban estate residents were more in this category: a little more fatalistic than many of the retired professionals in the coastal town.

Some interviewees were however more strongly of the view that older people and their interests were neglected in social policy and planning and that initiatives were aimed at the interests of younger people and families:

I think the government, party line, forget the older people. Everything at the moment is for folk having weans [children], och everything’s done for weans all the time. [Women’s group discussion, inner city neighbourhood]

Given the inner city location of this above discussion, this seemed linked to issues about policies for regeneration and social inclusion in particular, and echoed the point made in the literature about such initiatives concentrating on the interests of families and people of working age, rather than older generations (Scharf et al 2004; Abbot and Sapsford 2005).

There were also views aired that some older people did not feel able to speak up for themselves, for reasons of confidence, not knowing the system to go through, and / or frailty. Inevitably, fewer individuals involved in this study felt like this personally, as those who had agreed to participate tended to be the more active and outgoing members of the population so were self-selecting in that sense.

One interviewee made an important point that some older people felt that they should not have to fight for their interests, having spent a lifetime working hard and contributing to the community:

I think its just more that they tend to think they have done their stint and want to sit back…want to enjoy it and they are not really getting enjoyment. People are frightened to go out. [Woman, 70s, inner city neighbourhood].

Both these points, about some older people feeling unable to participate and others feeling that they should not have to, are worthy of note because they have important implications for what is expected in terms of older people’s participation.
Older individuals themselves should be enabled as much as possible to participate in consultative and decision-making arenas (see also Biggs and Tinker, 2007), but at the same time expectations should not be too high, especially regarding the much older and more frail members of communities. Older people should be able to view consultation as an opportunity rather than a burden. At the same time as increasing such opportunity therefore, it will also be important to strengthen advocacy for older people, especially those who prefer not to participate directly and who may be suffering physical or cognitive impairment that makes participation difficult. The interests of some of these people may best be served by consulting and involving other older and younger people who work directly with such groups and who are aware of their interests and needs.

As well as the range of views on consultation and participation in decision-making given above, an important, linked, but slightly wider issue emerged, and this concerned the way that older people are viewed in society in general. Several interviewees felt that older people are often seen as lesser, as lacking in skills and in intellect (also expressed in Richard et al 2005’s Canadian study). This was a view expressed even by several people who were themselves confident, active and who felt fully able to get their voice heard: they felt that this was a barrier that they had to push against. For others, especially in the more deprived area, this barrier led directly to them feeling excluded and overlooked. Participants emphasised that older people often have a wealth of experience, knowledge and skills that could be directly useful in many spheres, but that this resource was overlooked:

I don't think you can bridge the generation gap ... at the same time, I would like people, younger people, to appreciate that, OK, you don't reach a certain age and somebody turns a switch and that's you switched off. You've still got a brain. [Man, 80s, coastal town].

Participant 1: I think we are, the older people are forgotten about, forgetting they've got, everybody in this room has got, years, all, you know twenty, thirty, forty years of experience; once you reach a certain age you're no longer asked about things are you?

Participant 2: You don't have a brain any more!

Participant 3: You don't have a brain. [Women's group, inner city neighbourhood].

I really don't think that older people nationally are consulted enough and I don't think [this town] is unique in that ... [...] don't realise there's a hell of a lot of expertise that's not tapped into. If there was a method of tapping into that even on a voluntary basis, it would be very good. [Man, 80s, coastal town].

More than just having their local interests looked after, therefore, some individuals as this last quote shows were pointing out that many older people have a lot to say
that can be of instrumental use – either regarding their local area, or for more general policy issues.

Summary Points

- Several interviewees felt that older people are actually more involved in local affairs than are other age groups.
- Many others felt that they knew who to contact and how to express their view should they want to, although some appeared more passive in this respect than others.
- Others, especially in the more deprived area, felt that regeneration and inclusion programmes in particular did not cater for the needs of older people.
- Also more in the most deprived area was a view that many older people did not feel able to speak up about their needs and views.
- Some felt that older people should not have to fight to be listened to and catered for after a lifetime of hard work and this was why some did not want to be actively involved in local issues and fora.
- Strengthened advocacy as well as consultation and active participation may therefore be necessary.
- There was a general feeling that older people are widely treated as incompetent and that their experience is overlooked.
10. Conclusions

This study aimed to uncover the dimensions of the local environment that are important to older people, and also to consider the ways in which older people in general, or in certain places, might be experiencing inequity or injustice with respect to their local environments. This section will reflect on the findings of the study and the environmental justice implications, before considering some policy implications.

Aspects of the local environment that emerged as important to older people

On analysing the data from across the three neighbourhoods involved in this study, six main aspects emerged as being important to older people for their overall well-being. Ideally, a local urban environment, according to these participants, should be clean and free of litter and waste; as free as possible of pollutants, especially air pollutants; peaceful and relatively quiet; easy for older people to walk and perhaps cycle around; easy for people to meet each other and interact informally out of doors in; and should offer a varied, positive sensory experience incorporating some natural elements.

Some commentators have argued that a good environment for older people is also good environment for other age groups (see e.g. Feldman and Oberlink, 2003; Phillips et al, 2005). Certainly there is little described in these themes that would be a negative experience for many others. However, this and other studies do suggest that some of these themes are more important to older people than to other age groups. This may be the case because many older people spend more of their time in their local neighbourhood, but can also be the case for other more complex reasons that have links with age and ageing. Litter for example is likely to be more annoying to people who spend a lot of time in the one locale; the symbolic offence caused by litter may also affect older people whose identity may be strongly connected with a place in which they may have spent much of their lives. Noise in this study and also in that of Brook Lyndhurst (2004b) seemed to be more of an issue with ageing, at least partly for reasons connected with physical change. Opportunities for social interaction in the neighbourhood can be absolutely critical for older people living alone who may be at risk of isolation. Many of the participants in this study had at times been very thankful for the benefits of an aesthetically uplifting environment that helped them manage stress, depression and grief – issues that can arise at any time of life, but which do occur for many older people due to bereavement and illness.

Some of these aspects do also involve age-specific requirements. Making an environment walkable for a cohort of older people for example will, from the evidence in this study, require attention to design details; to maintenance; to traffic management and signage; to the siting of services and facilities; and potentially to other policies such as waste collection and the regulation of shop pavement displays. Likewise, promoting social interaction for older people will need similar measures.
Also, achieving a better environment for older people may not be synonymous with achieving an ideal environment for all, as it may involve compromises on the part of others, such as slower driving and altered routes, and reduction in noise. Nevertheless, an environment that works well for older people is likely to benefit many others, perhaps most likely younger disabled people; young children and their parents; and those suffering from stress and poor physical or mental health.

The analysis of the important dimensions that has been offered here is not definitive, being based on three neighbourhoods and a limited number of participants. More work would be needed to test its wider applicability, but it does offer some structure for approaching these issues in other settings. The aspects / dimensions are also not clear cut and could be defined in other terms. Certainly they overlap and interact – a walkable environment for example is likely to promote interaction, and a clean environment with interesting sights and smells is likely to encourage more people to spend time outside where they may get exercise.

An important caveat is that it is not the intention here to be deterministic in our understanding of older people’s needs. It is important but difficult to understand the issues and offer helpful analyses without overly essentialising. As has been noted many times before, older people are an extremely diverse group and age should not be any individual’s defining characteristic. The hope here is that in working towards achieving more enabling environments for older people, we can reduce the extent to which age-related issues limit and thereby appear to define them.

Environmental equity, justice and older people
The above paragraphs already make the point that within any given neighbourhood or locality, there are aspects of the local environment that may affect older people as a cohort more than other age groups. Where these aspects are negative therefore, a kind of injustice with respect to older people may be in play. One way to see this is as an injustice in terms of experience. This is a type of distributional injustice or inequity, but within a place, between different members of the community.

The more usual way of understanding distributional environmental injustice / inequity is in the sense of spatial variation in the levels of goods / hazards involved. From this study, it is clear that the aspects of the environment that appeared to matter most to older people are prone to spatial variation. Out of the three neighbourhoods, the small coastal town emerged the most favourable environment for older people, the inner city neighbourhood the least favourable, and the suburban estate in between. This ranking however would not hold true for every individual feature. It is tempting to see this ordering as linked to the levels of deprivation, the coastal town being the most affluent overall and the inner city neighbourhood the most deprived community. With three case studies it is not possible to be conclusive as to whether this patterning would hold true across a larger sample of neighbourhoods. Because several aspects are involved, the ways in which spatial inequalities come about are many and complex and may not all
Local Urban Environments and the Wellbeing of Older People

follow the same pattern. Some are linked to policy, planning and service delivery choices whilst others are maybe linked more to other place characteristics such as the inherited built form and the natural landscape. To some extent as well, the quality of the environment determines the level of affluence of the resident community as it contributes to the market value of property in that location.

Understanding the experiential aspect does however reveal ways in which links with wider deprivation can be salient. Previous work has noted that the links between poor environmental quality and the impacts that this has are mediated by other aspects of place (Day, 2007). This proposition is relevant to some of the findings of this study – for example, high levels of traffic noise will be have a greater impact on those in smaller dwellings without double glazing; a public environment that is lacking in aesthetically pleasant and uplifting elements will have a greater negative impact on those who are suffering greater levels of everyday stress and those with lower quality private space. Thus general deprivation and poor environmental quality can compound each other in terms of impacts. Additionally, poor environmental quality if linked with deprivation is likely to compound existing health inequalities that are linked with socio-economic status. Among older people for example, neighbourhoods that do not promote walking will exacerbate physical disabilities that are already higher in groups of lower socio-economic status (Grundy and Glaser 2000). Finally, people at the lower end of the socio-economic scale as this study has illustrated may lack the resources to access other, better quality environments. Free public transport for people over 65 has undoubtedly helped this but those without access to private transport especially if they are physically frail are more likely to be both isolated and confined to a poor environment.

A second aspect of environmental justice as it is commonly understood is that of procedural justice and this is something that this study also set out to explore with the interviewees. It was certainly the case that a substantial proportion, although by no means all, of participants felt that the needs of older people were overlooked in spheres relating to local environmental and wider neighbourhood issues. This did appear to be a stronger feeling in the more deprived areas and reflects a concern regarding regeneration and social inclusion policies that has been noted in earlier literature and is an ongoing concern of campaigning organisations and some government initiatives in Scotland and the UK – notably Better Government for Older People. Again, if a procedural injustice exists with respect to older people that is also worse in more deprived areas, a compounding process will take place, with older people in the more deprived areas likely to be the worst off in terms of both existing environmental quality and the means to affect change.

This study did also show that improving procedural justice for older people is not a simple task. Some older people lack the confidence to use existing channels to make their views heard and a lot of support and outreach work may be needed to reach them. Accessibility to procedures must be improved, both physically, by making it easy for older people physically to reach venues, and socially / culturally, by making the dynamic as comfortable as possible for them. Other older people do not
wish to be involved in decision-making processes and regard such participation as a burden; similarly some are too frail for the expectations on them to be met. For these groups, strengthened advocacy will be needed. Some older people are very active in their communities and very ready to be involved in relevant local issues, which is highly commendable. Whilst acknowledging and supporting their efforts, care must also be taken to avoid a situation where these individuals are either asked or assumed to speak for all older people.

Other issues that affect both older people’s relationship with their local environment and their engagement with relevant decision-making have also been described in this report. These might be understood as a further dimension of potential injustice, that relates to wider recognition. Such issues include the behaviour of others in the local environment, and ways in which older people are treated more widely as less capable, sometimes childlike. The behaviour and divergent preferences of diverse groups in public spaces is the cause of conflicts not all of which involve older people. However, the ability for many older people to enjoy their local environments could be much improved by other age groups being more aware of their presence and more sensitive about their needs and the kinds of things that make them anxious. Likewise, older people’s involvement in the public sphere could be made easier by a more general understanding of the value of their potential contribution and an acknowledgement of their experience. Both of these aspects can be seen as relating to a wider issue of recognition. Recognition can also conceptually cover the need for policy and planning to take more account of older people’s needs. Such recognition at least in policy terms would call for a mainstreaming approach across domains and is something that the new umbrella Equalities and Human Rights Commission should be in a position to take forward.

**Policy implications and recommendations**

Because this study has dealt with a small number of locations and participants, policy recommendations are suggested for consideration and further development. Action will need to involve several policy domains and could usefully cut across sectors, some potentially involving partnerships between public, private and voluntary bodies.

As all local authorities are aware, cleanliness problems need to be addressed. Authorities should consider how cleanliness outcomes can be made more equal across neighbourhoods and how – and why - resources may need to be apportioned to achieve this better. A project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is currently working on this topic (see ‘a Clean Sweep’ at http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/wip).

Pollution burdens should also be as spatially equitable as possible. Local air quality management strategies should already take account of this and are likely to be aware of whether pollution hotspots are affecting more deprived areas. Air quality management could usefully be aware of impacts on older people and where these might be occurring for example around sheltered housing, residential homes, community centres and shopping areas. Older people are potentially more
vulnerable to the effects of air pollution and should be protected as much as possible.

Local authorities are being required to prepare noise management strategies and again these should take account of the needs of older people. Efforts to reduce environmental noise are likely to benefit older people.

Physical barriers to walking for older people should be minimised as much as possible. These include uneven pavements, high kerbs and more moveable obstacles. Consideration should be given to regulating shops’ and businesses’ positioning of displays and boards outside premises, especially on busy or narrow streets.

Traffic should be calmed and minimised around shopping areas and other places that older people might use a lot. Clear signage should be given both to alert drivers to older people and to warn pedestrians of traffic issues such as loading bays and concealed entrances to business premises that delivery vehicles might be using.

Planning processes should take account of both natural topography and the built environment – positions of roads and so on – when siting facilities that older people are likely to use a lot, including residential homes and day centres.

Public benches should be positioned at regular intervals throughout neighbourhoods. These should be maintained in good condition. Burton and Mitchell (2006) give more detailed design guidance for benches as well as many other features of the built environment, to make them most suitable for older people.

Public toilets should be available at regular spatial intervals and certainly in civic and commercial centres. These should be free or very cheap to use and should be easily physically accessible.

Ideally, local shopping parades should be regenerated and aided to stay viable as far as possible. These are not only an important local service for a lot of people but are likely to increase older peoples’ exercising and socialising, which is critical for many. The environment around such local shopping areas should be kept as clean and pleasant as possible, with minimal traffic, places to sit and features such as flower beds and interesting architectural features very desirable.

Areas that are potentially good places for older people to walk, such as flat, pedestrianised places, should be made as pleasant and older person friendly as possible, to encourage such walking. Initiatives such as accompanied ‘health walks’ in parks and such places are likely to provide benefits for many older people especially those who generally feel unsafe or lack company to take walks.

Where possible, natural features should be maintained and added to the local environment, even if they are on a small scale, such as flower tubs. Small scale
features can be very important for those who cannot reach a local park. Interesting local architecture should also be maintained and displayed as far as possible as this often holds particular importance for older people’s sense of identity as well as providing a more pleasant locale that encourages people to be active outside the house.

Environmental features that provide other sensory experiences should also be promoted. Scented flowers, seating in sun traps and running water features are some examples.

Particular attention needs to be paid to maintaining such positive features in more deprived environments, even though this will probably take more effort and resources for maintenance.

Consideration should be given to installing park wardens or similar in as many parks as possible especially where there are known issues over conflicts of use.

Public transport needs to be as accessible as possible for older people and also needs to feel safe. Any harassment (of anyone) should not be tolerated. Where possible, support should be given for flexible community transport schemes that can be accessed more easily by more frail older people and that can allow them to get out beyond their immediate locale.

Overall, planners, urban designers and streetscape managers need to develop an improved ‘older person’s perspective’; an ability (and willingness) to see urban morphology and systems through an older person’s eyes. Tools to aid this may involve training, design proofing guidelines, and consultation.

Community planning, local area agreements and other frameworks and fora through which local environments are affected need to maximise the involvement of older people. These need to take pains to involve and consult as wide a selection of older people as possible. This may involve outreach activities and will certainly need to involve improving access, physically and socially.

As well as directly consulting older individuals, advocacy for older people in such spheres should be made good use of. Many national and local organisations are well placed to do this and often local communities will have groups and individuals, who may or may not be older themselves, who work extensively with older people in the community. Making use of these channels will reduce the burden of expectation on older people and will help in gaining a perspective regarding the very frail.

The new single Equality and Human Rights Commission, and in Scotland the EHRC Scotland, should address issues of age discrimination across policy fields. Recently, much policy attention has usefully been given to age discrimination in employment and to extending older people’s opportunities for work. Attention is also needed in planning and other policy fields where age discrimination may be less straightforward; often resulting from omission and lack of attention rather than active discrimination.
More widely, older people need to be more recognised and given more respect in society. Promoting enabling environments should help increase their visibility which in turn can contribute to wider understanding. More mixing of older and younger groups is desirable but there is currently some evidence that the preference is for segregation. Many kinds of initiative to involve older people in the community and to promote intergenerational activities can help here and these should be encouraged.
References


