Bolton's Age Friendly Strategy

Update Engagement Report

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis have had profound effects on individuals of all ages, particularly populations such as older adults. As such, Bolton Community and Voluntary Services (CVS) were commissioned via Boltons Aging Well Partnership (AWP) to conduct engagement activity to identify any additional considerations to the findings in the previous 'Developing an Age Friendly Strategy' report carried out by Healthwatch Bolton. This report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have impacted the lives of older adults living in Bolton, shedding light on the challenges they have faced and identifying potential strategies to address these issues which should be considered in the development of Boltons Age Friendly Strategy.

Methodology

To conduct this engagement, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative group interviews and one to one conversations (both with older adults themselves – total number = 107) as well as semi structured interviews with those who run VCSE based activity specifically for older people in Bolton and a desktop review of other relevant papers and research relating to the quality of life for older people in Bolton. Data was collected from a representative sample of older adults residing in Bolton, ensuring diversity in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and living arrangements. Our methods also allowed us to glean insight of concerns and considerations for those older adults who are not actively engaging in community-based support.

Engagement/conversations were built around 4 key prompt questions:

1. What is good? (strengths)
2. What is important to you? (opportunities/values)
3. What has changed for you? (changes/threats)
4. What worries you? (challenges)

The engagement was conducted by Bolton CVS in collaboration with community members, local VCSE organisations, and key stakeholders including;

- Age UK Bolton
- Senior Solutions
- Asian Elders Resource Centre
- Bolton LGBTQ+
- Halliwell Befriending Service
- Golden Oldies

Bolton Council have been a key partner throughout the process.

"This [engagement activity] is asking important questions which directly have an impact on the lives of older people and choices they make. It relates to their quality of life and ability to enjoy later life in a secure environment surrounded by people who care about them and their wellbeing."

– Shabeen Rahman, Asian Elders Resource Centre

WHO 8 Pillars of Age-Friendly Communities

The pillars provide a framework for understanding and addressing the needs of older adults within a community context and were used in the original consultation carried out by Healthwatch Bolton. As such, we have aligned the findings of the engagement activity to each of the pillars in summary.

1. Outdoor spaces and Buildings

The availability of safe, accessible outdoor spaces and buildings is crucial for Boltons older adults' physical and mental well-being. During the pandemic, restrictions on outdoor activities and closures of public spaces limited older adults' opportunities for exercise, socialisation, and access to essential services.

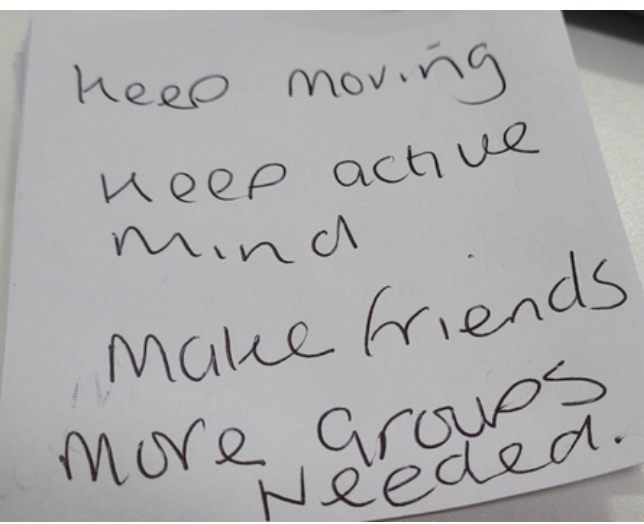# WHO 8 Pillars of Age-Friendly Communities

2. Transportation

Accessible and affordable transportation options are vital for our older adults to maintain their independence and access necessary services. Disruptions in public transportation services and the inconsistency/non-reliability of options such as 'Ring and Ride' increase the challenges faced by older adults in traveling to medical appointments, grocery stores, and other essential destinations.

3. Housing

Affordable and age-friendly housing plays a significant role in the well-being of older adults. The cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated housing affordability issues in Bolton, impacting older adults who may struggle to afford suitable housing or experience housing instability.

4. Social participation

Our older adults thrive when they can actively engage with their communities within and across Bolton. This is held in very high regard and a key mechanism for giving and receiving information in an increasingly digitalised world.

WHO 8 Pillars of Age-Friendly Communities

5. Respect and social inclusion

Promoting respect and social inclusion involves combating ageism, fostering intergenerational relationships, and ensuring that older adults' voices are heard and valued. We have strong examples of this across Bolton however the pandemic highlighted the importance of combating age-based discrimination and promoting inclusivity for older adults, who have often been disproportionately affected by social isolation and limited support.

6. Civic participation and employment

Our older adults' felt positive about civic participation and understood that employment activities can contribute to their sense of purpose, social connection, and financial security. However, the pandemic's economic impacts, including job losses and reduced employment opportunities, have disproportionately affected older adults, limiting their ability to actively contribute to their communities.

7. Communication and information

Access to accurate and timely information is crucial, especially during times of crisis. Ensuring that older adults have access to reliable information, including health guidelines, vaccination updates, and community resources, can empower them to make informed decisions and take appropriate actions. Our older adults want to be decision makers and maintain their independence – we have a responsibility to ensure they have the right information, at the right time, in the right way in order for them to do so.

WHO 8 Pillars of Age-Friendly Communities

8. Community support and health services

Accessible and comprehensive healthcare services, community support networks, and social care systems are essential for Bolton's older adults' well-being. Strengthening these services, particularly in times of crisis, can provide older adults in Bolton with the necessary support to navigate the challenges now and in the future.

By aligning initiatives and interventions with the WHO's 8 pillars of age-friendly communities, Bolton can work towards addressing the unique needs of older adults, mitigating the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis, and fostering an inclusive and supportive community for all age groups.

Overview of Engagement Findings

Four distinct priority themes emerged from the engagement:

Impact on Health and Wellbeing

Economic Challenges

Social Implications

Transportation

Although referred to separately below, it should be noted that accessibility (physical via transport or digital) and the increased cost of living were consistent 'golden threads' running throughout.

1. Impact on Health and Wellbeing

1.1 Physical Health

The pandemic has posed significant health risks to older adults, and this was no less experienced in Bolton - leading to increased anxiety, fear, and isolation. Many individuals who participated in the engagement expressed they have experienced difficulties accessing essential healthcare services, resulting in delayed treatments and a decline in overall well-being of which many have been unable to mitigate against since.

'They [health professionals/receptionist] don't speak our language and don't want to help'

'You don't have the same relationship with your GP as you used to. Nothing is personal. I need to start from the beginning every time I speak to them which takes more time and holds everything up.'

1. Impact on Health and Wellbeing

1.2 Mental Health

Social isolation and loneliness have been exacerbated by lockdown measures, impacting the mental health and confidence of some of our older adults in Bolton. Feelings of depression, anxiety, and increased stress and fear have been commonly reported.

> *'I feel like I'm always having to ask for help but, just because I'm elderly, doesn't mean I'm confused'.*

1.3 Access to Healthcare

The strain on healthcare services and resources has made it challenging for older adults to access routine medical care, leading to delayed diagnoses, limited treatment options, and increased health disparities. The digitalisation of many healthcare services have left older adults feeling unseen, unheard and essentially living in a world which does not belong to them.

> *'I feel like I've been written off.'*
>
> *'You can never get through [on the phone] to anyone when you need them.'*

1. Impact on Health and Wellbeing

Case Study

Trevor is in his late 70s and is the full-time carer for his wife who is living with Dementia. Despite wearing two hearing aids, he struggles with his hearing. Trevor was a mechanical engineer and served time in the Armed Forces. He prides himself on being 'one of the few' of his peers who has a smart phone and tries to use it however he becomes frustrated and overwhelmed by the mixed messages from family, friends and media.

'I know why the GP wants to do everything over the phone but I just can't hear them! I try and ask them to repeat things but they are impatient and I feel like they think I'm not 'all there', but I just can't hear them. It makes me feel stupid.

We also get warned all the time about getting scammed and being careful about who we answer the phone to or the information that we give but the doctor surgery often withholds its number when they call and so I miss it!'

1.4 Conclusion

Access to essential healthcare services has been hindered, leading to delayed treatments, limited options, and widening health disparities. The digitalisation of healthcare has further marginalised older adults, leaving them feeling unseen and unheard. It is crucial for policymakers and healthcare providers to prioritise the needs of older adults by implementing strategies that address their physical and mental health concerns. Enhancing access to healthcare services, including routine medical care, and developing age-friendly digital platforms can help mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on our older adult population. By recognising and addressing these challenges, we can help ensure the well-being and dignity of older adults in Bolton.

2. Economic Challenges

2.1 Financial Insecurity

The cost-of-living crisis has put a considerable strain on older adults' finances, particularly for those relying on fixed incomes or pension plans. Rising prices for essential goods, housing, and utilities have outpaced income growth, leading to financial instability and difficulty meeting basic needs.

'We've had a 25p increase in pension but penalised by a lot more so, [we're] worse off!'

'Older people having to access food banks just doesn't seem to be as talked about as working families – but it is happening!'

2.2 Employment and Retirement

The pandemic has resulted in job losses and reduced employment opportunities, affecting older adults' retirement plans and financial security. Many have faced increased pressure to continue working, even if it puts their health at risk.

2. Economic Challenges

2.3 Digital Divide

The shift towards remote work, online services, and virtual social interactions has presented challenges for older adults who may lack the necessary digital skills, access to technology, or internet connectivity. This has further limited their opportunities and ability to adapt to the changing landscape; paying for parking via app, closing of cash machines and preference for contactless payment and automated prescription and healthcare appointment setting were all reported as barriers and frustrations.

'We never go into Bolton town centre now. We used to go in the early evening in summer and do some window shopping but, the nice shops are gone, we can't park [because it's app only] and when we can, it's so expensive! I think Westhoughton town centre is much better. We often go there.'

'I know things are changing and it's important not to be 'left behind', but people have to remember that some (older people) will choose to never cross the digital bridge!'.

2.4 Conclusion

Bolton's older adults face significant economic challenges including financial insecurity, limited employment opportunities, and the digital divide. Promoting tailored employment opportunities, improving digital literacy, and expanding access to technology and reliable internet connectivity are crucial in bridging the digital divide. Additionally, healthcare and service providers should adopt inclusive practices to accommodate the needs of older adults including for those for whom English is not their first language. Collaboration between policymakers, community organisations, and service providers is essential to create an inclusive and supportive environment for older adults' financial well-being in Bolton.

3. Social Implications

3.1 Social Isolation

Lockdown measures, limited social interactions, and closure of community spaces have heightened feelings of isolation among our older adults. Loneliness has been linked to poor mental health, increased mortality rates, and decreased quality of life.

'I still enjoy company – don't write me off!'

3.2 Access to Support Networks

Many older adults rely on community centres, local VCSE organisations, and support networks for social engagement, access to information, and assistance with daily tasks. Although many individuals have returned to these services, a notable proportion have not with ill-health, lack of confidence, reduced mobility and fear being regularly stated as the reasons why.

'Places like Asian Elders Resource Centre (AERC) offer us the space and staff to express ourselves and to have more events based on our heritage... a safe and secure place where we can meet up and discuss all our worries and issues in our mother tongue.'

'This group (Golden Oldies) has speakers from all organisations which gives members access to information from sources they trust – it's good way of health providers getting to people.'

3. Social Implications

3.3 Intergenerational Connections

The pandemic has strained intergenerational relationships, hindering the transfer of knowledge, skills, and emotional support between our older adults and younger generations. This has had implications for community cohesion and the overall well-being of individuals of all ages with older adults reporting that they are 'dismissed', 'misunderstood, or 'ignored' by younger people. When opportunities for intergenerational connections are facilitated, they are held in incredibly high value by our older adults.

'The adopt a Grandparent scheme is wonderful!'

Case Study

Anne is in her early 80s and has been attending Senior Solutions for the past few years. Anne's family do not live nearby and the group is a highlight in her week where she gets to 'gossip with the other ladies over a brew and create a bit of mischief'. Anne passionately spoke about the importance of the older generation to mixing with the younger, stating that 'everyone has something to learn from each other and it gives us 'oldies' something to look forward to'. Anne spoke of how at Easter, children from the local primary school attended Senior Solutions to sing to them and how the opportunity to have a chat with the young people afterwards and find out about them, school life etc was a moment she cherished.

3. Social Implications

3.4 Conclusion

The social implications of the pandemic on older adults are evident in increased social isolation, limited access to support networks, and strained intergenerational connections. Ensuring access to support networks through community centres and further investing in and utilising Boltons VCSE organisations is vital for social engagement, information access, and assistance with daily tasks. Intergenerational connections should be facilitated to promote knowledge transfer, emotional support, and community cohesion. Recognising the value older adults place on these connections and creating opportunities for interaction can enhance the well-being of individuals of all ages. Collaborative efforts between community organisations, families, and educational institutions can help alleviate the social challenges faced by older adults and create a more inclusive and connected society across Bolton.

4. Transportation

Transportation plays a vital role in enabling older people to maintain their independence, access essential services, and engage with their communities. However, several challenges and barriers exist that affect the transportation experience for older individuals in Bolton.

4.1 Reliability

Reliability is a crucial factor for older people who rely on public or organised (Ring and Ride) transportation. Throughout engagement, unpredictable schedules, frequent delays, and service disruptions were noted to significantly impact on older peoples ability to attend appointments, socialise, or run errands. This lack of reliability causes frustration, anxiety, and inconvenience, leading to diminished trust in public transportation systems.

Case study

Arwah relies on Ring and Ride to get her to and from her hospital appointment but feels the service is not reliable or operated with older people in mind.

'Half the time I don't get there [to the appointment] on time and then I wait for hours to be taken home. It's a horrible experience and fills me with dread but, what can I do?'.

4. Transportation

4.2 Cost

Affordability is another significant challenge faced by older individuals when it comes to transportation. Many older people live on fixed incomes, making it difficult to afford the cost of public transportation fares, particularly when they need to travel frequently for medical appointments or other essential activities. High fares can limit their access to services and activities, leading to social isolation and reduced quality of life.

4.3 Placement of Bus Stops

The physical placement of bus stops across the borough can pose obstacles for our older people. Bus stops located far from residential areas or in areas with limited pedestrian infrastructure can create difficulties for older individuals, especially those with mobility challenges. Long distances and inadequate shelter at bus stops can make waiting for buses uncomfortable and physically demanding, discouraging our older people from utilising public transportation.

'There are pot holes all over the pavement – getting to the bus stop is near impossible'

4. Transportation

4.4 Friendliness, Approachability, and Understanding of Bus Drivers

The attitude and behaviour of bus drivers significantly influence the transportation experience for older passengers. Friendliness, approachability, and understanding on the part of bus drivers can make older individuals feel valued and respected. Conversely, drivers who lack empathy or fail to assist older passengers in boarding, securing mobility aids, or providing necessary information can create a hostile or unwelcoming environment, deterring our older people from using public transportation.'

'They always start with a jerk before you sit down. They should wait until we're seated.'

It's important to remember it's not all bad...

Case Study

Mary's daughter suggested she should join a local VCSE group. Because her daughter works, Mary would have to take a 7-minute bus journey to and from the centre.
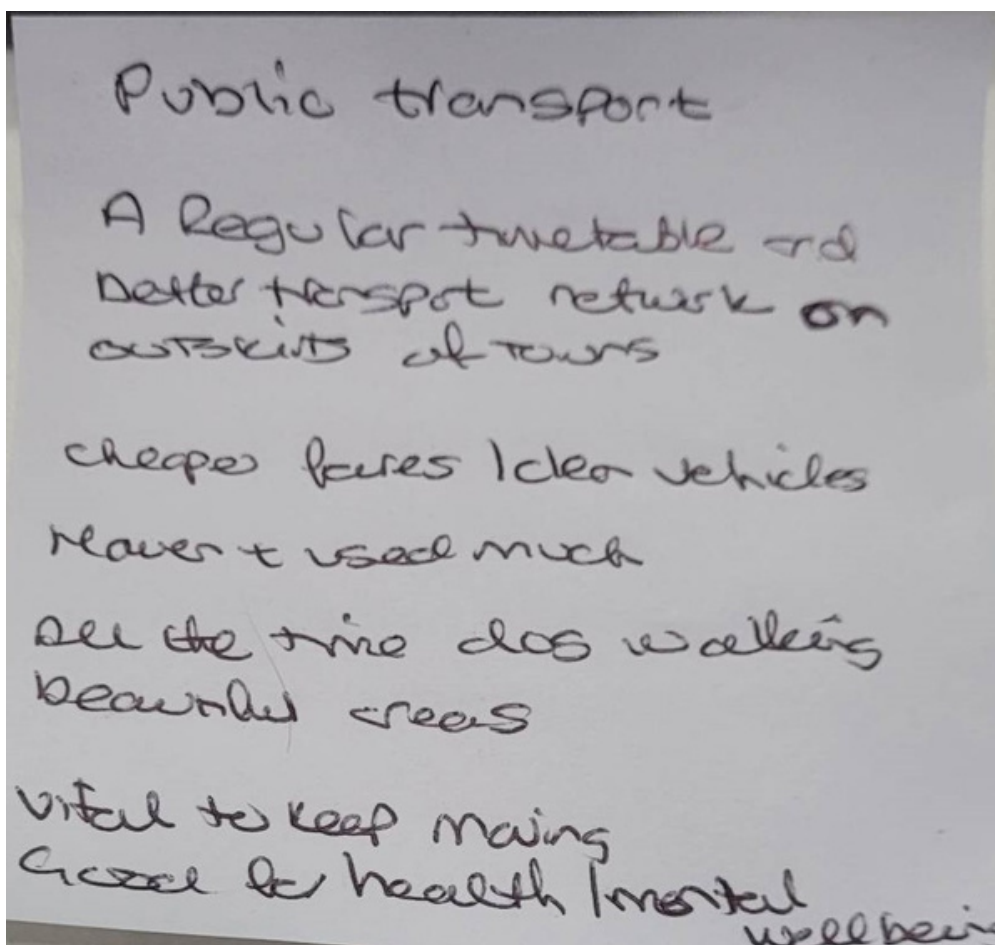
'My daughter came with me the first few times so I knew where to get on and get off. That really helped. I don't mind it now though it takes me a bit more time and effort on the days it is raining'.

4. Transportation

4.5 Conclusion

To enhance transportation accessibility for older people in Bolton, it is imperative to address the challenges and barriers they face. Improving reliability through better scheduling and reducing service disruptions, strategically placing bus stops near residential areas with adequate infrastructure, and providing training and incentives to bus drivers to enhance their friendliness, approachability, and understanding are crucial steps. By focusing on these aspects which are deemed priorities for our older adults, we can create a more inclusive and age-friendly transportation system that promotes the independence, well-being, and active engagement of Boltons older individuals within their communities.

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