

Co-Motion

Summary: The impact of attitudes and behaviours on mobility and well-being in later life

Background

Co-Motion was a three year project that explored mobility and well-being for older people going through critical but common life transitions. The project worked with 96 people aged 55 and over to explore their experiences of getting out and about and to identify how the built environment might better support mobility and well-being in later life.

Our research participants discussed a range of barriers and challenges that they faced as they were out and about, especially people who lived with impairments and/or conditions. Although many respondents described some of the ways that the physical design and maintenance of outdoor spaces affected their mobility, participants also discussed the impact of experiences of being out and about amongst the wider public as well as interacting with staff in shops, transport operators and other service providers. The potential nature of social encounters - both positive and negative – also shaped mobility and people’s confidence to get out and about.

Attitudes and behaviours in public places

Participants discussed the very fluid and diverse experiences of day to day interaction with other people, including positive as well as negative encounters. A number of participants emphasised the supportive and positive nature of many encounters, and the influence of this on everyday experiences of being out and about. A participant summarised his experiences of using a mobility scooter:

Interviewer: How are other road users with you?

Richard¹: They’re very helpful. The car and road users are, you know. Other than the certain people who park on pavements which one sometimes have to have words with and... But by and large, the vast



majority are very helpful and have no problem with... You see, you can't judge everybody by the small minorities. I mean, there's minorities in everything.

However, as reflected in the quote above, participants also identified specific ways that the attitudes and behaviours of others could have a negative impact on mobility in specific locations. These latter comments had two distinct elements. Firstly, attitudes and behaviours that created physical barriers for others, and, secondly, negative social encounters and interactions.

Attitudes and behaviours that create physical barriers for others

Respondents identified a number of ways that the attitudes and behaviours created physical barriers for other people. This included:

- Parking on pavements (or parking across dropped curbs);
- Parking in bays for disabled people if none of the occupants live with an impairment;
- Users of parking bays for disabled people leaving shopping trolleys in parking spaces
- Businesses putting advertising boards on public pavements;

Negative and unhelpful encounters

Participants also emphasised that negative or unhelpful encounters with members of the public, as well as service providers, had a significant reported impact on their confidence to be mobile. Four themes were identified, including interactions between different types of transport user; the physicality of being out amongst other people; using public transport, and finally, attitudes towards disabled people.

Interactions between different types of transport users

- Cyclists on pavements (as distinct from designated routes that are shared between cyclists and pedestrians);
- Mobility scooter users on pavements who drive too quickly or without sufficient attention to other people;
- Speeding by motorists.

The physicality of being out, especially in busy or crowded places

- Being bumped or jostled in busy places
- Feeling unsafe near rowdy behaviour (especially evenings in town or city centres)
- People using mobile phones who are not looking where they are going.

A couple of participants discussed their anxiety of living with conditions such as osteo-arthritis, and their sense of vulnerability to a bump with someone, or worse, if contact resulted in a fall.

Using public transport

- Getting on or off buses
- finding and negotiating a seat on public transport

Participants described very varied experiences of using public transport, including some very positive and supportive instances. One aspect was interacting with bus drivers, especially for people who lived with particular conditions or impairments. A participant reflected on the responsibility of individuals to ask for help, but noted that the attitudes of drivers was important,

Tess: Everybody says, "Just ask." I say, "Yes, it's all right asking, but it's sometimes the attitude of people when you ask." I mean, I asked . . . was it one of the bus drivers? . . . I asked was this bus going past the hospital, because there's an orange bus and a yellow bus and I sometimes mix them up... "Does this bus go past [name]?" Then you get the reaction of, "Well, yes, of course it does, because it's such and such." Or, "It says such and such." And I'll say, "Well, I can't see that."

Another participant noted a positive change in this regard:

Mabel: I have found the buses have improved. When I had my new replacement, which was three years ago, it took me ages to pluck up enough courage go on a bus. I felt very vulnerable, but over this last year, before I fell over and broke my hip, I was very impressed by the improvement in the attitudes of the drivers. They would wait for you sit down, if you got up to get off at stop they wouldn't expect you to walk down the bus.....and I just found it much better.

However, another respondent who lived with sight loss discussed the difficulties of negotiating a seat with fellow passengers:

Christena; Some bus drivers are great and they take my card off me and do it for me, others just let you struggle, not deliberately, I'd like to think, but it can be a struggle. So you've got over that hurdle, and then people are sat in the disabled seats who are not disabled, and you have to ask them if you can sit there because there's no way I could get to the back of the bus with a white cane. Just a little bit more thought from people would be nice, and before I was visually impaired I would never sit in a disabled seat, I'd always leave them spare. I just think it's manners.

Attitudes towards disabled people

One participant who used a wheelchair reflected on some of the attitudes she encountered while she was out and about, and noted how many people seemed to ignore her.

Ruby: I'm going along with the shopping trolley and my stick's in the shopping trolley, but people walk straight into you, you know. I find that a lot when I'm in the wheelchair as well, people don't see you because you're lower down, so they tend to walk into you, but in [supermarket], it's terrible. I mean, there's wide aisles but they always seem to head for you, hitting you with trollies and things and, oh! So we stopped going there.

In contrast, other participants emphasised the invisible or episodic nature of their impairments, or the speed at which they could do things, and the difficulties this could cause as they navigated through public spaces and interacted with services. A couple of participants who lived with sight loss noted that they used symbol canes to alert people around them. However, another participant who used a long cane discussed the negative comments and behaviours that using a long cane sometimes attracted while she was out and about.

Key conclusions for policy and practice

The physical design of the built environment is part of the jigsaw that shapes the ease with which people navigate outdoor spaces. The attitudes and behaviours of others can also impact positively and negatively on people's experiences of being out and about, as well as the capacity and confidence to be mobile.

Attention has been drawn to the need for ongoing training for the frontline staff of service providers in disability awareness and age-friendly approaches (Ormorod et al, 2015²). Our participants also raised the issue of awareness raising amongst the general public as well. Some behaviours create physical barriers for others, such as parking on pavements. Inclusive design features such as dropped curbs can be rendered useless if people park vehicles across them. Negotiating a seat on public transport, or being the focus of negative attitudes or comments erodes confidence and can create anxiety about travelling. There was a sense that the issues faced by participants who lived with diverse and/or multiple conditions or impairments reflected a wider lack of awareness amongst some of the general public or service providers that their attitudes and behaviours were having, rather than premeditated hate crime.

Whilst our evidence for this summary was drawn from participants in later life, this conclusion is relevant for all ages. Nevertheless, the higher prevalence of a number of conditions in later life means that the experiences of being out and about for many older people will be affected not only the nature of their impairment, but also how people - of any age – react towards them.

Raising awareness of the needs of older and disabled people in public spaces

Going forwards, one potential avenue is the promotion of awareness raising amongst the general public and service providers of the needs of key groups across all ages as part of a broader focus by policy on factors that can also support age friendly communities. The range of impairments that people live with are not always obvious, and awareness raising needs to reflect this diversity. It's possible to draw on examples of current and emerging practice in this regard, including awareness raising as part of the development of dementia friendly communities, or the use of 'Better Journey' cards for people who use public transport. Although transport operators undertake disability awareness training for staff, this is not yet mandatory in law for drivers³. Our project has developed a local approach to awareness raising by working with the poet Anna Woodford, who has written a sequence of poems on mobility in later life. These poems will feature on First York buses around York in January 2017.

About this study

Ninety-six people aged 55 and over in three locations - Leeds, Hexham, and York - in the north of England took part in a longitudinal study to explore their

mobility and wellbeing over time as they moved through a range of one or more critical but common life changes. The evidence for this summary was drawn primarily from our participants who lived with impairments and/or conditions, and the study also included older people who did not report poor health or impairments. These were our core participants over the course of the project, but other people aged 55 and over also took part in workshops and events. Local and national stakeholders were also interviewed to explore their views on supporting mobility and well-being in later life. These stakeholders included local authorities, voluntary sector organisations, community groups and national non-government organisations. A range of workshops with our participants and organisations also explored ways to change behaviour in public places to make them easier and friendlier for older people, and for people of all ages with different types of health problems or impairments.

Led by the Centre for Housing Policy, the research Consortium included the Departments of Computer Science and Health Sciences and the Stockholm Environment Institute at the University of York, as well as partners at the University of Leeds; Newcastle University; Northumbria University; and the Bradford Institute for Health Research.

Notes

¹ All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

² Ormorod, M., Newton, R., Phillips, J., Musselwhite, C., with McGee, S. and Russell, R. (2015) How can transport provision and associated built environment infrastructure be enhanced and developed to support the mobility needs of individuals as they age? Future of an ageing population: evidence review. Foresight, Government Office for Science.

³Department for Transport (2015) Summary of responses to the Department for Transport's review of the mandatory disability awareness training exemption applied under EU Regulation 181/2011 (concerning bus and coach passenger rights).

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398693/summary-responses-2a.pdf (accessed 20/12/2016).

