



ambition
for
ageing



It's About People, Not Just Place: How community organisations support older people in dispersed communities

Clare Bonetree, March 2022

A programme led by:
Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation

St Thomas Centre
Ardwick Green North
Manchester M12 6FZ
www.ambitionforageing.org.uk

☎ 0161 277 1000
✉ ambitionforageing@gmcvo.org.uk
🐦 @afageing



GMCVO

Many thanks to all who participated in the research, thank you for sharing your time, experience, knowledge, and very powerful and often personal stories. I learned a lot about courage and determination from listening to you, and I hope this report is useful to you in supporting the valuable work that you do. Thanks also to Dr Luciana Lang for research support, and to Lucy North for design.

Ambition for Ageing is a Greater Manchester wide cross-sector partnership, led by GMCVO aimed at creating more age friendly places by connecting communities and people through the creation of relationships, development of existing assets and putting older people at the heart of designing the places they live.

Ambition for Ageing is part of the National Lottery Community Fund's Ageing Better Programme. Ageing Better aims to develop creative ways for people aged over 50 to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. It is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

Contents

Contents	3
Glossary / List of new terms	4
Executive summary	5
Introduction	6
‘Dispersed communities’ and place-based work.....	6
Research participants and process.....	7
Findings	9
Community, identity and movement.....	9
Focusing on people, rather than place.....	11
Social infrastructure and social capital	12
Beyond ‘community-led’.....	14
Mitigating barriers and systemic exclusion.....	16
Funding.....	19
Increasing visibility of communities and their needs	23
Conclusions	25
Focus on people as well as place	25
A vital role in making Greater Manchester Age-Friendly.....	25
Recommendations	27
Recommendations for place-based work	27
Recommendations for supporting community organisations	27
Appendix	28

Glossary / List of new terms

Ambition for Aging	A Greater Manchester programme from 2016 to 2022 that aimed to make communities more age-friendly and improve older people's quality of life
Age-friendly	People of all ages being able to contribute actively in decisions taken in the place they live
Ageing Equally?	A programme of community research which focused on what makes a good place in which to grow older for people who belong to minority communities
Asset Based Community Development	An approach to community work that starts by identifying local people, organisations, and community buildings and spaces
BSL	British Sign Language; a Deaf BSL user is someone born without hearing who communicates only or mostly using BSL
CERI	Communities Experiencing Racial Inequality, a term to replace BAME (Black and Ethnic Minority) that emphasises the structural nature of racial inequality
Coding	Identifying key words or themes in research information for analysis
Dispersed communities	Communities of identity or experience whose members do not live near each other in the same neighbourhood, so they have to travel to meet up
Ethnically Diverse	A term developed by ethnically diverse people to replace BAME
Global Majority community	An ethnic community whose members are larger in number globally than this country's majority ethnic community, even if they are smaller in number in this country
Grounded analysis	An approach to analysing research which looks at the themes coming out of the information collected
Place-based	An approach to community development focusing on a particular place or neighbourhood
Semi-structured interviews	Interviews with a mixture of a few pre-determined questions and some unplanned questions
Social capital	A set of shared values between people that enable them to work and live together
Social infrastructure	Physical spaces and social networks that support a community's wellbeing

Executive summary

Place-based approaches to age-friendly community development can further exclude marginalised older people who are members of dispersed communities of identity or experience. Older people in dispersed communities need the support of their own small community organisations to be included in the development of an age-friendly city region.

These organisations are expert in the needs of their communities. Through providing opportunities and spaces to gather together, they promote individual wellbeing and sense of belonging, and support their community's collective sense of identity. They work hard to overcome and mitigate for the geographic dispersal of community members, and they mediate access to mainstream services and information provision.

What we mean by 'dispersed community':

A group of people who share an identity or experience – such as seeking asylum, being Deaf BSL users, or having the same faith - who do not all live near each other in one area. This means they have to travel away from their neighbourhood to meet up, buy the food they prefer, get the support they need, or practice their faith together.

However, they need more consistent and appropriate support in order to be stable, and to continue to be responsive and flexible in adapting to the needs of their communities. This report discusses findings from a small qualitative research project looking at how ten community organisations meet the needs of older people in dispersed communities of identity and experience.

In this report we show that these community organisations make a vital contribution to the development of an age-friendly city region, facilitating key aspects of age-friendliness for older people from dispersed communities. Finally, we make the following recommendations for supporting these organisations to enable them to continue to play this important role in Greater Manchester's age-friendly future.



Introduction

‘Dispersed communities’ and place-based work

Public Health England defines ‘community’ as “an umbrella term, to cover groups of people sharing a common characteristic or affinity” and “shorthand for the relationships, bonds, or identities and interests that join people together or give them a shared stake in a place, service, culture, or activity”¹.

Some communities, such as the LGBT community, have developed a strong sense of identity in part as a result of experiences of marginalisation and exclusion. Others, such as carers, share experiences that may shape individual identity, but members of this ‘dispersed community’ do not necessarily subscribe to a collective identity in the same way. No community is a homogenous group: community members will have a range of characteristics that intersect, and some people may feel they ‘belong’ to more than one dispersed community.

The term ‘dispersed communities’ was coined following development of the spatial approach to working with marginalised communities². This offers a model for considering the size and spatial distribution of different communities when designing activities and ways of working in neighbourhoods. It can be used by those working with place-based approaches, such as asset based community development, to minimise the risk of exacerbating inequalities³.

In recognition of the limitations of place-based models, Ambition for Ageing developed ‘scaled programmes’ to meet needs identified as not being met by work at a very local level. For example, Growing Older with Learning Disabilities (GOLD)⁴ and Community Navigators⁵. Place-based working has now received new attention as efforts supporting recovery from Covid-19 once again focus on neighbourhoods. This reflects the focus on neighbourhood-level support at the start of the pandemic, which seemed to confirm that place-based working is the most appropriate way to work with older people. However, vulnerable older people in dispersed communities of identity or experience were not sufficiently well served by this approach.

The ‘Ageing Equally?’ research programme commissioned a number of community organisations to investigate what makes a good place to grow older for people in minority communities. The research findings contributed valuable insights about the characteristics of dispersed communities, particularly that members are more likely to seek support from community organisations, and that travel is integral to remaining connected and meeting even daily needs such as food shopping. For example:

¹ Quoted in Phillipson, C.; Yarker, S.; Lang, L.; Doran, P.; Goff, M.; Buffel, T. COVID-19, Inequality and Older People: Developing Community-Centred Interventions. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2021, 18, 8064.

doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18158064

² www.gmevo.org.uk/publications/spatial-approach-working-marginalised-communities

³ www.gmevo.org.uk/publications/asset-based-approaches-and-inequalities

⁴ www.gmevo.org.uk/publications/going-gold-growing-older-learning-disabilities

⁵ www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/communitynavigators

Access to culturally-appropriate community spaces, including places of worship, and community spaces for cultural activities, is essential to a sense of belonging.

Even when there are differences between people in a minority community, people may have a stronger sense of belonging to their community of identity and its organisations than to a local community.

Older people need to be able to maintain connections to places beyond their local areas. This may be particularly important for migrants and those who do not feel safe in their local area.

People who speak minority community languages need to access their social networks or they will be at even greater risk of poor health outcomes and social isolation.

People may feel more confident accessing community-specific and community-organised services. These need to be supported.⁶

The Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately affected older people, with older people in deprived neighbourhoods even worse affected⁷. Many minority communities experienced gaps in support⁸ and, as the Pandemic Pressures report detailed, community organisations filled this gap, able to respond quickly in a crisis thanks to their specialist knowledge about their communities⁹. However, as the Runnymede Trust notes: “[d]espite this, these organisations have not been provided with sufficient additional financial support and resources.”¹⁰

The Ageing Equally Dispersed Communities project set out to find out more from community organisations about how they support older people in dispersed communities of identity using non-neighbourhood-based approaches. The first phase of the project commissioned 10 community organisations to deliver activities for dispersed communities over a three-month period during the winter of 2021-2022. In the second phase we carried out semi-structured interviews with project leaders at the 10 organisations to explore their experience of supporting diverse dispersed communities, in this project and more broadly.

Research participants and process

In the research phase of the project two researchers carried out semi-structured interviews over Zoom with the project leaders of the 10 organisations. One researcher also visited one of the organisations and spoke with older people taking part in the funded project. All the participating organisations had identified themselves or been previously identified as working with particular communities of identity.

⁶ ‘Insights from the Ageing Equally? research projects’ at www.gmcvo.org.uk/publications/ageing-equally-research-reports

⁷ Buffel, T., Yarker, S., Phillipson, C., Lang, L., Lewis, C., Doran, P., Goff, M. Locked down by inequality: Older people and the Covid-19 pandemic, Urban Studies 1-18 2021

⁸ Phillipson, C., Lang, L., Yarker, S., Lewis, C., Doran, P., Goff, M. and Buffel, T. Covid-19 and Social Exclusion: Experiences of older people living in areas of multiple deprivation, University of Manchester 2021, available at www.micra.manchester.ac.uk/muarg/

⁹ www.gmcvo.org.uk/publications/pandemic-pressures-how-greater-manchester-equalities-organisations-have-responded-needs

¹⁰ Hewitt, J., & Kapadia, D. Ethnic Minority Older People, Histories of Structural Racism and the COVID-19 Pandemic. (Runnymede/CoDE Covid Briefings). Runnymede Trust 2021, available at www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/

Eight of the organisations worked with and are run by communities experiencing racial inequalities (CERI); many of them support diverse people of different heritages. Some of the organisations work only with one dispersed community, while others offer a range of activities, some of which are for specific dispersed communities. Of the other two organisations, one supports carers and one supports Deaf BSL users. None of the organisations identified as supporting particular disabled communities – the Deaf BSL community identifies as a language community, not as disabled.

The hour-long online interviews were conducted in December 2021 and January 2022. Questions explored: characteristics of the community, sense of identity, geographic dispersal of the community, travel, activities and services delivered by the organisations, views on how funding could better support their community, and views on how to make their communities' needs more visible. Interviews were transcribed, then coded once using a grounded analysis approach to identify emerging themes, and again for themes related to interview questions. The research was conducted in a short space of time, and the design phase was disrupted due to a change of staffing. This also affected the consistency of the interviews. Nonetheless, we found that the interviews yielded rich data that echoes the findings of previous research conducted by ourselves and others, as discussed in the first part of the introduction and further below.



Findings

Community, identity and movement

Travel and movement characterise all dispersed communities, however, they have different meanings for different communities. These different meanings relate to the particular histories of the community, as well as community members' sense of identity. They can have relevance for the importance of community spaces, and the support that older people in these communities may need to be able to come together and feel a sense of belonging.

For Global Majority communities, histories of migration and displacement are highly relevant to community organising:

“Basically the Afro-Caribbean community is probably one of the most dispersed communities in Manchester, going back as far as ... from the Windrush days ... When we first came here Moss Side was one of the places that we landed in, but also people went to Oldham, people went to Birmingham, people went to Leeds, Wolverhampton, Nottingham. So over the years the way of us kind of coming together was music, domino tournaments, cricket, setting up cricket leagues among ourselves...”

Coming together is also important for many communities because movement and dispersal doesn't end at arrival in the UK. One organisation calls this “scatter-factor” – when a migrant community concentrated in one area has dispersed due to mill closures, unemployment forcing families to move, and new housing developments proving unsuitable for multigenerational households.

For people seeking asylum, displacement due to forced migration results in severe loss of connection:

“You leave your country, you leave your family, you leave your friends, you leave basically your social network and then you end up in a place you've never been before, you don't speak the language and you need to find your way. It's not something that's [easy] especially [for] those who are over 50 ... Getting those people together, telling them that you are not alone, we've been there, we know how it is and we can help you, supporting each other, that's what gives them like hope and that's what brings us together.”

For some communities, complex political histories have left a mark that both increases the need for community organising, but also poses challenges:

“Unfortunately [we] are not that much trusting because of the government [historically] ... in history of [our country] we had a lot of spying... so a lot of the time you live in the community with few [people from our country] there and it takes a long time [before] you allow yourself to say hello ... I have to say proudly that [our organisation] had a very good role in that.”

For the Deaf BSL community, “there is no geographical base, they are absolutely everywhere.” In this community, movement is more often related to personal history, and community identity can exist alongside a deep connection to a local place. As a small community, long distance friendships can form as a result of going to specialist boarding

schools, supporting a sense of community identity, so as well as identifying as “capital D Deaf ... culturally Deaf”:

“...thinking about a particular group of ladies ... they are proud Salford residents: if you cut their arm in half it would be like a stick of rock that said Salford [through it]. Very proud of where they’re from.”

For carers, movement is also relevant to identity, albeit in a less deciding way: caring inevitably involves some loss of personal freedom and restrictions on mobility. Identifying as a carer is complex and often painful, especially for older carers, as it involves loss, and a further challenge to identity when caring ends.

“For some it really is needed to see other carers... we always try and make sure there is a chance for a quiet space as well because being a carer can be so emotive.”

For small communities with a particular shared experience it is vital that they are able to offer support that is not place-based or restricted to one area:

“I will talk about this scatter-factor – we have Ramsbottom, there is Prestwich, Radcliffe, Whitefield, and they’re not easy ... it’s not an easy venue to get here if you’re living far away. The other thing is, how do they keep in touch? There are no mosques in those areas, there are no community centres.”

“I think the fact that there is now such a thing as ‘dispersed communities’, and that is being recognised, I think that will really help because before, it was the Deaf community of Salford, the Deaf community of Greater Manchester. And if you just look at those groups without understanding how they interact with their peers and other cohorts in the similar area and further afield, then you’re missing the bigger picture. I think having the term ‘dispersed community’ should help because it still links everybody as a community, and it recognises the fact that they are [one].”

Many of the interviewees reported that the older people they support make great efforts to travel to access their community spaces and activities, and gather together.

“We’re based in the north of Stockport and our reach goes right down to Marple Bridge, so it’s probably about 10 miles, I would say, but it would take 40 minutes to drive and on public transport it’s very difficult.”

Community members at one project talked about walking, in good weather, as much as an hour to get to the community centre.

“In wintertime I need a lift from my husband or my son or my daughter. In summertime I walk, I love to walk to be fit, to see the people and say hello.”

Interviewees explained how community members are prepared to travel around within a borough and across boroughs:

“One of our members celebrated a 50-year wedding anniversary ... in the evening, but she invited all the group. I was there, all of us went there. She lives in Horwich, I live on the other side of Bolton ... it’s about 20 minutes driving from the town centre so it is a little bit of a distance. People still went there, some took buses and went there, it was in the night and they were there and it finished around 11pm or 12am. They spent all night dancing and all that, they are over fifties but they were dancing.”

“We have [people coming] from Bury, we have from Rochdale and Stockport and some area past Stockport ... Chorlton, Withington, Longsight, Rusholme ... Wilmslow.”
[Organisation based in Longsight]

“...from Wigan, from Manchester, [p]eople from Altrincham, we’ve got people from Stockport, we’ve got from Old Trafford, Hulme ... Longsight, Gorton, Ashton ... Blackley – they’re really coming from Greater Manchester.” [Organisation based in Salford]

“The fact is they are from all over Salford, and it takes an effort to come together ... they’re literally from across the city. It has to be something that is deliberately organised for them to attend ... For this group there is nothing in Eccles, there’s nothing in Weaste, specifically. It’s a Salford thing, so they are spread across.”

Focusing on people, rather than place

Through the interviews it became clear that, although community organisations may base themselves in particular areas, or target work in particular areas, their focus is on who they support, rather than where community members are located. Many spoke passionately of welcoming people wherever they come from:

“... we’re pocketed everywhere, so there will be some in Trafford, Manchester, Moss Side, Hulme, Gorton, Stockport. Women are coming from everywhere ... We wouldn’t say to a woman [from] Stockport who wanted to come, ‘You can’t come because you don’t live in Trafford’. In fact we would welcome [you] because then you can give us a sense of what is happening in Stockport.”

This was also reflected in some of the organisations’ reports on the funding they received to deliver non-place-based work:

Older people were worried when we told them that the project is about to end they reported accessing these activities weekly gave them a sense of purpose. Some people who met through the dispersed communities activities also met regularly outside the group, forming strong networks and building genuine friendships. These social connections, including for people with disabilities, also improved physical and mental health.

Access to social contact and talking to each other was seen as a therapy which as a great source of support. The pandemic has exacerbated an existing problem that far too few older people currently receive this support. Participants reported that they felt empowered with increased confidence so they can decide what they need, what they want, what they think will work in their areas. From what we are seeing, it’s been very successful in helping them to build connections, combat social isolation and loneliness.

These women have become isolated and some suffer with anxiety and stress. We introduced women to new activities that they had never tried before to reinforce the idea that you can be and do anything you want despite what you may have been through in life. We wanted to instil a sense of power, purpose and hope in the lives of these women. Our aim was to inspire them and encourage them to overcome their barriers and tap into their creative side. We also wanted to create a safe place to socialise and network with new people in order to reduce the feeling of isolation.



Social infrastructure and social capital

The organisations participating in this research had a variety of operating models – some were based in and carried out all activities from one centre of their own, some use a network of centres, and some rely on public venues such as libraries and shared community spaces.

Interviewees differed in the emphasis they gave to having their own centre, and this often related to the type of activities being offered, and the history of the community. For example, Socio Economic Regeneration CIC was very focused on developing a centre where people from the African Caribbean community could come together. They explained how focusing on a physical space can be a way to bring community together:

“So it wasn’t like give me a 10 million pound building all kitted out to the max. I wasn’t bothered in what condition it was because I’ve got a construction background. So as part of the project of making people to use and take ownership of the space was to get them involved in development of the space.”

Having a centre was seen as important for this widely spread diaspora community that has experienced migration to the UK, subsequent dispersal around the UK, and dispersal across Greater Manchester, within two generations.

“...when we do things, we have people as far as Leeds come together with us, because when we first came here Moss Side was one of the first places we landed in, but also people went to Oldham, people went to Birmingham, people went to Leeds, Wolverhampton, Nottingham.”

Some organisations have centres in places with particular historical relevance for their community. Jinnah Day Centre is located in an area of Bury formerly dominated by cotton and paper mills. It was set up to support retired millworkers who had migrated to the area

from Pakistan in the 1960s because mainstream day centres did not understand or cater to their religious and cultural needs.

Other organisations use a network of their own centres or public venues in order to improve access for community members. Warm Hut has three small offices, or “branches”, in different boroughs, supporting asylum seekers who travel to the offices to meet and get help. Precious Gems organises group activities for women and girls in Bolton, including a group specifically for ‘BAME women’ for whom English is not their first language. Groups meet at locations that are accessible by public transport, as members live in different areas of Bolton. Research by Henshaws for the Ageing Equally? programme¹¹ found that working in this way through ‘community hubs’ has both advantages and disadvantages, depending on the infrastructure of the area where hubs are located.

Some groups don’t currently place importance on working from fixed centres. In some cases, this is due to developing Covid-safe projects and ways of working. Widows Empowerment Trust, which provides peer support to widows in Manchester, has a number of ‘wellbeing centres’, but now also trains up volunteer befrienders to make outreach visits, or provide telephone befriending support. Salford Deaf Advocacy developed a hybrid approach to their projects, which fitted neatly with their established one to one advocacy work:

“We’re doing craft groups, like a knit and natter type of group but with a festive spin on it... Once we’ve brought those materials in we can send them out. When we were doing home visits we would take one of the wire wreath bases and some of the flowers and things like that, and we can take the activity to the individuals who didn’t want to come to the group.”

Organisations carried out activities for two main reasons: to bring members of a dispersed community together – albeit for a variety of ostensible reasons, and to support members of a dispersed community to access information and services provided by mainstream organisations, for example by translating letters, or signposting. A few organisations also provide specific services to particular communities, such as counselling in native languages, but by and large they complement mainstream services, rather than seeking to replace them.

Organisations offer a fairly similar variety of structured activities: arts and crafts, music groups, culturally relevant creative activities, yoga or pilates or low impact exercise classes, and sometimes more active sports. Most organisations are also now returning to offering outings. In addition, most organisations also offer less structured social opportunities, such as coffee mornings or afternoons. However, it was clear that even with structured activities, often the primary purpose is to offer an opportunity for people to come together in a place where they feel safe and welcome:

“It’s not just this that we’re doing, the art, it’s sort of like a therapy as well ... if they have any issues or problems they feel that they can actually talk about them. They will talk with each other as well.”

¹¹ www.gmcvo.org.uk/publications/ageing-equally-research-reports

“There is this thing, a feeling, the community seeing their own, my kind of person, something like that.”

“We’re talking to each other about what you did this morning, what time you go for a walk, and what you’re going to do when you go home, and other things as well.”

In her report for MICRA on social infrastructure, Sophie Yarker gives a comprehensive overview of the relationships between social infrastructure and the development of forms of social capital¹². Yarker explains that, while ‘bonding capital’ in the form of friendships and strong social ties is important, so too are weaker social ties, such as acquaintanceships and “connections without substantial significance”.

For all of the organisations and communities participating in our research, access to appropriate ‘third places’, whether their own community centres or public venues, is essential for developing both the strong and weak social ties that support community identity. This is additional to the historic and cultural importance that particular buildings and meeting places have for particular communities.

The combined pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic and austerity present threats to the stability and continued availability of necessary social infrastructure, particularly for communities located in deprived areas¹³. Many community centres have had to put charges and rents up to make up for lost funding, and revenue lost due to Covid-19 closures. These issues could pose a greater disadvantage for those communities with a heavier reliance on diverse or widely available social spaces, such as libraries and general community centres. Conversely, those communities with their own centre may be somewhat protected from this – as long as they are able to maintain the centre.

Beyond ‘community-led’

Many of the CERI organisations participating in the research saw themselves as belonging to, and inherently part of the communities that they serve, and their work as truly owned by the community.

In many cases the organisations had been developed through a concerted community effort to meet a glaring need or had been founded by a community member with personal experience of discrimination or inequality.

“A lot of the Asian community that you see in this area especially would have come here in the ‘60s to work in the cotton mills, the paper mills ... so because the mills started to close down in the ‘90s, so you have a workforce from the ‘60s, probably in the same job for 30 or 40 years and suddenly the mills close, they didn’t have transferable skills, and the community here said, “we should do something for the elderly”, so some of them decided to make a voluntary organisation.”

“So it’s all these things that I think makes our group different, we can relate immediately, we’re coming from the exact same place. I have experienced the exact

¹² Yarker, S. Social Infrastructure: How shared spaces make communities work, MICRA 2020 www.gmevo.org.uk/publications/social-infrastructure-how-shared-spaces-make-communities-work

¹³ Buffel T, Yarker S, Phillipson C, et al. Locked down by inequality: Older people and the COVID-19 pandemic. Urban Studies. September 2021. <https://doi:10.1177/00420980211041018>

same things in terms of the other issues that I mentioned before – discrimination and equality, etcetera, because that all plays a role as well.”

How deeply embedded many of these organisations are in their communities also came through in the way that interviewees shared personal stories of national and ethnic identity, migration, seeking asylum, and other relevant experiences. It also came through in the way that interviewees talked about the people who participated in the organisation, its groups and activities:

“It’s about nurturing the community that’s growing, that we have created and without probably meaning to, it has organically grown and is growing.”

“[W]e prefer not to call them service user[s] because they own the project ... We call them members ... because if somebody is a service user he doesn’t have ownership, they come and then you tell them what to do or maybe they benefit on something you prepared. When they are members in our group they are a group and they are a member and they decide and they take the decision and they contribute on what happens and they decide what to do.”

“We are family.”

This sense of the organisations being members of their communities was reinforced by the informal way that interviewees spoke about co-production and co-design:

“We’ve really had to work with the community and tweak what we’re doing constantly, so [the development of the project] has been driven by them ... [this project] came on the back of this particular group of ladies ... saying there’s coffee mornings, there’s this, there’s that, but there’s nothing for us. We thought, yes actually, you’re right.”

Try to make the participants own the project and be involved in planning and delivering as much as possible as not everyone like things done for or to them, but more with them. [From report on funding,]

All the interviewees described their organisations as responsive to the needs of their community and driven by feedback from community members.

“When we want to have ... classes they ask them what you want and what you can offer. So now all the facilitators we have got is from our service users, so one of them comes and says, ‘I am a painter from this and that,’ and maybe we give them insurance and we go for it.”

In many organisations, ‘volunteering’ has unclear boundaries and can be an aspect or a development of membership and participation:

“For me it is about engaging the women that you want to be working with from the offset, getting their voice, ‘What do you want? What’s happening for you? What is your life like? How can we make a difference? What would you like to see?’ That way you know that you’re doing something that is what people want that will make a difference.”

The value of members volunteering in their own projects was also highlighted in reports on delivery of non-place-based projects:

It was good to see that all activities were co-designed by older people based on services that matter to them, they have contributed their skills and experience to help design and run activities, lead on projects and they have developed new skills and made connections within and across their community ... Because volunteers were more invested in the activities, they were more engaged in getting results. Participants and volunteers gained confidence [and] This built local capacity to enhance other activities and strengthen communities.

All the interviewees described their organisations as responsive to the needs of the community and driven by feedback from community members:

Mitigating barriers and systemic exclusion

Through the interviews it became clear that the organisations play an important role in helping community members navigate barriers of language, mobility and access to services.

Most of the interviewees we spoke to talked about inequality and discrimination; most talked about language barriers, with a few providing English classes in addition to other activities. Unsurprisingly all the organisations noted travel and transport barriers. Many talked about how they help community members overcome them.

All the organisations we spoke to described ways in which their communities, and the members of the communities individually, experienced unequal access to services, and direct discrimination.

“Like with everything, the more money you’ve got, the easier it is to be a carer. If you’re struggling financially, or you’re in poor housing, and you just don’t have that control that is really difficult because then you’re at the mercy of whatever care package you might have or whatever carers get sent to support you.”

Some communities are very alive to the connections between historic and current day experiences of discrimination:

“We’re still looking at racism and some of the ism and schism at the moment, the inequality stuff, you get me, that’s a common conversation all day long.”



Some drew clear connections between individual experiences of exclusion and structural discrimination:

“One or two people from our community did go to the [nearby mainstream community centre] but they’re out of place, nobody speaks the language there, the food is different, there is nowhere you can pray, their spiritual needs are not catered for, the cultural needs, the religious needs ... so if I told you about their budget [vs] our budget you will be shocked.”

Many of these organisations are working with older people who they themselves describe as vulnerable. They include women who have survived domestic abuse, older people who have lived through traumatic global events or fled persecution, and people who have lived with discrimination and isolation all their lives. Interviewees spoke about how they work with community members to mitigate these inequalities through advocacy, and through supporting self-empowerment:

“A lot of their needs is jobs, GPs, housing, you get me, a lot of issues, a load of issues, because I try to get them access to public services, that’s the issue.”

“It is about helping them to bring out the skill ... to empower women and to recognise the skills they have – you will find that a lot of women on the committee we get them doing things that they normally say, ‘I’m not doing that, I couldn’t do that’, and then they do it and it feels good! So it’s about finding the skills within the group and pulling them out of people and encouraging them to get involved and keep encouraging them until their doing things, and they think ‘Oh, I can’t believe I’ve done that!’”

Language barriers in particular were identified by many as intricately connected to older community members’ experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and social isolation:

“... especially [for] over 50s there’s an issue around language ... but there’s a history behind it – it wasn’t necessary for those people who worked in the mills to be fluent in English; it was a noisy environment. ... They spent maybe 30, 40 years in the mills and when they left ... they didn’t have transferable skills and they found themselves at that kind of retirement age as well. I call it the twilight zone, when you’re in your late 50s, you’re too young for a pension and you’re not really able to work ... so there is an issue around language; that’s a real barrier.”

“We’ve had a service user be in hospital for five days on a ward with no interpreter, despite being promised every day by the same doctor [and] not being able to bring even a friend in to provide communication support because of Covid, again, understandable but absolutely not acceptable.”

“I might want to speak in my native tongue and I can’t because this person might not understand me and I might wave my arms around a bit more and somebody might interpret that as being aggressive.”

Some interviewees spoke of language as a fundamental reason for setting up the organisation, or a specific activity, and felt it was a reason why people needed the organisation:

“... when we started we were asylum seekers too and it was really a struggle to get someone who doesn’t speak your language to help you with all those immigration issues. We were travelling to Manchester, to Refugee Action, to get support and from that point we decided to set up a group in Salford to help each other... we’ve got staff

and volunteers speaking those different languages ... Pr speaks two of the languages ... our programme managers speaks four languages. Myself I speak three languages and we've got Pa [who] speaks I don't know how many African languages – at least six or seven.”

“there is a kind of language barrier, so [for those for whom] English is not their first language ... because they cannot speak English [and] they do [not] feel comfortable sitting with somebody who does not understand their language.”

“Confidentiality issue is a key when you do an activity with asylum seekers and refugees. Sometimes they don't really like the fact that to access a service you need to have an interpreter ... But when they come to us they know that we speak the same language.”

“So we're a middle step. [We] trigger, give people confidence to join mainstream activities although they have cultural barriers and language needs ... because of language barriers, cultural barriers, maybe even religious barriers, they don't go out and access information, join a club, join a gym, join a recreating centre. So we had to come up with different ways of presenting the information to them.”

Community organisations provided a mixture of support to enable community members to access mainstream services, and some replica services in community languages:

“We provide a low-level advocacy ... We are advocating for and campaigning for fair and equal access to all services, regardless of whether that is official advocacy, healthcare services... but we are doing that in the user's first language. There is no other service in Salford that offers that in BSL.”

The reduced mobility which is a common experience for older people has a greater impact in terms of increased social isolation and loneliness for members of dispersed communities.

“Some of the [people] we support and work with live in Salford and travel to Bolton for social activities; they will go over to Merseyside Society for Deaf people when they have bingo night; the Deaf community and sign language community have to meet, especially when we're talking about the older generation; WhatsApp is great and Zoom's great, and this kind of thing is fantastic, [so] as part of our project we've been trying to build digital skills.”

“Sometimes my body is aching and I can't travel and then they come and pick me up ... The same with [this lady] she's got body pains, her body is constantly in a lot of pain and she's got brittle bones as well ... She likes to walk but obviously it's too far to come here so [she only comes] if she can get a lift.”

“some of [our] people are not able to drive anymore, they've got nobody around them to help them, so it was a matter of picking up or sending taxis for them.”

Similarly, although transport availability is an issue for all older people, members of dispersed communities face additional barriers to accessing transport such as language and cost. Transport barriers include availability of transport, but also cost:

“Unfortunately the funding was not enough to apply for travel expenses for participants ... especially those who are asylum seekers and destitute, they are struggling to attend are activities but they are really struggling with transport.”



Half of the community organisations we spoke to provide their own solutions to these barriers. It should be noted that this imposes additional financial challenges for the organisations themselves.

“Most of these travel and we can’t get the bus, we have the minibus outside, we pick them up a day before, or they ring up early in the morning.”

“some of them transportation is an issue ... before Covid some want to access our services but lack of transportation. Some of them will tell you they can’t afford to pay for a taxi, and ring and ride - some areas can’t access to come down, so that’s a lack of access to the service as well ... sometimes we find out that some of our users want to access the services, we have to pay volunteers to travel, use their car to go and bring them in.”

“We’ve got hands on volunteers and we do try our best to offer some sort of transport to get people together.”

An additional travel barrier for carers is the need to find replacement care; the carers’ organisation we spoke to offers help by using funding for short periods of respite care.

Funding

The needs of small community organisations are simple: they want support that enables them to be more stable, to employ more – or some – staff, and to continue to be flexible and responsive to their communities’ needs.

“That unrestricted core funding that is more sustainable or encourages organisations to do some capacity building, and that sort of trial and error flexibility along the way, is what we need.”

Having a befriending coordinator to look at the inconsistency of volunteers and to help manage that really helped to deliver a consistent service and to support the volunteers

to ensure that the beneficiaries were socially engaged. The beneficiaries felt better supported as there was more consistency to the service that they received, and they felt part of a community by being encouraged to participate in socially engaging activities. Our befriending coordinator was able to manage the volunteer visits and encourage them to continue with their volunteering commitments. Through our befriending coordinator we were able to provide a befriending service and encourage them to participate in social activities that help to form a sense of community and eliminate loneliness and social isolation. [From report on delivery of non-place-based project.]

Interviewees had a lot to say about how difficult and stressful funding and funding processes can be for small community organisations:

*“To be honest it is really horrible, really hard, it is competitive and gives you a bad feeling. It gives you a feeling of losing and winning and fighting, it is not nice. Also, personally, it gives me the feeling of they have doubts about my profession...”
[counsellor for migrants and refugees]*

“Since the pandemic I’ve noticed they keep saying that if there is any funding available they are going to make it available first for the black and minority organisations ... but how many people running organisations like myself are seeing those funding? I’ve no clue. Even when the funding is available, you send out your application, the chances of it being rejected is higher than it was before. To be honest, I don’t know, as a CEO of this charity I always leave with the feeling of not being able to provide the services in maybe three months’ time, or four or five months’ time. It’s like a lottery, you don’t know if tomorrow you are going to open your doors or not because of the funding. At the end of the day I need to pay for the venue, I need to pay stuff, I need to pay for volunteers to help run the activities. Even all the will that I have to help the community, if there are no resources there’s no way we can help them.”

Many spoke about barriers, and raised issues of accessibility, and the pressure of having short lead-times to turn around funding applications:

“For the groups like us, all of us from [non-English-speaking] backgrounds, we have a disadvantage; writing is an art, a skill, and we are not good at it. So this is a profession how to write a fund, and again we are not in the head of the game.”

“I’ve not seen any funding applications that you can submit in the video form, so you can’t submit that in BSL, it has to be written in English. The guidelines and guidance are often complicated, often jargon reports and things like that, often convoluted English. For a lot of the Deaf community, written English is a struggle.”

“... we do other things as well [but then] you’ve just got to quickly boom boom quickly get this [application] in and you’re under such stress, and pressure, but you have to do it because you need the funding to be able to do the things that we do.”

The challenges faced by small organisations also came through in project reports:

Often small organisations working at grassroots level do amazing work but over commit in a desperate attempt to get some funding.

The most challenging part is fitting the hours in from the application to planning, delivery and evaluation of the project, as well as doing all the other things that life

requires. We rely heavily on volunteers, and could not operate without them. We learnt that need to be working with local authorities to secure long-term funding so we can employ full time workers to carry out this work throughout the year.

The evaluation process was made easier having this format to follow kept it precise and to the point ensuring the correct information was captured.

Many referred to the tendency for funders to prefer to fund new projects and new work, rather than continuing to fund work that community organisations know continues to be needed:

“There needs to be more trust in organisations in their expertise in working with those dispersed communities – there are organisations that have got years of experience, both lived and professional, in working with those sorts of people and being one of those people. Funders need to trust that they know what is needed and what will make that difference.”

“They have to trust us. How many times I have to write one thing and change to see can I stay [open] this year or not? How many times do I have to prove myself and my company, how many times I have to say that? In the newspaper you all the time [see] ‘We need mental health, we have to give [it] millions’ ... but I have to beg for my own salary and all my colleagues’ salaries.”

Much of what we heard echoes findings of the recent evaluation of the Supporting Ageing in Place work¹⁴, and supports that report’s recommendations on accessibility, inclusivity, timing, and support and capacity building. In diverse ways, interviewees told us that they need funding to be more consistent and stable, easier to access and simpler to manage, and based on respect for their expertise and the value of their work:

“They need to stop making it like, we’re beggars, and two, they’re doing us a favour by making that funding available. They’re not doing us a favour by making it available if we can’t access it.”

“Having a bank of volunteers is very difficult to really give the best of the services, but if we have like a paid [staff member], if we can have funding [for that], it pays to have people that can [give] consistency, reliability, that’s one of the big issues we have ... So I think the key thing is having a few paid staff that can help to co-ordinate the volunteer projects and activities.”

“One of the things that needs to change is accessibility to funding, also making the funding process more interactive, and more easy for organisations like ours to access. Also tend to give long term funding – because most of the funders we encounter only fund for a limited number of months, maybe maximum just one year ... I think there needs to be continuity and then funding for more years or months.”

¹⁴ Lang, L. Supporting Ageing In Place: A process evaluation of Ambition for Ageing’s microfunding programme, Ambition for Ageing, 2022 www.gmcvo.org.uk/publications/supporting-ageing-place-process-evaluation-ambition-ageings-microfunding-programme

All the organisations we spoke to demonstrated flexibility, adaptability, and responsiveness in the way they work. All of the interviewees talked about responding to community members' needs as core to the way they work, even where this was challenging. Many had had to adapt their ways of working to support Covid-19 protection measures, or to provide additional support. This echoed the experience of organisations in the Pandemic Pressures research¹⁵. Interviewees talked about needing funders and funding streams that would support this ability to be responsive:

“It’s good if they are ready to fund new ideas. Like I say, there are some projects that we run now that, as we are running it, new ideas have developed ... when a project is running say for one or two years, within the delivery period it’s like a many-headed project, as one is delivering a social project, other [groups and people] are coming up to be attended to.”

“A lot of project funding is directed towards a particular activity or particular aims of that project only [but] I think sometimes there needs to be a little bit more flexibility, you know ... to help us to be a bit more decisive and have a bit more agility in the things we can cater [for], in the things we can put on.”

“That’s what has been really great about this funding ... thinking, ‘Let’s try it because this is what five [community members] have told us they want, so there might be 25 or 30 [others],”

“As someone with a support need you want to see and be supported by an organisation that is dynamic and vibrant and listening and trying...”

Many interviewees had suggestions for ways that funders can better understand communities and work more closely with community organisations:

“[we see] there’s a need for this, in this area ... I want to do this; can I sit with you as a funder, and work on a project together, rather than me sending you the application blindly ... how can me and you together to address these needs here and now, with x amount of money.”

“They can talk to us, and we can show them what we do [and] they could listen to people – after funding, speak to people you are supporting, find out what are the other things [we need] speak to the people you are giving funding to ... Every funder has a purpose, has a need, something they want to achieve – but they can also have an open mind, like open it to new ideas instead of only keeping what they know and what exists, test the new idea.”

Many of the organisations in our research fit the profile of the ones that Ubele Initiative described as “most affected” by the pandemic, and about whom the report expressed concern for the future¹⁶. Our research was conducted 21 months after the publication of that report, and during that time new grants for ethnically diverse organisations have been made available, and inequalities highlighted by the pandemic have received renewed

¹⁵ www.gmcvo.org.uk/publications/pandemic-pressures-how-greater-manchester-equalities-organisations-have-responded-needs

¹⁶ Murray, K. Impact of Covid-19 on the BAME Community Sector, The Ubele Initiative 2020

attention. Nonetheless interviewees echoed many of the report authors' concerns. This suggests that if change has begun, its positive effects are not yet being felt by grassroots organisations.

Many of the things we heard also tallied with findings by the 10 Years' Time report on racial justice and funding¹⁷. Although these reports focus on the experiences of ethnically diverse organisations, many of the issues they raise would resonate with other dispersed communities too. However, fuller research would uncover the differences of organisations with different relationships to power, structures of influence, and philanthropy both today and historically.

Increasing visibility of communities and their needs

It may seem self-evident that increasing the visibility of the needs of older people in dispersed communities will help to improve the mechanisms for supporting them. All the organisations we spoke to felt this was the case, and they had a variety of thoughts on how this might be done:

“A route should be created where people come to render their voices on issues and then those who are in positions of authority should not be far away from the communities ... something like a townhouse meeting... it could be attending some of the local projects.”

“A lot of campaigns, a lot of advocacy, raising awareness of why people are fleeing countries of their origin to come and seek refuge here will help a lot.”

“Making people understand that the stats are one in six of the general population has some sort of caring responsibility, so we should all know a good handful of people [with] a caring responsibility in our teams or neighbourhoods.”

“We want a seat around the table where we can have our voices heard.”

“Maybe we need to speak to them, like people like us that are actually closer to the community, and speak to the community, and see members of the community on a regular basis. We could go and speak to them and show them all the things we do and tell them and collect data - show them data and something like that.”

However, raising public awareness, connecting with decision makers, and improving visibility of community issues in order to influence change, is complex work. This type of policy and advocacy are not core functions for small organisations with little if any unrestricted income.

“For instance, in past times we used to have a yearly sports day. When we do a sports day, we invite the Lord Mayor and the local councillors. However, due to lack of funding we've not been able to do that.”

The community organisations involved in this research were very clearly focused on direct delivery of community support, and had no additional capacity beyond this. This became clear

¹⁷ Manderson Evans, E., Akinrele, C-J., Shah, A. Racial Justice and Social Transformation: How funders can act, 10 Years' Time 2022

when an event organised to help them learn more about gathering and using evidence to influence change had to be cancelled due to low numbers.

There are other visibility issues of concern to dispersed communities:

“The ‘Rose Effect’ from Strictly Come Dancing is fantastic – but we also have a lot of intersectionality within the Deaf community [and] Black and brown-skinned Deaf people are wanting their own representation as well. It’s fantastic that the Deaf community is being represented and acknowledged and celebrated but we need to be mindful that it is a fair representation of the dispersed community but as a diverse community. I’m just going to drop that in there.”

There are also some who, through bitter experience, have come to take a dim view of the potential of awareness raising for making much difference:

“I’m pretty sure that policy makers they know about these group of people, because of politics sometimes they don’t really care.”

While others are disheartened by failed attempts to raise their voice:

“I am going to hundreds of meetings in a year, even more to be honest, and do you know how many times I said something and they shut me up? It is not because they are rude [but] because it is not the right place to raise that [issue]. I don’t know when is right place to do that, I don’t know.”

The low visibility of the needs of dispersed communities, and the lack of capacity on the part of community organisations to correct this, is related to the inequality and discrimination experienced by the communities. Small community organisations need support to raise awareness and advocate at a higher level to influence change. This support could come in the form of VCSE organisations with capacity sharing their platforms, creating opportunities for smaller organisations to raise their voices, and directing attention to these organisations and communities.



Conclusions

Focus on people as well as place

Place-based models of community support, at any scale of geographic area, carry the risk of excluding older people in dispersed communities of identity or experience. Their isolation is compounded by age-related limitations to mobility combining with barriers to accessing transport and mainstream services, and cultural and social exclusion. Further, place-based working can overlook the need of older community members to maintain their sense of identity as they age.

The community organisations supporting older people in dispersed communities may also be overlooked in community development strategies focused on place. However, place-based strategies that account for these organisations may enhance support for older people in dispersed communities. For example, if they can ensure the availability of vital social infrastructure, or support partnerships that can transfer resources to small community organisations while amplifying their voice and making use of their expert knowledge.

A vital role in making Greater Manchester Age-Friendly

The things we heard in the research lead us to conclude that these organisations play a critical role in maintaining the wellbeing of people in dispersed communities as they age.

- i. Through their work they mitigate for the geographic dispersal of the community, by bringing people together and keeping them in touch with each other – often literally through providing or paying for transport or facilitating it in other ways.
- ii. They mediate access to mainstream services, by providing native language support that enables people to use English language services, and by advocating directly on behalf of people experiencing discrimination.
- iii. They are unique and culturally relevant, operating in a landscape where people feel unable to use services that are culturally excluding or inappropriate, and they are often significantly related to or arise out of a community's history.

Community organisations serving dispersed communities can also be said to play a vital role in developing an age-friendly city region, ensuring that older people who are often excluded are able to play their part. In 'Building Age-Friendly Communities'¹⁸, Jessica Thorley identifies six themes for age-friendly neighbourhoods:

- Community integration and belonging
- Meeting and participation opportunities
- Accessibility, facilities and transport
- Community resources and spaces
- Feeling of safety
- Information and communication.

¹⁸ Thorley, J. Building Age-Friendly Neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester: evidence from the Ambition for Ageing programme, Ambition for Ageing 2018 www.gmcvo.org.uk/publications/building-age-friendly-neighbourhoods-greater-manchester

The ‘Ageing Equally?’ research showed that these themes are experienced and expressed in both similar and particular ways for members of smaller communities whose community of identity is dispersed within a local authority area, or across the Greater Manchester region (and, in the case of the Deaf BSL community, beyond). This latest small qualitative research study shows how the organisations embedded in and led by dispersed communities facilitate these crucial aspects of life experience for people who share an identity or experience.

In setting out a ‘Manifesto for an Age-Friendly Movement’¹⁹ (see appendix), Tine Buffel pointed to the need for partnership and collaborative working, and suggested that age-friendly policies must engage closely with those most likely to be excluded. The small community organisations in our research address three of the six areas of the manifesto, and have the potential to contribute much to age-friendly partnerships. They have expertise in dealing with inequality from their work, and often from lived experience. They are embedded in communities that are seen by others as ‘hard to reach’. Their commitment to responding to the needs of their communities means they are skilled at co-production. In addition, they can support marginalised older people to contribute valuable insights and experience to mainstream community co-production processes.

More immediately, small organisations supporting dispersed communities are making an important contribution to an age-friendly recovery from Covid-19. Our research indicates that Buffel’s recently articulated six principles for age-friendly post-Covid-19 recovery strategies²⁰ are already integral to the work of these organisations, to varying degrees and dependent on local and community contexts and needs.

Much of the discussion about inequality and exclusion of older people from dispersed communities focuses on the experiences of individuals. However, individuals are part of communities. Individuals and communities often do not see themselves as ‘hard to reach’, but as thriving and mutually supporting. They are enabled in this by small community organisations which work beyond geographic boundaries to facilitate individual resilience and wellbeing, collective identity and belonging, and practical connection to mainstream social structures. These organisations also need support, to continue to be able to play an important role in Greater Manchester’s age-friendly future.

¹⁹ Buffel, T. A Manifesto for the Age-Friendly Movement: Developing a New Urban Agenda, *Journal of Ageing and Social Policy* January 2018

²⁰ Buffel et al 2021; see appendix for full list

Recommendations

Recommendations for place-based work

Place-based working always carries the risk that members of small dispersed communities will be excluded or less likely to benefit. Our main recommendations from this report are:

- All organisations involved in place-based working – whether funders, mainstream VCSE organisations, or local authorities – should ensure that programme planning is based on a thorough understanding of the people, assets and relationships in the area.
- All organisations involved in place-based working must recognise the importance and value of complementary support for work with dispersed communities, either in partnership with or devolved to community organisations embedded in these communities.

Recommendations for supporting community organisations

Community organisations supporting dispersed communities predominantly need more and improved support in three areas: funding, social infrastructure, and research and advocacy. Some of this support might be thought of as a type of ‘corporate allyship’, whereby larger, more established, mainstream VCSE organisations, and funding bodies, empower and enable marginalised communities to speak and be heard. Our recommendations are arranged by target audience for ease of identifying relevant actions:

<p>Funders should:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop longer term funding for small community organisations supporting dispersed communities. • Develop funding support for social infrastructure belonging to and used by dispersed communities. • Develop more accessible application and more proportionate reporting processes. • Support further research to uncover the work and support needs of community organisations supporting dispersed communities
<p>Mainstream VCSE organisations should:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocate for the interests of organisations supporting dispersed communities and share advocacy opportunities so they can self-advocate. • Where possible channel funding to small organisations through partnerships / acting as responsible organisation. • Support small community organisations supporting dispersed communities to gather evidence and raise the visibility of their communities' needs. • Explore the development of mutually beneficial and egalitarian partnerships with community organisations, which recognise the potential to learn from their expertise and connections, and ensure that localities develop support structures that are open and accessible to members of dispersed communities.
<p>Local authorities and policy makers should:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure vital social infrastructure is available for and accessible to dispersed communities. • Ensure that geographically-defined 'levelling up' and community development opportunities are complemented by policies that address the needs of dispersed communities. • Work together in partnership with other authorities and with small organisations to ensure that dispersed communities' needs are better understood in planning across the city region.

Appendix

The six areas covered by Tine Buffel's Manifesto for the Age-Friendly Movement:

- Challenging social inequality
- Widening participation
- Coproducing age-friendly communities
- Co-designing age-friendly environments
- Encouraging multi-sectorial and multidisciplinary collaboration
- Integrating research with policy

