

Ageing well in rural England: How can Neighbourhood Planning contribute?

January 2018 - March 2019

This study focused on the challenges and opportunities rural communities present for ageing populations in England. It was specifically concerned with Neighbourhood Planning. This is a participatory process through which communities shape development in local areas. The study explored whether Neighbourhood Planning could help create communities that foster healthy ageing.

Neighbourhood Planning was introduced by the UK Government in 2011. Neighbourhood Plans can specify how land should be used, where new buildings should be, what they should look like and what should be protected or improved in the local environment.

Researchers from the NIHR School for Public Health Research

(<https://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/>) explored how Neighbourhood Planning can help create places in rural England to age well – so-called ‘age-friendly communities’. We studied six rural sites (see map below) that wanted to become more age-friendly through Neighbourhood Planning.



- The six sites were communities in different parts of England
- Four were villages, two were towns
- They had between 1,400-8,000 residents
- They all had a parish council

We spoke to parish councillors, local residents and planning professionals in each community and examined their Neighbourhood Planning documents. Overleaf are some of the things we found:



NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING PROCESS

- In all six communities, Neighbourhood Planning occurred through the parish council
- The communities had Neighbourhood Planning steering groups, with older people as members and leads
- Participating in Neighbourhood Planning was demanding. Many local residents, to some extent, became 'experts'
- Some older adults struggled with modern technology (computers), which limited contributions
- Local residents, sometimes specifically older residents, were asked what they wanted and needed in their local communities
- Neighbourhood Planning required money and volunteers. Some communities struggled and could not develop their Neighbourhood Plan as well as hoped
- The communities worked together with their local authorities. This often worked well, but sometimes tensions arose

EARLY MILESTONES

- Five of the communities already had a Neighbourhood Plan, one was preparing a Plan
- The Neighbourhood Plans included age-friendly priorities, such as housing for older people, including downsizing options, accessible services, and protections for the local environment
- Sometimes Neighbourhood Planning resulted in more than a Neighbourhood Plan. For example, in one site it led to the introduction of a community bus

FURTHER RESULTS

- Residents and communities felt empowered
- People involved gained new knowledge and formed relationships with others
- Neighbourhood Planning led to a greater sense of community. It also caused disagreements and friction
- The Neighbourhood Plans had not been in place for long, so there were as yet no visible changes in the local environment. However, some changes were expected:

- More suitable housing for older people, including downsizing options
- More affordable homes that would enable younger people to stay close to their ageing parents
- Better services and facilities
- Easier access to green spaces
- Improved transport options
- Protection of local views
- Neighbourhood Planning was also linked to challenges:
 - Its focus on land use was seen as too narrow to achieve the many priorities of communities
 - Some felt that even with a Neighbourhood Plan in place, more powerful players such as local authorities and big developers would determine what happens in a community

LONGER TERM IMPACTS

- Only a few years had passed since Neighbourhood Planning had started in the communities. Any longer term impacts had yet to become visible
- Residents hoped that Neighbourhood Planning would help their communities to thrive

WHERE TO NEXT?

- Within only a few years, Neighbourhood Planning has helped to make a number of rural communities in England more age-friendly
- While there are challenges, Neighbourhood Planning *can* improve the built environment and help create stronger communities in which older people can have a say
- Now that some Neighbourhood Plans are in place, we need to discover more about how they shape communities in the longer term. We might then be able to confidently argue that Neighbourhood Planning should be used for creating rural communities in which people can live and age well.