

How can future generations of older people live good lives in Essex?

What we did - **RESEARCH**

Horizon scan & professional interviews

We scanned the horizon and talked to experts to identify some exciting and promising models of support for older people in their later life and carers which enable them to live fulfilling lives.

Ethnography

We conducted 8 ethnographic interviews with working-age adults and carers to explore their views on their future needs and aspirations, and explore what tools, products, services and support forms may enable them to achieve their aspirations.

Site-visits

We conducted 3 workshops with 15 working-age people to enable them to experience services for older people in Essex and share their views on whether and how existing provision meets their expectations, what is missing from provision, and what other experiences and support would feel valuable to their future selves in older age.

What we did - COHORT

Our sample had the following inclusion criteria:

Working age adults between 50 and 60 years old...

- in or out of employment.
- with long-term health conditions (for example, dementia, physical disabilities or learning difficulties).
- at risk of isolation.
- who are caring for an older person and have experience of using day opportunity centres.

What we did - ANALYSIS

Our process of generating themes and insights from the fieldwork included the following phases:

- Notes were taken during each workshop and a written narrative was produced from each professional telephone interview and ethnographic interview.
- The research team engaged with all the workshop notes and interview narratives through storytelling and synthesis sessions.
- As the research team listened to the stories repetitive patterns were captured and coded. We generated codes and combined them into overarching themes and insights. These can be found in the next section.
- The quotes presented in our findings were chosen because they are representative of re-occurring issues and experiences.

What we did - CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

Alongside overarching themes and insights, key ideas and opportunities can be found in the next section. These concepts emerged from...

- Our research participants, through exploring what kinds of support forms may enable them to live a good life in their older age.
- Stakeholders during a Change Workshop, through identifying 'what kinds of experiences, relationships, and interventions will contribute towards a good life in people's older age'.

We captured key principles and features from all ideas and developed final ideas by linking them with key themes and insights.

What we did - SYSTEM OPPORTUNITIES

Using emerging themes and insights, and ideas and opportunities from our research, we brought together members of ECC at a Change Workshop. Assessing the system as it is, and seeing where Essex could lead the change, we convened conversations around 5 areas:

- Strategy - what are the big questions we need to ask to create the ideal future?
- Commissioning - what does this mean for our future role as Essex County Council?
- Alliances - what new relationships do we need to build?
- Practice - what are the right capabilities, values, and behaviours practitioners need in the future?
- User Experience - what kinds of interactions do people want to have?

We developed key system opportunities which emerged from these conversations, which can be found later in this report.

Key themes &
insights &
ideas

Key themes

The following themes emerged from the field work and present our framework of analysis:

Purpose

Social
connection

Emotional
wellbeing

Physical
wellbeing

Caring

Purpose

The 'I'm-not-done-yet' (INDY) generation

People in their 50s and 60s were active members of the community with busy schedules. And most importantly, they were keen to “keep doing what I am doing now”. Whether this be working, running a business, volunteering in their communities, pursuing their hobbies, travelling, or learning new skills, people in their 50s and 60s see themselves as willing and able to pursue active lives as long as they can.

“I’ll take the money, take early retirement in effect, probably work part-time but perhaps not straight away, do some volunteering and go and visit my eldest son in Australia.” (Anne)

People already active in their communities also have a strong sense of purpose in their older age

The degree to which people expressed a sense of purpose in their later lives varied depending on their outlook to getting older and their involvement in the community. People who were less active in their communities and who focussed more on their careers found it more difficult to articulate a sense of purpose in their older age, beyond travelling. Among the people with a clear and strong sense of purpose three aspects featured very strongly:

- Pursuing creative interests
- Helping others
- Feeling connected with others

“Being in church gives you a sense of belonging. It’s another family. There will always be people who will be interested in you, visit you, pray for you and help you.” (Esther)

People had different outlooks on getting older

People's attitudes towards getting older varied widely. Those with a more positive outlook see their older age as an opportunity for self-actualisation. They see it as an opportunity to have more freedom over their time and pursue their interests. They also regard older age as an opportunity to let go of their worries and their ego. Those with a less positive outlook expressed anxieties about their increasing loss of capabilities and their dependency on others.

"I very much think one of the benefits of aging is an ability to enjoy your life. Less worries and cares than you had when you were younger around ego and what you want to achieve in life. I'm looking forward to having more time and enjoying life - being more in the moment and less focused on the future." (Phil)

Financial security & self-actualisation

People's financial situation influences their ability to retire, to pursue new activities in their later lives, to live independently, and organise and mobilise the type of care they want. A secure financial situation was perceived as an enabler for comfortable later lives. Those with little future income either did not want to engage with the topic, or expressed some resentment about their need to work, feeling they have to compromise in relation to their aspirations for their later lives.

"Most of the guys I play walking football with have got good pensions and have paid off their mortgage. [But I don't]... If I didn't have to work, I'd be offering a free digital storytelling workshop... teaching people... I'd be a member of the community farm, and encouraging more people to get involved..." (Phil)

When planning for the future people tend to focus on material factors and not on social factors

The ability for people to project themselves into the future and imagine the kinds of lives they would like to live, felt difficult for the majority. However people had relatively clear ideas about their financial situation, their ability to pay for their personal care, and the type of home they would like to live in. Some also had an idea of their roles in the community, and an awareness of the importance of investing in their social relationships. However, there was a sense of powerlessness with regards to other immaterial factors such as their health, their sense of purpose particularly as they may lose critical capabilities, and their emotional wellbeing.

“If I get dementia, all of my future plans and aspirations would all become pretty irrelevant.”

(Phil)

What this means for Essex

It appears critical to engage people as early as possible in a conversation about their future; not centred around their 'future frailty' and 'support needs', but aspirations and purpose in the future, enabling them to think through factors such as their financial situation as well as their health, social relationships and sense of purpose. Having these conversations early on reduces anxiety attached to these big questions. People felt these kinds of conversations were empowering; they felt they had agency to prepare for their future according to their preferences and wishes. By unlocking community/voluntary sector assets imaginatively, it is possible to shift "ongoing support" upstream, and engage older people over extended time periods, rather than in one-off/single interventions, which risk leaving people unable to turn plans into reality.

Key ideas & opportunities

The transition conversations



What is it? A range of conversations designed for people going through transitions in their later lives. The conversations unlock emotional issues, embrace/re-discover aspirations and a sense of purpose, help them plan their personal life and support them to achieve personal outcomes. These conversations could also provide ongoing personal development coaching and mentoring when needed.

Why is it important? These conversations enable people to explore and prepare for their future according to their preferences and wishes.

Who is involved? The conversations are directly encouraged by employers or community and voluntary organisations.

Similar examples - [The Retirement Transition Initiative](#)

Key ideas & opportunities

Supporting business ideas



What is it? A programme for individuals in later life to get business ideas off the ground by providing funding and practical support alongside mentoring and expert support.

Why is it important? Some people in their later lives have the ambition and energy to make a contribution in a new way.

Who is involved? The council, VCS and local businesses could share assets and ideas to get this idea up and running - with rewards and support from businesses, action from the community and signposting from the council.

Similar examples - [Age Unlimited](#)

Key ideas & opportunities

Skills-exchange programme



What is it? A skills-exchange programme that builds on people's assets, recognising that everyone has some valuable skills and knowledge to give to someone else.

Why is it important? This gives people opportunities to continue using their strengths and skills in new ways.

Who is involved? It could involve educational institutions or community organisations that offer a chance for older people to boost intergenerational relationships through knowledge and skill sharing.

Similar examples - [The Experience Corps](#)

Social connection

Investing in social relationships is critical for older people's wellbeing

The majority of people expect their circles of friends to scale down as they get older. Some expressed some concern about the potential risk of social isolation, or not having anybody to care for them, while others proactively invested in their relationships to enlarge them. The latter acknowledged the importance of building relationships with younger generations to ensure continuity as they may lose friends from their own generations. Interestingly, those people who are most at risk of social isolation (not having children or close relationships with their family) also perceived greater barriers to going out and meeting new people.

"It's not about food really is it? It's about coming together... we noticed that Mum would eat more when she was with us." (Anne)

Moving presents a cost to social relationships

Most people were looking to move out of their home, to a new home that would either be in the countryside, or more adapted to their future health needs. Most people did not take account of the social cost of these moves. Those who were aware of this cost aimed to pre-empt it by moving earlier rather than later, so they have enough time to build new friendships.

Liz, a carer, explains how her mother's friends stopped calling her once she had moved from Lincolnshire to Essex: "She gets very bored and lonely now". (Liz)

Transportation and technology are critical enablers for social connection

With the prospect of losing one's mobility, people in their 50s emphasised the importance of transportation, free bus passes, but also driverless cars for older people in the future. Equally the internet also featured as an enabler for social connection as long as the interface was inclusive enough, including for people with dementia. Most people in their 50s and 60s embrace technology and use it in their everyday lives. While some people were concerned about privacy and confidentiality, overall people felt positive about technology's potential for their own future care needs and their social relationships.

*"How do I get out if I lose my mobility?
There aren't enough buses in this area!"*

(Florie)

What this means for Essex

With smaller families and family members living apart more often, social isolation among older people is a widespread phenomenon and a risk for the next generation of older people.

Social relationships are key to people's wellbeing and their sense of purpose. In particular, being able to see and make new friends at an older age is critical to maintaining people's wellbeing.

Essex could explore how it can facilitate new encounters between older people and younger generations based on people's interests and aspirations.

Key ideas & opportunities

Community space network



What is it? A local network of places, which provides community activities for people to stay connected by helping with practical support or simply having a good meal together. This includes a quality mark (e.g. dementia friendly) so people know where these activities take place.

Why is it important? The activities (e.g. cafes provide community meals once a week, hairdressers provide free hair-cuts) happen in existing facilities and provide local and easily accessible spaces for people to come by themselves and connect with each other.

Who is involved? Community places that are empowered and qualified by the council.

Similar examples - [Leeds University Spaces initiative](#)

Emotional
wellbeing

Dementia is the number one perceived threat to people's wellbeing

People in their 50s and 60s perceive dementia as the greatest threat to their sense of self-worth, and hence their emotional wellbeing. The reasons for this were the perceived change of identity of people who have dementia and their lack of self-awareness, as well as complete dependency on others. Carers who looked after people with dementia also emphasised their emotional struggles, feeling exhausted and sad.

Liz was very upset and disappointed about the fact that none of her mother's friends called her in her new home. She thinks this is related to her mother's mental illness and people's prejudices.

Pursuing creative activities enable older people to maintain their capabilities

While not everybody embraced 'creativity and arts', people expressed great interest in music, DIY, cooking, philosophy, or political history. They acknowledged the importance of these activities for their physical and mental capabilities, as well as their emotional wellbeing and were keen to continue pursuing these in their later lives. Some people were critical of 'one-size-fits-it-all' clubs for older people and expressed higher expectations for their generation. They highlighted that activities needed to respond to their individual interests instead of their age.

"Do I want to play bingo every week? You need more creative and varied activities. You want things that stimulate you!" (Florie)

What this means for Essex

Our research findings support arguments made by experts on older age who argue for the importance of people maintaining creative and contributory behaviours throughout the life stages. Once a person stops being creative, being involved or trying out new experiences, it becomes progressively more difficult for that person to re-engage and re-find skills and capabilities that were once strong.

Essex might consider how it can help to encourage citizens in their 50s & 60s (& onwards) to maintain connections and creative activities that contribute to good wellbeing. This is not simply a question of commissioning different services, it goes deeper: generating creative ways of helping people stay in touch (over the long term) with their sense of purpose, curiosity and appetite for learning, connection and activity.

Key ideas & opportunities

Creativity hub



What is it? A community hub providing a safe and trusted environment, where people can take part in creative and intergenerational activities, connect around people's interests, or just have a balanced meal together.

For example, the activities could include a story sharing event where people could tell their stories to their neighbours through making films, writing, speaking and art in order to learn new things and stay creatively engaged.

Why is it important? The hub considers interests and affinities as important to bring people together around activities.

Who is involved? Hubs are run and enabled by community members.

Similar examples - [The Ideas Hub, Chelmsford](#)

Physical
wellbeing

Weight features as a great risk to people's physical health

Nearly all people in the sample were overweight and identified their weight as a risk to their physical wellbeing in the future. They also acknowledged the higher risks for dementia and were keen to lose weight.

Phil has some worries that he is overweight, and he particularly worries how this might affect his health in the future: 'I've got good health, and that, although I'm overweight - and I am very active'. He explains how sometimes when he is stressed, drinking contributes to his weight gain.

Living independently with health conditions

While most of the people we spoke to were in relatively good health, some had some health conditions and learning difficulties. However, having a health condition did not automatically equate to needing support from professionals or the community. Some people were able to create a support network around them and manage their health conditions themselves.

People felt that technology could play a stronger role, in the future, in supporting older people's ability to live independently.

"When you turn 80, you become very vulnerable. When I become incapable of doing things physically or looking after myself, who is going to look after me?" (James)

"I don't want to feel like a burden." (Florie)

What this means for Essex

Independence is important in older age and people seem to perceive health conditions as a potential threat to living independently. Independence is, however, not the only - or main - lens through which we need to design and deliver services and interventions.

The idea of 'independence' risks underplaying the importance of dependency, which is not always experienced or imagined as a "bad thing", but valued as part of a person's personal network of support. There is an opportunity to explore dependency positively in terms of "give and take" (reciprocity) between people and the services they use, for example in the kinds of support people provide each other to overcome the practical hurdles of everyday life.

Key ideas & opportunities

Community champions network



What is it? A local network of support, made up of people who are actively engaging with their community. They know what's available in their community and bring other community members together. This could also be a reward scheme where neighbourhood points are awarded to those who take an active role in their community.

Why is it important? Champions provide advice and links with local services, voluntary sector support and activities for people who need help to stay active and improve their health.

Who is involved? They are empowered by the council and receive either a part time wage, or council tax incentives.

Similar examples - Wigan Community Link Worker

Caring

Transitions in and out of caring roles are sudden and unprepared

Carers often experienced their transition into caring as sudden and unprepared, having to deal with an overwhelming number of issues for their parents, who were often widowed and lonely. Due to their relatively unprepared involvement, carers often found it very difficult to make sense of their parents' health conditions, their medication and their paperwork. Unsurprisingly, some carers felt compelled to abandon their jobs, or reduce their working hours, to accommodate their caring responsibilities. People in the cohort were part of the 'sandwich' generation, not only looking after their children, but also their parents.

"There is no support around you once you have been diagnosed with dementia. You are left completely on your own." (Liz)

Support with navigating personal administration and professional care

Specifically people with caring experience complained about the difficulties of accessing formal support and entitlements for their loved ones. Part of the difficulty seems to be related to lengthy and complicated forms, which carers worried some people may not be able to understand. Carers also found it difficult to navigate and coordinate the various professionals involved in the care of their loved ones, and asked for simplified forms and professional support.

"They don't make it easy! It took my sister three hours to fill out the attendance allowance form... And she does this all the time in her job." (Liz)

Women assume caring responsibilities more often than men

For the majority of people we spoke to the caring role was situated in the family and was executed by a woman. Often, this involved moving parents closer to the caring family, which in some occasions led to isolating experiences for the person being cared for. Some carers were good at mobilising support around themselves by involving their children and their siblings in the care of their parents or grandparents. Others were all on their own and required to give up their work, which had detrimental effects on the carer's financial, social and emotional situation.

“Sophie wants to care for her mother unless she gets an extreme condition like dementia.”

(James)

What this means for Essex

There is scope to think creatively about how older people in Essex can be supported to connect and reconnect as their lives and circumstances change. Older age, like other life stages, is full of transitions, ebbs and flows, and so service redesign should pay attention to this, asking: how can older people be supported to cope better with/make the most of changes in their circumstances? (e.g. moving in and out of caring roles). This focuses on aspects of personal administration as well as people's personal needs.

Key ideas & opportunities

Carers support network



What is it? A community network connecting professionals (including experts by experience) and carers to help them with personal administration (e.g. paperwork) as well as their personal needs (e.g. home visit hairdresser). The professionals also inform the carers about local services, and give advice when they need it, to help people connect with the right community services.

Why is it important? It gives access to care and personal support from existing services and offers choice for individuals.

Who is involved? Community members, experts, ex-carers.

Similar examples - [Heywood, Middleton & Rochdale Circle](#)

Overall recommendation

Overall recommendation

Services framed only around stepped management of needs will miss opportunities to enhance wellbeing and quality of life. We recommend the Council opens up conversations with partner agencies and stakeholders to explore the design and delivery of interventions, experiences and relationships for older people that:

- Help grow personal skills and resources for living well through the ageing process (understanding older age as a process/journey through time rather than a snapshot presentation of needs at one moment).
- Help communities support each other to develop/retain positive mindsets, including an ability to mindfully 'live with' physical deterioration/ill health, rather than battling against it as a struggle.
- Help older people to find their purpose, meaning and direction in life.
- Help older people find enjoyment, pleasure and moments of delight.
- Help people overcome practical needs (transport, money etc).

How can future generations of older people live good lives in Essex?