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ARTICLE

# ‘You really do become invisible’: examining older adults’ right to the city in the United Kingdom

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## Abstract

A global ageing population presents opportunities and challenges to designing urban environments that support ageing in place. The World Health Organization’s Global Age-Friendly Cities movement has identified the need to develop communities that optimise health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. Ensuring that age-friendly urban environments create the conditions for active ageing requires cities and communities to support older adults’ rights to access and move around the city (‘appropriation’) and for them to be actively involved in the transformation (‘making and remaking’) of the city. These opportunities raise important questions: What are older adults’ everyday experiences in exercising their rights to the city? What are the challenges and opportunities in supporting a rights to the city approach? How can the delivery of age-friendly cities support rights to the city for older adults? This paper aims to respond to these questions by examining the lived experiences of older adults across three cities and nine neighbourhoods in the United Kingdom. Drawing on 104 semi-structured interviews with older adults between the ages of 51 and 94, the discussion centres on the themes of: right to use urban space; respect and visibility; and the right to participate in planning and decision-making. These themes are illustrated as areas in which older adults’ rights to access and shape urban environments need to be addressed, along with recommendations for age-friendly cities that support a rights-based approach.

**Keywords:** age-friendly cities; social justice; right to the city; ageing-in-place

## Introduction

Across the globe, urbanisation and ageing represent two critical societal challenges driving key policy decisions (Phillipson, 2011; Fitzgerald and Caro, 2017). In the

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development of sustainable cities and communities, there has been a focus on place-making, specifically how urban spaces and inner-city areas can enable a sense of inclusion and citizenship for all residents (Friedmann, 2010). In bringing about urban change, debate has centred on how urban environments can support equitability in terms of providing diverse groups with access to resources and opportunities to support wellbeing (Wheeler, 2013). This discussion has been firmly grounded in theories of social justice and *rights to the city* (Imrie, 2011) which have conceptualised those rights in two interrelated ways: the right to appropriate the city (e.g. right to access, occupy and use urban space) in support of a full social participation, and the right to participate in the shaping of the city (e.g. citizenship, involvement in decision-making) to enable political participation (Lefebvre, [1968] 1996, 1974; Purcell, 2002, 2003). Whilst the rights to the city agenda has gained much attention, there has been little attempt to conceptualise these rights within the context of ageing in urban environments. This is despite literature exploring rights and social justice amongst older adults more broadly, including calls for an international response to addressing the rights of older adults (Tang and Lee, 2006).

### Towards a rights-based agenda for age-friendly cities

Enabling a ‘right to the city’ agenda is seen as fundamental to citizenship, democratic participation and engagement, specifically by having the right to engage in the opportunities that cities offer (Lefebvre, [1968] 1996, 1974; Purcell, 2002, 2003). In so doing, the ‘right to the city’ movement has aimed to strengthen the ability of *citadins* (i.e. inhabitants of the city) to take charge of processes of spatial production (Lefebvre, [1968] 1996, 1974; Shields, 1998; Dikeç, 2002; Purcell, 2002, 2003; Chiodeli, 2013). Appropriating urban spaces and resources, in respect of moving around the city and accessing urban space, are a key dimension of what Lefebvre ([1968] 1996) referred to as a reclaiming of *oeuvre*: the ability to participate in the city and to be part of urban life and to be present within it (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009; King, 2020). The ‘right to the city’ supports the claim of all (including older adults) to social participation and inclusion, and the opportunities to access the ‘rich’ social, economic, political, cultural and physical spaces that constitute urban life (Cramm *et al.*, 2018; Woolrych *et al.*, 2021).

The ‘right to the city’ movement has regained the attention of scholars searching for a more inclusive and participatory framework to address the growing disenfranchisement of urban inhabitants in the context of contemporary neoliberal policy making (Friedman, 1995; Isin, 2000; McCann, 2002, 2003; Purcell, 2002, 2003; Mitchell, 2003; Simone, 2005; Harvey, 2008; Boniburini *et al.*, 2013; Torku *et al.*, 2021). In this paper, we use ‘right to the city’ as a theoretical framework to engage with the age-friendly cities (AFC) agenda which affirms full citizenship when seeking: (a) to flourish through a rich social participation by *appropriation* of urban spaces; and (b) to *participate* in urban governance and generate social change, i.e. a rich formal and informal political participation.

Alongside a ‘rights to the city’ agenda, the literature on ageing in the city has focused on the engagement and participation of older adults through ensuring access to the services and supports to enable ageing-in-place (Rowles and

Bernard, 2013; Novek and Menec, 2014; Woolrych *et al.*, 2021). Here, ageing-in-place is dependent on older adults having the place-based supports for social participation, mobility and active living (Sixsmith *et al.*, 2014). However, the design of urban environments often discourages active ageing, putting older adults at risk of insecurity, isolation and loneliness (Scharf and Smith, 2005; Buffel *et al.*, 2012; Adlakha *et al.*, 2020). Enabling older adults to participate in communities in old age is fundamental to a sense of fulfilment, engagement and citizenship; underpinning principles of social justice within the city (Woolrych *et al.*, 2021).

Over the last 20 years, there has been a growing interest in developing AFCs in policy and practice as a key driver for ageing in place (Buffel *et al.*, 2014; Buffel and Phillipson, 2016; Woolrych and Sixsmith, 2017; Torku *et al.*, 2021). Much of this work has been led by the World Health Organization's (WHO) *Global Age-friendly Cities* agenda (WHO, 2007) aimed at supporting the development of urban environments that provide the economic, personal, physical and social resources to age well. The increasing interest in AFCs has been underpinned by a paradigm shift in public discourse on ageing as a positive process, emphasising the active roles and positive contribution of older adults to communities and society (Biggs, 2001; Powell and Edwards, 2002; Lui *et al.*, 2009). This has forefronted the importance of a 'rights-based' approach that prioritises the inclusion of older adults in policy making at a community and city level (WHO, 2002; Woolrych and Sixsmith, 2017).

The AFC agenda has led to some positive interventions in the co-design of physical and social environments to support old age, as well as models of participatory, collaborative governance that include older adults in decision-making and planning (Lui *et al.*, 2009; Menec *et al.*, 2011; Cramm *et al.*, 2018). However, forms of participation have not always been inclusive, having more success engaging with the 'enthusiastic' older adults at the expense of those who are often more isolated, such as the 'very old', those living with dementia and the physically frail (Jenkins *et al.*, 2006; Menec *et al.*, 2011; Buffel *et al.*, 2012; Buffel and Phillipson, 2016).

Barriers to exercising rights to the city undermine a sense of agency in old age, and thwart older adult's ability to assume more active roles in communities (Woolrych and Sixsmith, 2017). Here, feelings of inclusion are related to the extent to which urban environments affect a sense of being respected, valued and safe as key components of citizenship and the AFC (Abbott and Sapsford, 2005; Scharf *et al.*, 2007; De Donder *et al.*, 2013; Menezes, 2020; Woolrych *et al.*, 2020). Research has highlighted the importance of connected communities that support meaningful participation, which in turn enhance feelings of place belonging, familiarity and identity (Phillips *et al.*, 2005; Buffel *et al.*, 2014; Novek and Menec, 2014; Woolrych and Sixsmith, 2017). Yet urban interventions often undermine a sense of place, failing to build the political, social and cultural capital necessary for sustainable communities (Woolrych *et al.*, 2007). This has significantly impacted on older adults, for instance, through processes of urban change that have displaced many from urban areas, disrupting deeply rooted neighbourhood ties and the affective, symbolic and psychological attachments to community (Atkinson *et al.*, 2011).

In contemporary debates on city design, the lived experiences of older adults have been afforded less significance than commercial interests and the related

'rebranding' of the city, thus prioritising the experiences of certain groups over others, bringing issues of tolerance, fairness and justice into sharp focus (Burns *et al.*, 2012). As a result, older adults have often reported a sense of disillusion with living in inner-city urban areas, with many experiencing a sense of 'lost community' and estrangement from place (Buffel *et al.*, 2013).

### Positioning older adults 'right to the city'

Delivering equitable and inclusive outcomes for older people raises critical questions of how fairness, social justice and good governance can be supported within the delivery of AFCs. In this context, the 'right to city' approach offers a valuable theoretical perspective to support dialogue and analysis of the barriers to ageing well, namely appropriation and use of urban spaces, and participation in decision-making at various political scales in the production of urban space and access to resources.

In seeking to assert the 'right to the city' as both appropriation and political participation, this article brings together the experiences of older adults living across urban environments in the United Kingdom (UK) by drawing on qualitative interview data collected from nine neighbourhoods across three cities in the UK (Glasgow, Edinburgh and Manchester). The paper outlines recommendations for supporting ageing-in-place which seek to build a deepening understanding of older adults' aspirations for social and political participation – the 'right to the city' and work towards developing a rights-based approach to AFCs with older people at the centre.

### Methodology

The analysis for this paper is based on qualitative data collected as part of a three-year (2016–2019) mixed-method case-study project examining experiences of ageing-in-place, specifically exploring the enablers and barriers to creating AFCs. The project methods included a survey, semi-structured interviews, walking interviews and photo diaries. This paper draws on data from 104 semi-structured face-to-face interviews undertaken with 110 older adults, including six couples (between the ages of 51 and 94, who were all interviewed only once) from nine neighbourhoods across three cities in the UK (Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh). The selected case-study cities and neighbourhoods were chosen to represent a broad diversity of contexts in terms of urban development, ageing demographics, and social and economic deprivation. The recruitment strategy adopted multiple pathways to reach older adults, including canvassing in the local community, utilising mailing lists of existing community groups, follow-up contact provided through completion of an initial door-to-door survey and snowball sampling from an initial set of interviewees. Initially, the inclusion criteria for participating in the study were: aged 60 and over and residing within the case-study neighbourhoods. In very few exceptions we were approached by participants in their fifties who were actively engaged with local groups of older adults and so we lowered the inclusion criteria to ensure their perspectives were incorporated. In ensuring an inclusive approach to engagement, the sample also included older

adults with physical impairments and mild cognitive impairment (people with dementia and their carers) (see Table 1).

The research was subject to the lead university's ethical review process and research governance framework. Participants were informed about the goals of the study and how issues of confidentiality and anonymity would be preserved, including the storage, analysis and dissemination of the data. The interviews were audio recorded, professionally transcribed and checked for quality by the research team.

The interview schedule was developed following a pilot study and the final schedule covered the following topic areas: experiences of ageing and sense of place; perceptions of the built and social environment, particularly in terms of the barriers and challenges to ageing in the community; experiences of social and civic participation in the city/community; and priorities for delivering AFCs. Interview length ranged between 25 and 150 minutes and followed a conversational style, with the schedule acting as a guide. Participants were given the choice of interview venue to ensure their comfort and convenience. Consequently, most interviews were conducted in older adults' homes, but community venues were also used.

The thematic analysis of the data is underpinned by an interpretive paradigm (see Creswell, 2009) which requires a holistic exploration of both individual and social phenomena in order to understand older adults' lived experiences within their immediate neighbourhoods. The analysis followed the basic six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). It began by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to get familiarised with the nuances of the data. This was followed by identification of meaningful texts in relation to the research questions. The relevant data were then grouped in first coding categories. These codes were then discussed amongst the investigators to develop a coding framework. This framework was then refined through further referring to the transcripts and discussing the inter-connections of the emerging codes and interpretations of the data. In this way, a series of tentative themes were formed, and codes were combined or removed to develop the final themes. A team analysis workshop was then undertaken with all investigators to cluster the codes into a final agreed set of themes and sub-themes. The result was a case-study analytical framework which entailed the development of the key themes across the nine neighbourhoods: 'place familiarity and perceptions of safety and security', 'vulnerability and public space', 'navigating supports', 'social and civic participation', 'feeling valued', 'managing place insecurities' and 'older adults' rights and voice'.

The focus of this paper lies on the two main issues around rights of older adults in the city: (a) the right to shape, appropriate and use urban space, and (b) the right to participate in the decision-making of the city. This is done by examining older adults' everyday experiences to underline those aspects of their everyday life which are constituted around daily encounters within the city and their neighbourhoods, followed by identifying the experiences and 'struggles' that older adults confront while navigating their everyday urban spaces, to then move on to illustrating the voice that older adults have in the decisions that direct their everyday 'right to the city'.

### **Right to shape, appropriate and use urban space**

This section draws on the experiences of older adults to illustrate the challenges and struggles that many older adults face in accessing and participating in urban life and

**Table 1.** Sample of participant characteristics

	Edinburgh			Glasgow			Manchester		
	Craigmillar (low income)	Leith (medium income)	Morningside (high income)	Easterhouse (low income)	Govanhill (medium income)	Hyndland, Dowanhill and Partick (high income)	Baguley (low income)	Rusholme (medium income)	Didsbury (high income)
N	12	11	10	11	16	16	9	14	11
Age:									
Minimum	52	63	62	58	60	61	63	65	66
Maximum	92	78	90	87	80	84	92	94	90
Mean	74	64.18	80.66	69.72	70.28	70.62	76.11	73.63	76
Gender:									
Female	7	9	6	7	14	12	7	11	7
Male	5	2	4	4	2	4	2	3	4
Ethnicity:									
White	12	9	10	11	13	16	9	12	11
BAME	0	2	0	0	3	0	0	2	0
Living arrangements:									
Living alone	7	6	2	8	12	9	4	5	5
Living with others	5	5	8	3	4	7	5	9	6

Employment status:									
Retired	11	8	8	8	13	16	8	11	11
Employed	1	1	1	2	na	0	1	na	0
Volunteer job	0	4	1	0	na	0	1	na	0
Unemployed	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	na	0
Years living in area:									
Minimum	1	2	0.66	9	10	0.58	20	17	15
Maximum	84	77	70	78	79	76	92	53	60
Mean	34.25	30.8	- <sup>1</sup>	46.63	31.85	18.89	60.37	38.42	40

Notes: N = 110. 1. Cannot be calculated as many values are missing. na: data not available. BAME: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicities.



spaces – the right to access the city. The focus is on two specific sub-themes: right to access and use urban space, and respect and visibility.

### **Right to access and use urban space**

Issues around the right to space in terms of accessing, using and appropriating urban space were recurrent themes in the interviews. A perceived fundamental human right for a number of older adults was barrier-free access to public spaces and moving around the community, in order to access the ‘basic freedoms’ that people should be entitled to in old age:

To me, an age-friendly community is one where I can move around without hassle, without worry. How can I get from A to Z and access the basic freedoms that most others are entitled. It shouldn't be a source of worry and stress. (Female, 82, Manchester)

Some older adults, who were mobile and active, expressed positive experiences of public space and transport, as an enabler of mobility, physical activity and socialising, thereby enabling people to ‘stay involved’ as a key component of an age-friendly community:

Transport is very good. The bus is every few minutes. Yeah it's all free. We just get on and off wherever we want to be. It's easy for me as I can reach the places I need to be ... I can still stay involved. I often get to the Botanical Gardens on the bus where I'll have lunch with friends. (Female, 84, Edinburgh)

Yet accessing participation opportunities was complex for many older adults extending beyond accessible public transport, requiring the continuous negotiation of barriers within the urban environment. Physical barriers and hazards to mobility prevented the ability to move around urban space easily which undermined everyday routines within the context of place, providing ‘second-class’ access for many and eroding opportunities for community participation:

There are hazards now. They didn't used to be but they changed all the road haven't they and everything. They have made the pavement that bit smaller ... Yes and now they have got a cycle path. Well yes because I mean they use our space ... you find yourself taking different routes, avoiding certain places or not going out. (Female, 71, Manchester)

To others, exercising one's right to the city was strongly related to the right to the various supports and services within the community. Inability to navigate urban space prevented access to those services, and compromised opportunities for healthy and active ageing:

It doesn't matter how easy it is to get to a place or to the end of the road, if we cannot get there, then we cannot access that service or meet people can we? In which case, those opportunities that should be afforded to you, are no longer available. So you do feel excluded. (Male, 81, Edinburgh)

For some older adults, the ability to assume access to urban space and take advantage of assets in the community went beyond physical access. Being able to realise an individual ‘right to the city’ was also deeply rooted in psycho-social barriers associated with leaving the home:

Assuming that I know what is out there for me in terms of the things I can access, and even if I could physically get there... there are other things preventing me from getting out there if you know what I mean... I’ve not always had the same confidence since the fall. It’s the anxiety of leaving the home that gets to me. (Female, 71, Glasgow)

These everyday struggles for older adults reflect the importance of the right to access and use urban space, in terms of supporting basic opportunities and freedoms. Many felt a lack of confidence about using urban space and of their rights in occupying that space. Whilst even those communities who were notionally more age-friendly in terms of being ‘asset rich’ were unlikely to deliver positive outcomes for older people unless those opportunities could be realised.

### **Respect and visibility**

For older adults in our study, an AFC was one where older adults felt safe and respected as key components of the ‘right to the city’. Despite some of the enablers that public transport offered, many older adults felt vulnerable when using public transport owing to a lack of sensitivity from transport providers and a lack of recognition from other users. In this respect, travelling by bus was often an ‘anxious’ experience for older adults, with everyday journeys being framed as a ‘struggle’:

A lot of people are nervous about falling on a bus, getting on and off the buses. The bus drivers are getting much better at being aware but there are some bus drivers who are just not nice people. It’s almost like they like to play games. Like as soon as you get on the bus, as far as I know the training says ... that with older people or disabled people they’ve got to wait until they are seated before they take off. (Female, 80, Manchester)

These ‘struggles’ were also present in determining rights and priorities in terms of appropriating urban space. Older adults felt that their rights to use urban space were afforded less priority than others, creating feelings of frustration, and excluding them from the use of everyday spaces in the community. Some spoke of wanting to assert themselves with others – although this was not always well-received:

They [members of the public] have got no respect for people ... I don’t let it bother me. I was out with [my son] one day and he said, ‘Mum, behave yourself.’ ‘Why? I have as much right to be on this pavement as they have.’ I once said there was a car parked across the pavement and I was coming up here and I said to the driver, ‘this is a pavement for people’. So that meant I had to walk on to the main road which is a bus lane which is hardly the safest thing to do. (Female, 72, Manchester)

There was a perception of very little respect from other members of the community when using public space, which translated into negative experiences when undertaking daily activities outside the home, including shopping:

...there's very little respect anywhere. When my husband was in the mobility thing [scooter] in the Trafford Centre [shopping precinct], people used to try and walk over him. When I was walking down the road from the hospital the other day and I had two bags, a bag in each hand, I had to push my way through the crowds and then I got along this part of the road and they're milling in and out and everywhere. (Female, 67, Manchester)

Many older adults reported that becoming older had rendered them invisible to other community members, adopting separate, parallel lives with little day-to-day recognition when moving around public spaces:

I've noticed in the last maybe what, certainly the last few years. I'm just 65 now, but you become invisible. You really do ... there can be big numbers of people maybe, they've just got off a bus or something. And you can be walking the opposite way on the pavement, and they don't see you, honestly. I can get on a bus, you really do become invisible, honestly. (Female, 65, Manchester)

Similarly, there was an increased sense of vulnerability and sustaining their voice in the community was becoming more challenging. Often, older adults felt as if their perspectives were less likely to be heard, with many being apprehensive about defending their right to occupy the city, thus undermining their sense of citizenship:

When you're older you're more vulnerable. I'm finding I'm losing that bravery, if you like. You feel more vulnerable as you're getting older and I can feel it now more. It's a terrible world, isn't it! Because my daughter used to always be saying to me, don't say anything and I won't shut up, but I'm finding now I'm less likely to say something. I don't know whether it's because it's getting worse now or whether it's just because I'm getting older. (Female, 67, Manchester)

Some adopted measures to remain 'visible' within urban spaces, but these had the potential to objectify and/or stigmatise the older person:

A lady in the community now has had to buy herself a high-vis vest to cross the road because she's terrified that the traffic won't see her. It is stigmatising, isn't it? She's not said anything about that no, but that's my perception of it. And buses tend to not stop for her either if they don't see her. So that's why she does it as well. (Female, 65, Manchester)

The examples above illustrated three types of barriers that interviewees raised in relation to their opportunities to develop their full participation – and assert and enjoy their 'right to the city': constraints on accessing resources and urban spaces; perceptions of lack of respect and understanding towards them as older adults; and

a sense of social invisibility. In the process, these examples provide further insights as to the challenges for older adults in reclaiming their ‘right to the city’.

### Right to participate in planning and decision-making

The previous section illustrated how accessing and using the city is an everyday struggle for many older adults in the UK. These struggles would suggest the importance of involving older adults in the planning and decision-making around urban interventions. In this section, we interpret some of the challenges older adults face in seeking to become part of urban governance – making and remaking the city.

A small number of older adults had participated in specific groups (*e.g.* cultural champions, valuing older people groups, advisory panels) to bring about change. These brought about positive experiences for older people, particularly where their voice was used in positive ways:

I’ve been a cultural champion for a few years now. There’s that sense of responsibility but also feeling that you can make a difference. We disseminate information, get older people involved, encourage participation. It’s the feeling that what you are doing has value. (Male, 75, Manchester)

However, the majority of older adults in our research reported feeling a lack of power in designing the communities and cities within which they live and an alienation from existing governance structures. Their voices were often not used meaningfully within the planning and design process, such that older people often felt devalued and under-prioritised:

We were asked about what we wanted to see as part of age-friendly Glasgow, when it all first started. They invited to a big event and they did a survey at the door. But we didn’t hear anything after that ... They’re going to do what they want to do, aren’t they? They might say we need your opinion but they do what they want. They’ll see you but they’re not really listening to you. (Female, 64, Glasgow)

We had the City for All Ages stuff. We were just getting some momentum and then they decided to pull it. There was no real commitment and it all fell a bit flat. It’s a shame but other things became a priority. I understand that it’s not just older people competing for the services and the money and other groups might have been seen as more important. (Female, 80, Edinburgh)

Further, interviewees pointed out problems in getting heard within urban governance structures, the sense of historical and cultural ignorance to the requirements of communities, and a perception that the views and contributions of older adults are being exploited. There was a perceived ‘don’t make a fuss’ attitude towards older people which pointed to a deeper exclusion of older people from the policy setting:

Older people, and they also hate to make a fuss. They’ve been taught all their lives never to make a fuss. And councils exploit that. The people that make policy exploit that. (Male, 74, Glasgow)

A number of older adults saw the potential for a deepening engagement and deliberation with varieties of formal participation and governance yet there was often a reluctance or fear in doing so. A perception that older people 'should be thankful for what they've got' was part of a wider disavowal of older people's rights to influence change:

These are people with experiences in these problems. And there's plenty of us that are maybe older, they're not frail up there and there are plenty of people with loads of life experience that can deliver that kind of thing, rather than as I say some wee council committee that's been set up to produce some kind of report saying we're going to do this and that, we've identified this and that. There is a kind of apathy or a fear or a reluctance to raise their head above the parapet in case they're shot down in flames, and you've got to be thankful for what you've got and you can't expect any more as an older person. (Female, 66, Glasgow)

However, there were key differences across cities in terms of older people's perceptions of how their rights were being supported within an age-friendly context. In Manchester, a number of our interviewees were aware of the age-friendly movement in the city, one which has been well documented in the literature (McGarry and Morris, 2011). Many felt that this movement had not only created the political framework for deeper engagement with older people but mechanisms in practice for shaping change:

We have a Charter for older adult rights. It sets out how older people should be included in key decisions. That's a great start for any city. We also have a dedicated group of older people who input into each and every decision. So if it's a new transport initiative, then we input into it and help shape it. (Male, 82, Manchester)

Yet, across all case-study cities, ensuring the integration of older people's perspectives was not always achieved. Many felt that older adults had a positive contribution to make to the design and delivery of AFC, and that they should be seen as a crucial resource for deepening governance within communities:

But I think older people should be responsible or should have a big input, because you don't know what it's like to be an old person until you're an older person, until you have to encounter the kind of problems that we've been talking about this morning. (Male, 72, Glasgow)

In this sense, initiatives aimed at deeper engagement with older people 'by older people themselves' had the potential for positive impact in terms of wider participation but also in terms of understanding and realising rights to the city:

We have the cultural champions, which are basically older people in communities who have a direct line into the council but who engage other older adults in social participation and civic forms of engagement. We act as a conduit into the community for programmes and services ... People will approach you about this and that.

How do I do this? How might I do that? Am I entitled to this? So people gain wider understanding from that. (Male, 82, Manchester)

Yet in achieving meaningful change, understanding and recognition of the rights within the age-friendly agenda was a complex process. Interventions often had more success with certain visible and engaged members of the population. Achieving real transformative change in the lives of the harder-to-reach, marginalised and vulnerable older groups was difficult to achieve:

We are a complex community here. It's easier to engage those who answer the door and the same people who are always involved when people come asking. But there are sub-groups and different identities within the community. What about those older people who are not represented, whether they are isolated and don't leave the house. The differences between a person from Somalia, India or Pakistan. How do we really understand what they want? And how they can get involved? (Male, 82, Manchester)

Moreover, there was an identified need to challenge existing structures of power to ensure that older people are in a position to influence change. This included the ability to shape decision-making processes actively but also about realising the collective power of older adults:

People need more power, older people need more power, and there is a power there, it's just about organising that and ensuring that people, old people should have a voice, but it should be a strong voice. (Male, 70, Glasgow)

In making a positive contribution, there was a recognition from some interviewees of the crucial role of older adult's organisations in building wider knowledge of these opportunities, supporting wider participation and empowerment, and actively advocating for and monitoring change:

More needs to be done on educating people into understanding that they can make change. They can make changes, they can influence changes. But they have to have the platform to speak. (Female, 72, Manchester)

If there aren't groups, if there aren't groups that advocate and pressure groups for change, then there should be. We've got a very tiny one here, a very tiny one, but there needs to be more for older people to actually have their say and have their say conveyed to affect policy, to talk about any of the things we've discussed this morning. (Male, 80, Glasgow)

A central challenge highlighted was the need for the state to support older adults actively in understanding their existing rights and opportunities for democratic participation:

Generally, people are very unaware and therefore ignorant of their rights. And a lot of acts are passed and somebody looks at that and it means absolutely nothing to

them. And unless it's spelled out and this is what's been happening, and this is what you can do. So the majority of people are not aware of the power, of having any power. (Female, 72, Glasgow)

These interviewees were looking for a more powerful collective body of older adults to advocate change and for a very different relationship with urban planning systems (spatial, social, health, local, for instance). In effect, not just through 'having a say' within state structures but through shared power to effect policy and practice change.

### **Conclusion: in search of the right to the age-friendly city**

Cities are often perceived as hubs of economic, social and cultural activity, as well as sites of innovation, creativity and change. For many, city-space is constructed through social relations, a place where social engagement and everyday interactions play out and where people negotiate access to services, activities and institutions as they move around the city. The city has the potential to act as a space for inclusion and participation, yet it can also be excluding and disempowering by generating invisibility and barriers to access and opportunities to participate in decision-making. Some groups, including older adults, are more sensitive to urban changes as they typically rely on their more immediate communities and urban spaces for access to services, resources and support; therefore, an inclusive access to urban settings and environments are crucial for supporting healthy and active ageing agendas as part of the AFC framework.

### **Key findings**

Results drawn from this research have showed how older adults' 'right to the city' is denied on two interrelated accounts: use of the city and wider social participation; and political participation in the formal decision-making of the city. Within the first category, urban spaces confronted older adults with hazards and barriers that make the built environment inconvenient, uncomfortable or unsafe. These spaces were seen by older adults as disabling and excluding, compromising social participation and alienating many from the spaces of everyday life. Secondly, pertaining to issues of social justice in the context of formal political participation, older adults highlighted the broader power imbalances – such as designing *for* and not *with* older adults – with older adults often absent from planning processes or where their views were ignored. This left older adults feeling invisible and voiceless in the process. These experiences were often underpinned by a desire for recognition; to be valued as someone who is making a positive contribution to their city and community. Their means to making positive contributions were undermined by a lack of collective power and awareness amongst older adults about what their 'rights' were and by the failures of existing structures in supporting those rights.

This paper thus illustrates the multi-layered, interconnected nature of older adults' everyday use of urban spaces, and participation in designing these, particularly by highlighting the extent to which older adults' 'right to the city' is being denied. These denials are expressed in older adults' daily life across the nine neighbourhoods in Edinburgh, Manchester and Glasgow. This paper also illustrates how

everyday denials of the 'right to the city' undermine the ability of older adults to assume a sense of citizenship, thus undermining a sense of *self-in-the city*. Arguably we have an obligation, articulated through the AFC model, to facilitate older adults' social and political participation and so ultimately their right to full citizenship.

### **Recommendations**

The challenges of delivering AFCs raise some pertinent issues about how to better support older adults' right to full social and political participation. What follows are some specific interventions for policy and practice.

#### *Right to appropriate and use urban space*

The right to appropriate and use urban space is made complex by a set of interrelated psychological, social and spatial barriers. These barriers are particularly important to those older adults who have become more reliant upon their immediate environment for achieving fulfilment in old age and for whom accessing public space and moving around the neighbourhood and wider city is integral to accessing the range of services and supports they need. The experiences of the study participants highlight the interdependency between person and place, and also speak to the many tensions and conflicts they experience within urban spaces which undermine the relational aspects of place-making which are essential in supporting a sense of inclusion and citizenship through AFC interventions.

In order to address this, current age-friendly strategies are often underpinned by a distributive discourse of rights, *e.g.* if we allocate resources such as more physical infrastructure (*e.g.* improved outdoor spaces, community centres, health-care facilities and opportunities for social participation), then there follows an assumption that we are doing 'right' by older adults. Yet many older adults remain excluded from accessing those spaces, with our findings revealing negotiation of access to urban settings to be more nuanced, involving interrelated social and psychological factors (confidence, fear, insecurity, territoriality, *etc.*). Clearly the process of 'claiming' a 'right to the city' is more complex, requiring that older adults: (a) are involved in determining what those rights are; (b) are informed about what constitutes their 'right to the city'; and (c) have the opportunity to assume their 'right to the city' which requires targeted supports for older adults.

In negotiating one's rights to the city, our findings revealed that experiences of older people cut across multiple contexts, *e.g.* home, community, outdoor spaces. These raise issues about how rights are being determined and co-ordinated across sectors, *e.g.* the right to housing, the right to move around the city, the right to access health and wellbeing services. Whilst some have been proactive in establishing Older People's Charters at a city level (Manchester City Council, 2015), there is a need to ensure these are fully operationalised in AFC delivery in terms of how these rights are being applied and evaluated in policy formulation and implementation of AFC initiatives.

#### *Rights to participate and collective advocacy*

Participants repeatedly stressed the wealth of experience and expertise that they were able to bring to cities, and also the strong desire to act as active 'place makers'



in the process. Older adults expressed a degree of scepticism at current decision-making structures which failed to integrate their knowledge in the production of urban environments. In giving this knowledge less value, it effectively denies them power in the making and remaking of urban spaces that all city inhabitants would expect. This need for older adults to have their say conveyed to affect policy was a recurring theme in the data. A major reason for this was that older adults were not aware of their rights to participate in urban governance, as set out in UK legislation. Systemic ignorance of their views and the ‘do not make a fuss’ attitude of some policy makers was deeply disempowering of older adults and their capacities to contribute to decision-making.

Participants advocated change in the way urban planning is undertaken, not just through ‘having a say’ but through shared power to effect policy and practice change. A need for facilitating this voice and empowering older adults as ‘change makers’ or ‘change advocates’ would go some way to meeting their ‘right to the city’ through political participation. Arguably, the collective organising by older adults and suitable resourcing of such structures are also crucial to increasing their effective political participation.

### *Delivering political participation through the AFC agenda*

Clearly having ‘a right’ is different to ‘doing right’. Whilst it is apparent that rights are negotiated in the social and relational production of space, they are also grounded in processes and practices of governance. Therefore, there must be the political will to agitate for and realise the rights of older adults in processes of participation, governance and decision-making. Further work is needed to explore these political dimensions. Even where a set of rights are established, older adults need to be in a position to assume control and ownership of rights. This is dependent on their being the structures and governance frameworks in place to affirm their rights both individually and collectively (*e.g.* representative groups). This work with older adults highlights the need to engage in a process of collaborative dialogue and knowledge exchange, to encourage a shift in thinking to a more inclusive and user-centred approach to urban interventions. Arguably the development and resourcing of collective organising and advocacy by and with older adults will have a crucial role here. Older People’s Boards, Assemblies and Steering Groups which are accessible and meet regularly as consultative, sounding and delivery groups are examples for influencing age-friendliness in local council policies. However, these need to be extended further to ensure that the seldom heard and often excluded older adults feel more in control of influencing and delivering a rights-based agenda for AFC.

Ultimately, the right of older adults to participate in urban governance, as ‘city dwellers’ who have a key voice in defining urban spaces (Lefebvre, [1968] 1996, 1974; Purcell, 2003), requires new approaches in order to realise the AFC agenda. Young (1989) highlighted how participatory democratic structures tend to reproduce group oppression, ‘the paradox of democracy’, and argues that it is by institutional means that this must be rectified. The experiences of older adults in this study point towards institutional strategies that draw on the depth of their knowledge to build a ‘wiser’ urban governance. Through deliberative approaches, perhaps, that seek to move beyond the paradox of participatory democracy towards more

diverse, balanced dialogue and policy making. This requires more assertive collective organising and advocacy for and by older adults.

### **Future research agenda**

Going beyond the present research, further work needs to be undertaken to explore clearly and further conceptualise what older adults understand by rights to the city across diverse groups and identities. This requires a more intersectional approach to understanding rights in old age, exploring how age cuts across ethnicity, gender, ability (physical and mental), sexuality and place to impact on rights, which we have not explored in this study. There is a current assumption in the delivery of social justice frameworks that there exists a set of normative judgements through which rights in old age can be determined, e.g. right to access public spaces, right to affordable housing, right to inclusion in the decision-making process. However, in applying a common framework, there is a failure to understand how the freedoms, capabilities and opportunities to assume those rights are restricted for more-marginalised and vulnerable groups in old age. As the Methodology section pointed out, cognitive or mobility abilities were not used as criteria for recruitment, however, the nature of the final sample reflected a more active set of older adults though many of them did live with varying levels of impairments. Hence, further research would also be required to ascertain the challenges that older adults with cognitive and physical decline faced in the process of accessing and participating in the life of the city. In terms of future opportunities for comparative case-study research, whilst the findings presented in this paper brought together the experiences of older people across cities and community contexts, we did not analyse the data by socio-economic context. Future research is needed to explore how experiences and rights in old age differ in terms of material access to resources and income, as well as across different urban governance frameworks. Finally, in light of global events, and the importance of COVID-19 and future pandemics, older adults face new challenges in respect of their freedoms and rights, potentially reshaping the role of the community and state, and this requires further discussion in the context of AFC.

### **Concluding remarks**

Older adults are at risk of being denied their full 'right to the city' as an appropriation of the shared spaces and resources as part of a fulfilling social participation. Their experiences and perceptions of social invisibility illustrated the power increasingly to undermine and deny their aspirations for full social participation and inclusion as they become older. If involving older adults in the development of AFC approaches within urban settings represents a crucial goal for urban governance, then achieving this will require situating a rights-based approach within a governance framework that allows those rights to be realised. This is crucial if the age-friendly agenda is to achieve transformative change aimed at progressing social justice amongst older adults.

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