Centre for Ageing Better

Inequalities in later life

Barriers to accessing local businesses and customer-facing settings

November 2024

Introduction

For many people today, living longer is not just a hope but an expectation. Gains in life expectancy in past decades mean that millions more of us are living into our 70s, 80s, 90s and beyond (Centre for Ageing Better, 2023).

This is a huge success story. At the same time, there is a growing divide in experiences of ageing, with the poorest people and people from minority ethnic backgrounds being among those experiencing some of the greatest inequalities (Centre for Ageing Better, 2023).

For more of us to benefit from these gains in life expectancy, changes are needed in society and in the communities where we live out our day to day lives. This includes local businesses and other community settings needing to be accessible, welcoming and inclusive as we age. We are working to support this to happen through the UK Network of Age-friendly Communities, and guidance for Age-friendly Businesses.

To support this work, we commissioned the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) to carry out a review of the evidence into the barriers experienced by older people in accessing local businesses and customer-facing settings. In addition to the barriers experienced by older people as a group, we specifically wanted to look at the barriers that might be experienced by particular groups of older people who are more likely to experience social exclusion and discrimination.

We chose to focus the review on three sectors: arts, culture and heritage, leisure and fitness, and retail and hospitality. These sectors represent many of the everyday places that we regularly use in our communities, such as shops, cafes, leisure centres and libraries. They can also have a positive impact on individuals and communities, particularly around health and wellbeing.

We are publishing this summary of the findings so that it can be useful to others working on this issue, whether to address research gaps or to identify and test solutions.

Sector definitions

Arts, culture and heritage: has a cultural objective at its centre, including built heritage, film, libraries, museums and galleries, performing arts and the visual arts.

Leisure and fitness: supports participation in physical activity including leisure centres, swimming pools, gyms, dance studios, golf clubs and stadiums.

Retail and hospitality: sells goods and services and has a strong customer service focus, including supermarkets, clothes stores, restaurants, bars and hotels.

Methodology

Key research questions:

What are the barriers that older people face when engaging with the products, services, and activities provided by the three focus sectors? Are there any specific groups of older people who are more likely than others to experience barriers in these sectors?

Inclusion criteria:

– Adults aged 50 and older in the UK

– Quantitative and qualitative studies, and secondary analysis (including evidence reviews) in academic or grey literature* published from 2010 onwards

A list of search terms relating to the three sectors of interest (arts, culture and heritage, leisure and fitness, and retail and hospitality) was produced and used to identify studies and reports of interest.

Number of studies reviewed:

The number of studies on each sector which met all the inclusion criteria is as follows:

– Arts, culture and heritage – 84

– Leisure and fitness – 85

– Retail and hospitality – 37

These were reviewed in full and findings included in this review where relevant.

Limitations:

The review was small-scale and time-limited, so some relevant articles may have been missed. While consideration was given to robustness, it is worth noting that many of the studies included had small samples or lacked direct examination of the effectiveness of proposed interventions.

Gaps:

The review identified significant gaps in the research about older people's experiences of these sectors, particularly around the experiences of specific groups of older people. Race, ethnicity, and gender were rarely studied in conjunction with age, and the review was unable to identify any studies directly relating to the experiences of LGBTQ older people, older people with learning disabilities, older people with sensory impairments, and those with caring responsibilities within these sectors.

*Grey literature refers to a wide range of publications (for example, reports, working papers, government documents, white papers and evaluations) that are not books and are not journal articles produced by traditional commercial or academic channels.

An overview of findings

While there were gaps in the research, the evidence review was still able to identify a number of barriers that older people experience when accessing and participating in arts, culture and heritage, leisure and fitness, and retail and hospitality offerings. Some were specific to the sector but a number applied across all three sectors. In addition, some findings highlighted areas where specific groups of older people may be more likely to face barriers or face additional barriers. These are summarised in the tables below.

Table 1: Cross-sector

Barrier	Summary	Groups particularly impacted	Sources
Time and scheduling	Some older people can find products, services, or activities hard to engage with due to other responsibilities, and/or because they have been scheduled at inconvenient times.	Carers Older workers	Gray et al (2016) Guell et al (2018) Hallam et al (2012) Ige-Elegbede et al (2019) Pike (2012) Spiteri et al (2019)
Cost	Products, services and activities on offer can be expensive, which discourages engagement with them.	People on low incomes	Baert et al (2011) Boulton, Horne and Todd (2018) Franco et al (2015) Ige-Elegbede et al (2019) Mak, Coulter and Fancourt (2020) Spiteri et al (2019) Tierny et al (2022)
Cultural norms	Mixed gender services and activities require men and women to interact in the same spaces, which may not be considered appropriate in some religions and cultures. The use of religious venues for community activities may also be a barrier.	Women from some religious backgrounds	Amara and Henry (2010) Hallam et al (2012) Ige-Elegbede et al (2019) Victor (2014)
Ageism	Staff who do not accommodate and welcome older adults and/or who display ageist attitudes may discourage older people from participating.		Burton, Clancy and Cowap (2018) Lim et al (2020) Tulle and Dorrer (2012)
Physical accessibility	Lack of accessibility in venues or in transport to get to/from venues can make it more difficult to engage with different businesses. Trip hazards, particularly in retail settings, can increase risk of falls and make spaces unsafe.	Disabled people People with mobility issues	Age UK (2017) Megicks (2012) Paramio-Salcines, Kitchin and Downs (2018) Roe et al (2016) Todd et al (2017) Yin, Pei and Ranchhod (2013) Yin (2021)
Communication and information	Older people may not know about the opportunities/offerings due to a lack of advertising, or advertising that is in an inaccessible format (e.g., only online, small typefaces, or not available in other languages)	People who are less proficient in English People with visual impairments	Hallam et al (2012) Horne and Tierney (2012) Horne et al (2013) Ige-Elegbede et al (2019) Klug et al (2017)

Table 2: Arts, culture and heritage

Barrier	Summary	Groups particularly impacted	Sources
Perceived elitism	Arts, culture and heritage spaces and events can be perceived to be elitist and exclusive, leading to a lack of confidence in accessing activities. Those who frequent these spaces are more likely to be highly educated, in work, and from higher socioeconomic groups.	People on low incomes	Gorenberg et al (2023) Hallam et al (2012) Todd et al (2017)
Cultural norms	Events taking place in religious venues may serve as a barrier for those who come from a different religious background or who don't feel comfortable in religious settings.	People from some religious backgrounds or those with no religion	Hallam et al (2012)
Communication and information	Lack of communication or information about what products and services entail leads to the perception that certain spaces, particularly music classes, require an existing level of skill to participate.	People from low socio-economic backgrounds	Hallam et al (2012) Pitts (2020)

Table 3: Leisure and fitness

Barrier	Summary	Groups particularly impacted	Sources
Internalised ageism	Older people's perception that exercise isn't 'for' them can lead to anxiety or embarrassment around engaging in exercise in public.		Burton, Clancy and Cowap (2018) Ige-Elegbede et al (2019) Jenkin et al (2018) Pike (2012) Spiteri et al (2019)
Ageism	The attitudes of professionals within this sector can create barriers to older people's participation. Some fitness instructors assume that older people are incapable of attending certain activities and/or undervalue the social aspects of gym spaces, despite social connections being a key factor in keeping older people engaged with leisure and fitness activities.		Tulle and Dorrer (2012)
Fear of getting hurt	A lack of knowledge (both staff and older people) about safe exercise practices can contribute to the fear of pain, harm, and falls. This effect becomes more pronounced as people get older.	Disabled people (particularly those with visual impairment) The 'oldest old' (people aged 80+ and over)	Burton et al (2018)
Cultural norms	Certain cultures or religions may place implicit or explicit limits on where and why it is appropriate to exercise, or limit exercise to same-gender spaces. This means mixed gender fitness classes, or exercise facilities that are open to public view, may keep some older people from engaging.	Women from some religious backgrounds	Amara and Henry (2010) Ige-Elegbede et al (2019) Victor (2014)

Table 4: Retail and hospitality

Barrier	Summary	Groups particularly impacted	Sources
Product placement	Placement of products on high-up and low-down shelves can make them difficult to reach. Moving products around regularly can create confusion and make products difficult to find.	Disabled people People with mobility issues	Lim et al (2020) Megicks (2012) Yin et al (2011, Yin and Ranchhod (2013) Yin (2021)
Signage and labels	Ceiling signs hanging too high can be difficult to read because of inaccessible font size and colours. Signage and labels that change often can be incorrect or confusing.	Disabled people People with visual impairments	Megicks (2012) Yin et al (2011, Yin and Ranchhod (2013) Yin (2021)
Technology	New technology, like self-service tills, can be difficult to use for people with no or limited access to and experience of technology or of being online. This technology can also reduce opportunities for human interaction- which may be particularly valuable for older people.	People who are digitally excluded	Age UK (2017) Yarker (2021)
Cultural norms	The presence of alcohol in some hospitality settings can exclude those who don't drink due to their cultural or religious beliefs or backgrounds.	People from some religious backgrounds	Yarker (2021) Thurnell-Read (2021)

Good practice recommendations

In addition to identifying barriers, the studies included in this review identified a small number of examples of existing and potential good practices which research supports to help older people engage in the arts, culture and heritage, leisure and fitness, and retail and hospitality sectors. While these are often sector-specific, several warrant consideration for provision across a range of sectors.

Group activities can help older people build social connections and are a key driver for keeping older people, particularly older women, engaged in community activities in the arts, culture and heritage, and the leisure and fitness sectors (Wood, Jepson and Stadler, 2023).

Recurring, consistent activities that happen each week at the same time have been shown to be better than one-off activities for engaging older people and encouraging them to use arts and culture spaces on their own (Todd et al., 2017).

Translations and appropriate language should be used in event outreach and planning when trying to improve engagement across nationalities and ethnicities in the leisure and fitness sector (Ige-Elegbede et al., 2019).

Visible diversity in marketing materials can make people of all backgrounds, ages and abilities feel represented and comfortable to attend group activities in the arts and culture sector. Staff at events should be representative of the surrounding community so people feel like the activities are 'for them' (Hallam et al., 2012).

Welcome greeters and friendly facilitators that are specifically there to greet people and answer questions can have a positive impact, making people feel calm and welcome when they enter museums and galleries for the first time (Roe et al., 2016).

Outreach sessions set in a familiar community setting (e.g., a shopping centre, library, or community centre) with high foot traffic, can provide older people with information about the arts, culture and heritage spaces near them and dispel the perception of elitism surrounding some of these spaces (Tierney et al., 2022).

Buddy systems for arts, culture and heritage activities, where a person new to an activity is partnered with a seasoned participant, can break down perceived elitism and help people gain the confidence to try new activities (Gorenberg et al., 2023).

Reduced-price or 'taster' sessions where older people can drop in for one session to try something new, can help get more older people to fitness and leisure facilities (Franco et al., 2015; Bolton and Martin, 2013).

Women's-only exercise classes can alleviate the barriers keeping older women, particularly those from some religious backgrounds, from engaging with fitness and leisure facilities. Having all-female staff and covering security cameras at specific times of the day, are key (Ige-Elegbede et al., 2019; Amara and Henry, 2010).

Pubs can be good places to develop activities targeting loneliness, especially for older men who live alone. However, it should be noted that due to the presence of alcohol, pubs would not be culturally appropriate for people from some religious or cultural backgrounds (Yarker, 2021; Mainey, 2019).

Libraries are good spaces to pilot and test new initiatives. Research has pointed to libraries as places with many elements of best practice provision noted in this report. Examples include; providing space to sit without making a purchase, internet access for those without it at home, and large font or audio books to people with visual impairments (Enyon, 2014).

Conclusion

This review has found that there are many barriers that reduce the engagement of older people with the arts, culture and heritage, leisure and fitness, and retail and hospitality sectors. Barriers differ for different groups of people, but include cost, scheduling, location, not catering for diverse cultural needs, and ageism. As a result, a wide range of older people are missing out on spaces and services that could enrich their lives and have a positive impact on their health and wellbeing.

However, the evidence base is scant: there are significant gaps in the literature on the barriers that exist, the factors that enable or prevent people from participating; and on initiatives to improve participation. The studies that we have included in this review tend to focus on barriers that arise from the individual's characteristics, such as their age, culture or religion. Only a small number examine systemic and structural barriers (such as store design, signage and technology) that prevent older people from engaging in these sectors in their communities.

The studies identified for all sectors were characterised by a lack of diversity among study participants but particularly in the arts and culture sector, where participants tended to be White British females who were married, retired and had completed further education (Pomfret et al., 2023; Hallam et al, 2012). There was little research on the intersection of age with characteristics like race, ethnicity, religion and gender, and the review didn't identify any studies that looked at barriers to engagement among specific groups of minoritised older adults such as older LGBTQ people, or older people with learning disabilities. Without this knowledge, we risk being able to effectively identify and remove barriers or design interventions that target and meet their needs.

True accessibility means committing to equity and respect for all older people and this means considering how age intersects with other characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation, religion or socioeconomic status. This review shows that where there is diversity in a community, there is a diversity of needs. In order to achieve equity and respect for all older people in our communities, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendations

– **More research should be undertaken to understand the ways older people access, or don't access, different businesses and community settings in the three sectors of interest. Including testing and evaluating the effectiveness of potential interventions in different settings (including those mentioned in this report).**

– **Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach at the local level researchers, policymakers, and service providers should emphasise genuine consultation and co-production, especially with a diverse range of older people, to better understand and meet their needs.**

– **While recognising that this work takes time and planning, service providers and venues should work with not only the groups of older people accessing them, but also with those groups least able to/not currently accessing them when developing or improving their outreach, offer and other activities.**

– **Local and national government should protect investment in examples of good practice, including public libraries and those mentioned in this review.**

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