BIOPICCC
Built Infrastructure for Older People’s Care in Conditions of Climate Change

Understanding community resilience at the local level

The BIOPICCC Toolkit¹ provides a series of resources to assist local authorities, partner organisations, and neighbourhood and community groups with local level resilience planning. Specifically, the resources are designed to support users to develop plans to make health and social care services for older people (aged 65 years and older) more resilient to the effects of extreme weather. This briefing paper focuses on the local community resilience strand of BIOPICCC project. The first section of the paper identifies some resources for gathering information about local community resilience. The second section provides examples of resilience amongst older people and illustrates the kinds of knowledge that were produced using this approach.

1) Gathering information about community resilience

People living and working in local neighbourhoods have a lot of important knowledge and can often contribute resources which can help to build resilience. Bringing people together to discuss these issues can in itself help to build local ties and community resilience. Every area is different and what works in one place may not work in another. This is why local knowledge is essential to build resilient communities.

This said, communities cannot be expected to do everything on their own, and knowledge and support from the local authority level in the wider area is often essential as well (see the ‘Local Authority Planning’ section of the toolkit for further details).

Putting older people and ‘frontline’ service providers at the centre

You may decide to conduct a ‘survey’ of local residents’ views and knowledge about how to make sure older people’s health and social care is provided during extreme weather events. It may also be helpful to collect views from the people who deliver local services on the ground in your neighbourhood.

• See the resources under ‘Identifying Key Partners’ in the toolkit for who to ask.
• See Appendix 4a for suggestions on how to collect views from older people and carers in the neighbourhood which includes examples of potentially useful questions to ask.
• See Appendix 4b for suggestions on how to collect views from ‘frontline’ service providers in the neighbourhood which includes examples of potentially useful questions to ask.

¹ http://www.dur.ac.uk/geography/research/researchprojects/biopiccc/toolkit/
Practical considerations:

- You will need to consider who could collect this information and whether they might need equipment or other resources.
- You will need to consider health and safety issues when working with older people who may be frail and to make sure that everyone involved is safe and comfortable when you are collecting this information.
- Some information might be confidential; it is important not to pass on any personal information about individuals.

Organisations such as Age UK and NCVO may be able to advise on these issues for local groups wanting to work with older people and their carers to improve neighbourhood resilience.

You should consider whether the suggestions in Appendices 4a and 4b, about information to collect, help you to address your priorities. If not, you may need to adjust them to suit your work better.

It is good to agree who will gather all the information together and how best to share it.

How will this information be used after the meeting to help build neighbourhood resilience? (See the resources under ‘Case Studies' in the toolkit for examples).

2) Older people's preparations for extreme weather events

In general, the older people interviewed had a stoic attitude towards the weather and the disruption it causes. As one older man said, “you just have to plod on, you know?” In referencing the past, older people often noted that life is easier now than when they were younger and they have a lot of experience and resilience to draw upon. Older people themselves reported that they are planning ways they can act themselves to try to minimise the impact of disruption due to extreme weather.

Recent experience of extreme weather conditions may have encouraged older people to think ahead and prepare for such events. Some of our informants, such as Elsie and Joyce described action they were taking for themselves. Such action will not be feasible for all individuals, so we should not expect these kinds of preparation to be possible for everyone. Nevertheless, these examples might give some other older people ideas about actions they could take.

“From my point of view we got caught short in that we didn't have ourselves prepared for winter…. I mean we managed but this year now I’m thinking it could come at anytime so we are getting ourselves prepared early.”

(Resident interviewed in ‘Rural Area’
Some of the older people we spoke to emphasised that they felt more resilient in adversity than the younger generation and they described their strategies for coping with extreme weather. Elsie (not her real name) is an older person living in ‘Market Town’. Joyce lives in ‘Village Hub’

“I’m adaptable. I mean when I grew up there was only one cold water tap coming into the house, the lavatory was across the yard… and you had a fire in the sitting room, no heating in the bedrooms at all and you used to get that lovely frosty condensation going into lovely frosty patterns so you grew up used to it…” (Elsie)

“(people today.... they’ve been cosseted with all the central heating and everything... they’re not built … for this cold weather or, you know, not used to it or can’t cope with it. But... we had the war you see, we’re strong people. Oh we haven’t had it cushy, well when we were younger it wasn’t easy was it? You know it’s a matter of surviving… Everyone has it easy now…so I think we were, we were a bit tougher than that..” (Joyce)

Elsie and Joyce explained that they have got used to stocking up with essential food, medicines and other necessities in case they are unable to leave their homes due to the weather.

“I always have plenty of non-perishables in, I start stockpiling about August so I’ve always got tins and packets and toilet-rolls and things like that and I get them on… when they come into special offer so I keep a stock of that and cough medicines and all that. I always make sure I’ve got that at the start of the winter.” (Elsie)

“(the flat I was in had no central heating so it was very cold but also when it did… it was in a close so when we had that bad snow … you couldn’t get out of the road… but if you knew it was coming, I used to stock up, you know…” (Joyce)

However, this strategy of ‘stocking up’ may not be feasible for all older people, as discussed by a group of older people in ‘Rural Area’ who were active in helping to organise voluntary services in their community:

Participant 4: “Well I think… people with dementia… won’t have a clue and they forget to eat … and if somebody brings food in for them they eat it all at once, and you know… if things like that…”

Participant 2: “But then that should be the carer’s responsibility then.”

Participant 4: "... but you see they haven’t all got carers, some of them just have meals on wheels."

Participant 1: “... people living on a fixed income, particularly at the moment are being hit all the time by things costing more and what they’re doing is, they’re retrenching and therefore instead of buying a couple of packets of something they’ll buy one, when they’ve got to the end of that if they couldn’t get out and they haven’t got anything… they can’t afford it; they won’t do it.”
Elsie and Joyce thought about what they might do to keep warm if the electricity supply failed:

“…without [electricity] and without being able to boil water for the hot water bottle it would be a bit chilly but as I say I’d probably just tuck into… the bed … if I couldn’t get a hot drink I’d drink plenty of water to stay hydrated.” (Elsie)

“I make sure I’ve got torches in certain places in each room I’ve got candles that in the dark I could put my hands on and I’ve got a lighter to light them with so… because I’ve experienced it, till you’ve experienced it you don’t realise how difficult it is; also if because we’re all electric here and I do have, … a little camping gas stove, so if there’s, if there’s a power cut no electric for so… I’ve got that, I can boil kettle.” (Joyce)

Local service providers from a discussion group in ‘Market Town’ also talked about the use of ‘wind up’ devices during power cuts.

Elsie and Joyce talked about the benefits for older people who adapt their homes to make them more thermally efficient, control ventilation in hot or cold weather, or use cooler spaces in hot weather:

“I think one of the single most important things is to see that people have double-glazing and cavity wall insulation; that makes such a difference.” (Elsie)

“[If] it does get a bit hot… then I go outside and sit in the shade if it’s too hot indoors you know there are ways around it but yes it does get warm and now I’m, you know, if I get too hot or cold I’ll shut the window, you know… there are ways around it. …things like having a fan; you need to have a fan when the weather gets really bad because of the heat, as well as the cold, and you need a fan, you have to make sure … you drink plenty of water things like that… you’ve got to keep hydrated, you’ve got to keep cool.” (Joyce)

Sharing knowledge and information about adaptation can support resilience. Elsie and Joyce had ideas about sources of information, from notice boards in community centres, and in public announcements on local radio during extreme weather events:

“I normally listen to Classic FM but if there is bad weather I’ll switch onto the local radio and they’ll give you all the information needed.” (Elsie)