Appendix 6c – Case study: Discussion groups with older Londoners

How will climate change affect you?
3rd May 2012, Salvation Army Community Church, London

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

SUMMARY REPORT

Introduction
A team of researchers at Durham University and Heriot-Watt University are undertaking a study investigating the impact of extreme weather (including heatwaves, prolonged cold spells, and heavy and prolonged rainfall which can lead to flooding) on the delivery of older people’s health and social care services. The aim of the study is to develop strategies to make these services more resilient to climate change in the future. The research is funded by the UK Government’s Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) as part of the Adaptation and Resilience to a Changing Climate Coordination Network (ARCC-CN).

So far the research team have interviewed older people, their carers, and service providers in two rural local authorities in England. The team are also interested to work with older people living in larger towns and cities. As part of this consultation process, members of the BIOPICCC research team met with around 60 older Londoners (aged 65 years and over) from across the city, and from a number of different ethnic minority groups, at the Salvation Army Community Church in South London. The BIOPICCC-led activities were part of an event exploring the impacts of climate change on older people organised by Age UK London and the Greater London Forum for Older People. The key points raised during the group discussions are summarised below.

Past experiences of extreme weather
Participants shared their experiences of heatwaves, droughts, storms (including high winds and heavy rainfall), and very bad winters. When bad weather occurred in the past it was just accepted. People didn’t know about climate change then, it was ‘just the weather’ and people adapted to it. Some participants recalled the 1976 heatwave which lasted for many weeks. During that time the GP surgeries and hospitals were inundated and the shops sold out of fans. Sleeping was difficult at night and people felt very uncomfortable.

More recently, participants talked about their experiences of the snow and ice which caused disruption to the transport network across London and left older people housebound for a number of weeks. Some older Londoners also reported some disruption to social care services including meals-on-wheels.

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Localised flooding following heavy rainfall was also mentioned. In some instances, this led to blocked footpaths and roads, with drains unable to cope with excess rainfall. In addition, leaks, dampness and burst pipes in some older and poorly maintained houses were reported by some participants. Poor insulation of some housing stock was another issue.

Older Londoners’ responses to extreme weather
Older Londoners participating in the discussions were mostly concerned with the snow and ice which disrupts day-to-day activities and routines. For example, older people tend to stay indoors for fear of falling on icy pavements. Footpaths are rarely gritted or cleared of snow making them treacherous for older people. Some participants living in blocks of flats reported that the outside steps were often left uncleared. In some cases, younger neighbours helped out by clearing the pavements.

During heatwaves, older Londoners try to keep as cool as possible. They open windows, draw curtains, use fans, wear cooler clothing, take showers to cool down and drink plenty of water. Housebound older people and older people living in multi-occupancy tower blocks were identified as being particularly vulnerable to the heat and cold.

Health and social care services older Londoners rely upon
Participants identified a range of formal and informal health and social care services that they rely upon. All services were considered important but are accessed at different times. Examples include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health care services</th>
<th>Hospitals; out-patients; GP surgeries; community nurses; and pharmacies.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social care services</td>
<td>Informal carers including relatives, friends and neighbours; meals-on-wheels; phone-based services; day centres; transport services e.g. buses and community transport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services</td>
<td>Housing management companies; tenants’ associations; and neighbourhood watch.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How might older Londoners be better prepared for extreme weather in the future?
Suggestions from participants included:

- **Advanced warning** of extreme weather events.
- **Advice on how to prepare** for extreme weather disseminated via the television and/or radio. Also information from the local authority and social services e.g. emergency contact numbers that would enable older people to speak to ‘real people’ should they need assistance or advice.
- Some participants also noted that **older people need to help themselves** e.g. by stock piling food, bottled water, wearing suitable clothes and using fans during hot weather. A few participants also mentioned the importance of staying active and getting ‘out-and-about’.
- There was also a feeling among some participants that **social services are not always aware of older people’s individual needs**. Older people need support if they are to live at home.
What kind of support do older Londoners require and from whom?

Isolation of older people was considered to be a big issue in London. Many older people live alone and not everyone has family they can rely on. In addition, people do not always know their neighbours. With this in mind, participants identified a range of formal and informal support networks that could help older Londoners prepare for, and respond to, extreme weather events should they occur. Examples include:

**Formal support networks**
- The NHS
- Local authorities/boroughs
- Local voluntary groups e.g. Age UK London

**Informal support networks**
- Neighbours
- Community groups were considered important not just during difficult times. A number of participants noted that London is different now than in the past with the loss of a sense of community. People don’t speak to each other anymore – “Londoners have a different mentality to other people”.
- Community facilities were considered important – a warm (or cool) place for a cup of tea and a chat with friends.
- Several participants highlighted the importance of postmen/women and milkmen/women. They often know who is vulnerable in the community.

In some London boroughs formal and informal organisations are working together including social services and neighbourhood groups to identify vulnerable older people who may require assistance during emergency situations. There were also suggestions for intergenerational support networks e.g. local authorities and Age UK recruiting young people to help older Londoners. Participants noted that it is important to talk with older people themselves to find out what they want and need and to work closely with different ethnic/cultural groups. Some participants were concerned about the impact of cuts in public funding which could lead to the links between and across local services and communities breaking down.

In addition to health and social care, some participants commented on the role of utility companies and regulators. It was felt that the water regulator could do more to ensure a robust drainage system across London reducing the occurrence of localised flooding.

**Comparing the views of older Londoners with older people living in more rural areas**

There were a number of similarities but also some differences between the views and experiences of older people living in London and older people living in more rural areas. What was clear from discussions across the different localities is that older people have considerable life experience and can be involved in preparing for, and responding to, extreme weather events.

In general, the older people interviewed were most concerned with the snow and ice which disrupts day-to-day activities and prevents older people from leaving their homes. The cold weather was of greater concern than heatwaves and floods, perhaps reflecting the severe
winters experienced in England in recent years and the disruption this caused across rural and urban areas. While people have to travel further in rural areas to access services e.g. GP practices, older people in both rural and urban areas have to **negotiate treacherous footpaths to reach main roads** during the ice and snow.

Many participants in both urban and rural areas also highlighted the issue of **isolation** and **loneliness** and the **importance of family, friends and neighbours**. Having people on the ground e.g. a postman, milkman or local domiciliary care team is important as they often know who is most vulnerable within the community. While isolation was an issue for both rural and urban areas, older Londoners talked about the **absence of close-knit communities** and people not knowing their neighbours. As a result, there was a feeling amongst participants that older people can be much more isolated in London. **Knowing who is vulnerable** and sharing this information with the relevant authorities is, therefore, essential. Participants in both rural and urban areas highlighted the need to **develop links across a range of service providers, community and neighbourhood groups and the voluntary sector** to ensure more effective health and social care service delivery.

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**Should you wish to discuss the project further, please contact:**

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**If you would like advice on preparing for climate change and extreme weather, please contact:** Janine Aldridge, Age UK London on 020 7091 2593 or the national Age UK advice line on 0800 169 6565