

# THE CONCERNS OF BAME PEOPLE IN LATER LIFE

## FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES: 2018/19

From November 2018 to January 2019 Age Alliance Wales and Age Cymru carried out a series of focus groups across Wales, visiting venues in Bangor, Wrexham, Swansea, Cardiff and Newport.

Opinions and comments were sought on a range of issues from people aged 50+, with additional meetings specifically aimed at BAME and LGBT+ people. Our document, *The Concerns of People in Later Life - Focus Group Responses: 2018/19*, contains details of matters of concern to all people aged 50+. However, there were a number of additional matters raised by BAME contributors. This report contains details of those matters.

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## **Community Participation**

Later life should represent a time of enjoyment and fulfilment, when people are able to participate in the community, learn new skills or take up new activities. Our document, *The Concerns of People in Later Life - Focus Group Responses: 2018/19*, contains details of a range of concerns held by people aged 50+ across Wales, including matters such as the loss of community and day centres, reduced lifelong learning opportunities, the lack of accessible toilets and a reduction in the provision of libraries, banks and post offices. However, BAME people also told us of a range of additional concerns, as set out below.

### **BAME people and community participation**

BAME people reported the same problems as the wider population regarding community participation, but faced a number of additional obstacles:

We were told that the potential vulnerability of BAME people post Brexit is a concern, and there was a fear that the UK government has developed an anti-immigrant stance. We were told that BAME people now choose to avoid engaging with government at any level, fearing their residency status may be probed (particularly given the “Windrush scandal”). As such BAME people may be less likely to complain about the issues which impact upon their ability to access social activities than may have been the case just a few years ago.

There are already groups of BAME people who meet regularly, including a predominantly BAME choir and an BAME “exercise programme” in the north (which organises walks for older BAME people, intergenerational exercise events for BAME people and single sex swimming sessions, which has resulted in older BAME women learning how to swim), as well as support groups and meeting places for BAME people across the country (although predominantly in urban areas). However, whilst these are welcome it is apparent that the ability of BAME people to take part in many community activities can be restricted.

It was reported that BAME people can experience general disrespect daily. Indeed, we were told of BAME people being given poor treatment from GPs and surgery staff,

local authority staff and bus drivers, amongst others. However, in addition to this it seems that language can also pose a problem for some:

Much of the difficulty experienced by a group of older BAME women we met in one large Welsh city centred on language skills and an unwillingness or inability for service providers to accommodate the needs of those who may have limited English. Language limitations were said to lead to difficulties with transport, local community events, libraries, theatres and a huge range of other areas. We were told that family members who speak English may be required to interpret at times, but it is unrealistic to expect this to happen very often. As such, it was a deep desire of the women we spoke with to learn English.

However, it was felt that the level of accessible English language courses were insufficient: although the BAME women we met were keen to take part in English language courses, they simply aren't well funded and so rarely available. The women were reliant upon a third sector organisation to arrange group tutoring sessions (which worked very well), but there was a perception that the local authority felt they had satisfied their obligations by providing funding to the third sector, rather than make language courses available more widely through their own avenues.

## Transport

Older people rely on public transport far more than other age groups. Indeed, respondents stated that buses were by far their most often used service. As well as being vitally important in helping older people to maintain their independence and well-being, both public and community transport services help to ensure communities are well-connected and that services, facilities and amenities are accessible, reducing the risks of isolation and loneliness.

We were informed of a range of problems impacting upon the 50+ population in Wales (set out in *The Concerns of People in Later Life - Focus Group Responses: 2018/19*), such as problematic timetabling and a lack of suitable provision – particularly in rural areas. However, we were told of further concerns held by BAME people:

### **BAME People and Public Transport**

BAME people experience the same difficulties as wider society in making use of public transport services, but in addition they report further difficulties caused by racial intolerance. We told of ill-mannered and disrespectful behaviour of some bus drivers towards BAME people, particularly those with limited English language abilities. This does not seem to be uncommon, with one woman telling us of an example where she had been verbally abused and intimidated by a bus driver when attempting to board a bus, but felt unable to make a complaint, knowing that she would be likely to encounter the driver again, as well as being fearful of the complaint system itself and doubting its likely effectiveness. The behaviour of the driver in question was therefore unchallenged.

The potential for racial discrimination and intolerance from other passengers was also a concern: we were told that many older BAME people are reluctant to use public transport during the evenings, particularly later evenings, fearing racial abuse and intimidation (although it was recognised that older people across the population may fear evening bus use). As such, the activities which older BAME people could potentially undertake during the evenings are limited for those who rely on public transport.

## Housing

During our focus groups we found that people aged 50+ across Wales had a range of concerns about housing for older people, as set out in *The Concerns of People in Later Life - Focus Group Responses: 2018/19*. These centred around matters such as choice of housing, the ability to stay in one's own home, potential difficulties in moving to a smaller home, and a range of concerns around supported housing and residential care.

In addition to issues of this sort, which may apply to all sections of society, there were particular concerns expressed by BAME people:

### **BAME people and housing in later life**

We were told that the notion of leaving one's own home and entering supported housing or residential care was troubling for some BAME people: property ownership may be seen as very important to some groups, and the idea of leaving behind an owned home, to enter into what may be seen as a rental property, would be a "a loss of face". As such, it may be felt that these sorts of accommodation are ruled out as a matter of course by some, and simply not considered as a potential housing option.

Further, those we spoke to explained that it is something of a myth that BAME communities and families wish to care for their older members in a significantly different manner to the rest of the population. Rather, they find at the facilities offered to them may not be suitable for their needs for a variety of reasons. For example, dietary considerations may not be properly addressed (the type of food, its preparation and its serving are of importance to some BAME people). Further, we were reminded that some BAME people with dementia can lose the use of English, and it can be very difficult to get care workers who can speak the appropriate languages – even more so than it is to recruit care workers who can speak Welsh, we were told. Therefore, given the lack of suitable facilities, older BAME people may instead receive the care of family members – but this needn't be the case if the services or accommodation offered were appropriate.

Additionally, we were told that it is not uncommon for older people with dementia to become racially abusive: it was stated that people brought up during a time when racism was more commonplace may regress to that way of thinking when living with dementia, becoming racially abusive to BAME residents and staff. No solution other than sensitive handling could be offered, but given that an older BAME person would be in a very small minority within many areas of Wales, it was feared that little may be done to safeguard them from attention of this sort.

### **BAME people and private sector housing provision**

A group of older BAME women in South Wales told us that their city's more affordable housing provision, whilst still relatively expensive (compared to valleys locations) was of a very poor quality. However, demand for properties was high, despite its poor standard, given its limited availability. As their family ties required they live within a relatively small geographical area (they were very often required to act as carers, often to people with limited English language skills) they felt they had no option to remain in the area. Whilst it may be thought that this is not a BAME issue to a certain extent, it was felt that the comparative "lack of voice" of BAME people was a factor in landlords feeling able to offer substandard housing, and the local authority not doing enough to challenge those landlords.

We were, however, informed of some good practice being developed: the formation of the North Wales Registered Social Landlord Equality Partnership in 2001 developed a Regional Black Minority Ethnic (BME) Housing Strategy, said to be the first in the UK. It has since widened its scope to not only consider the problems of race discrimination and harassment, but also other aspects covered by the Equality Act 2011 (disability, gender, religion, gender identity, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity and sexual orientation). The partnership was said to have assisted BAME people greatly, and it was suggested that such initiatives should therefore be of benefit across Wales.

## **You and your rights**

During the course of our focus groups participants spoke at length on the issue of rights, as noted in *The Concerns of People in Later Life - Focus Group Responses: 2018/19*. However, BAME people raised a number of additional concerns:

### **BAME people and their rights**

A lack of English language skills can lead to very significant difficulties for some BAME people. However, opportunities to learn the language are insufficient, we were told. We spoke to a number of BAME women attending a third sector body in Cardiff during the course of their English tutoring sessions. If it were not for these weekly opportunities the women we met would have very little opportunity to increase their English skills, if any.

A lack of English, we were told, leaves people in a very difficult position: they may have difficulties conversing with GPs, for example (and were still bound by their already limited appointment times), and found it difficult to obtain local authority services, whatever their nature (whether that's refuse collection, housing conditions, their children's education, social services or any other matter).

Given these difficulties the women told us that they thought advocates with language skills would be of tremendous benefit, but it appears these do not exist (or at least the women we met, who would be ideal recipients of their services, were not aware of them).

Furthermore, equality issues don't really seem to be taken into account when councils make their decisions, we were informed. It was claimed there is a lack of understanding of equality matters in local authorities, and they are therefore slow to implement equality policies. We were told there are very few equality officers in many local authorities - perhaps just one or two in some authorities - with many being part-time roles. It was said they are often not based in prominent positions, such as within a Chief Executive's team, and so their impact may be very limited.

A North Wales respondent told us that in his (professional academic) experience BAME policies are often adopted across Wales without proper consultation. As a result he has spent time trying to mobilise older ethnic minority people, to make sure they get their voices heard, but concedes this is a very difficult job: how are local authorities in North Wales supposed to involve a “critical mass” of BAME people in places where there are so few? Other than placing an advert in the press (which may have a limited level of success) it is difficult to see how this could be done. Access to BAME people in the north of the country is far more difficult than in places like Cardiff, he felt, where there are established groups which are relatively easy to access.

However, it also appears that North Wales health boards have made great inroads into speaking regularly with older ethnic minority women. We were told that this relationship developed as a result of BAME women attending health board meetings of their own volition, rather than being sought by the boards, but nevertheless the relationship is productive. This has resulted in the introduction of programmes which help address health issues in older BAME people, establishing walking groups and women’s swimming sessions – enabling older BAME women to learn to swim – and organising multi-generational activities for BAME people, such as family ice-skating sessions. Given the success of this initiative it was felt that it should also be able to establish more meaningful relationships between BAME people and local authorities across Wales too.



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