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We're none of us getting any younger. This is a matter for all of us to celebrate and applaud rather than to dread – and that includes local authorities. The ageing population should be seen for what it can offer the community rather than as a burden.

But it does mean a change in planning for those local authorities which want to support the community. As people age, their needs change and the local environment needs to reflect this. However, many older people tell us at Help the Aged that they feel excluded from the local community for a number of reasons.

Take poor pavements, as one example. In January 2007 an NOP survey (1) of 1000 people over the age of 65, found 56% agreed that, when they went out, they avoided routes that might have damaged or uneven pavements as these could cause them to slip, trip or fall. The same survey found that over 2.5 million older people had experienced a slip, trip or fall, where they lost their balance and landed on the ground, due to damaged or uneven pavements.

Falls have a direct influence on the lives of older people. Even if the physical damage sustained is slight, many become frightened and fearful of falling again. In the NOP survey, people aged 65+ who said they had had a slip, trip or falls, 13% said it had left them afraid to leave home and 46 % said worrying about the future affected their physical health.

Provision of public toilets is another factor. In a survey (2) by Help the Aged, 80% of older people said that they found it difficult to find a public toilet when they needed one and a further 75% said public toilets were not open when they required one. 52% agreed that the lack of public toilets in their area stops them from going out as often as they would like, a finding confirmed by other research (3).

Both these issues along with other simple measures such as street benches (where people can rest) and good lighting are contributing factors in older people's isolation and ultimately declining health. That is why the Charity is calling for councils to consider the impact and implications of policy on older people's quality of life. It is often only small amounts of funding that are necessary to keep services open or functioning in good condition and yet this can have a major impact on a significant section of the community. Not only would this reduce the potential for compensation claims, it would also benefit older people and those with small children and with disabilities. Why not set the provision of these key elements in the local environment as best-value performance indicators for your authority?

(1) The Spotlight Survey GfK/NOP January 2007 for Help the Aged.

(2) Nowhere to go; public toilet provision in the UK is available for download at <http://policy.helptheaged.org.uk/healthyageing>

(3) Taking Control of incontinence; exploring the links with social isolation is available for download at <http://policy.helptheaged.org.uk/healthyageing>

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