



MANCHESTER OLDER PEOPLE'S NETWORK



THE ROUGH GUIDE TO

Tackling Age Discrimination

In society there remain many attitudes based on false images of older people. What's behind these is usually a confusion between chronological age and physical age. "She's good for her age" is usually intended as a compliment, comparing an individual to some idea of "typical" capabilities of people at that stage in their lives. But it's only a short step from calling something "typical" to adopting a stereotype.

In all prejudice, stereotypes are a seductively quick and easy way to view people. In planning services of any kind for the community, "models" (which is almost an academic name for stereotypes) are naturally needed as some kind of benchmark – but there is a danger that something intended simply as a planning tool becomes a blanket view which smothers recognition of people as individuals: their wishes, abilities, needs, etc.

On a personal level, this might simply be offensive. But at a social level, it risks depriving a huge section of the community of the same rights and choices as the majority. It's often hard to realise how much this affects people's lives unless you're on the receiving end of it. As history has shown, the only way to overturn discrimination is to enable those discriminated against to have a voice and the authority to insist on change. At a personal level this is now called advocacy, at the community level it's called campaigning.

UK Law

As it currently stands, the laws against discrimination in the UK are:

- The Sex Discrimination Act 1975
- The Race Relations Act 1976
- The Sex Discrimination Act 1986
- The Disability Discrimination Act 1995

There is currently no law which addresses age discrimination.

Ageism

Like most forms of discrimination, ageism is often found in multiples:

- *Sexuality*: older people are perceived as simply not having sexuality or being somehow perverse if they do. For older lesbians and gay men this problem is even worse.
- *Disability*: many older people have mobility problems or sensory impairment: but we don't refer to them as having a disability as we would with a younger person - they're just "old".
- *Gender*: the majority of the older population are women: "little old lady" is another familiar, patronising phrase.

Looking at this last example more closely:

- After the age of 65 there are 50% more women than men - after 85 there are three times as many women as men
- Older women have fewer financial resources than older men - even more so for single older women
- Older women are less likely to drive and so much more affected by problems with public transport
- Cuts in Post Offices, banks and small local shops have a much greater impact on older people - again, particularly those without transport

Like so much discrimination, ageism has developed words and ideas which reinforce it in everyday life: "elderly", "pensioner" (why describe someone by their state benefits?) as well as the dominant images of those with opportunity being the young physically attractive people and the demonising of age by adverts for "anti-ageing" products, etc.

The Future

In October 2000, the Human Rights Act set out the fundamental rights which everyone, irrespective of their status, must be able to exercise. Unlike other European countries, however, the UK did not appoint a Commissioner to implement the Act.

During 2003, the Government has implemented a European directive on equal treatment making discrimination unlawful on the grounds of sexual orientation and religious beliefs - which are also addressed by the Human Rights Act 2000.

By 2006, European law requires the UK to ban age discrimination in employment - this will cover all aspects of employment including recruitment, training, promotion and retirement. Employers will no longer be able to consider age as a factor when considering someone's employment.

However, the law will still not cover goods and services: i.e. including education, transport, housing and health care.

The Equality Bill 2003: The Equality Commission

The Government is proposing to establish a single Equality Commission to address all forms of discrimination. This would replace the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Rights Commission with a single regulatory body which would also have responsibility for tackling discrimination on grounds of age, religion and sexual orientation.

The **Equality Bill** will “make provision making it unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of age, gender reassignment, religion or belief or sexual orientation”. The Bill takes the approach of **promoting equality** as well as tackling discrimination. The Bill received a tremendous welcome in the House of Commons but lack of Government support means its progress through Parliament has stalled. It is hoped it can be reintroduced in the next session. (We have an information sheet on how laws are passed - contact us for a copy).

While the Bill is welcomed by many, there are reservations about the theory that a single body can address all discrimination. Some working with the existing structures are concerned that their voice may be lost by merging with other groups. There is also concern that the system for challenging discrimination is still too reliant on individuals being willing to take a case to court - rather than developing organisational and cultural change.

Further information is available on the Odyssey Trust website: www.odysseustrust.org

The NHS National Service Framework for Older People

Standard 1 of this document (which is part of the NHS modernisation plan) is to “root out age discrimination”. Acknowledging that age discrimination takes place in the delivery of health & social care is an important step in tackling inequalities in public services. It is essential, if age discrimination is to be rooted out effectively, that those involved in working with older people reflect on their attitudes to ageing and to understand how this affects the way they work. The standard requires NHS organisations to address this at all levels.

This is the kind of cultural change which is needed. The health policy research organisation **The King's Fund** argues that “conventional anti-discrimination legislation is not likely to be effective in combating ageist practices in health and social care [...and that] there is a strong argument for creating new laws that place a duty on health and social care agencies to promote age equality and require **them** to demonstrate that they do not discriminate unlawfully against anyone on grounds of age” (from *Age Equality in Health and Social Care* by Janice Robinson, The Kings Fund January 2002)

The Older People's Network has produced a Rough Guide to the National Service Framework for Older People - please contact us for a free copy.

We can't go on like this...

There seems to be an assumed poverty of ambition for older people. This is not only unfair, it is unsustainable - it is a well known fact that the overall population of older people the UK is increasing. The "grey pound" and the "grey vote" are becoming ever stronger - the biggest growth in those buying computers has been among the over 60s, but this is never reflected in investment in IT training aimed at older people. Despite the evidence, IT is still perceived as the terrain of the young.

Social exclusion and the lack of opportunities for older people can have their effect outside the narrow boundaries of health and social care provision, it represents a failure to recognise and value the contribution of older people to communities. It is now estimated that 33% of "younger-older" carers (eg in their 50s or 60s) are actually caring for an "older-older" person (eg in their 80s or 90s). Also, many older people are now effectively bringing up their grandchildren after their own children's relationships have broken down.

There are national structures which may perhaps be ageist and it's important to examine them in case they need to be challenged. A better understanding is needed, for example, of "retirement age". It used to be the point at which you had done enough work for the company you'd started with at 15 and could now leave with head held high after a lifetime's service. Now, 50% of men are no longer in paid work at the age of 61 and 50% of women are no longer in paid work at 57. So is 65 now just the age at which you qualify for state retirement pension? If so, what will be the effect of pressure to increase the "normal" retirement age to 70?

As well as working on tackling ageism within local structures around the National Service Framework for Older People, Manchester Older People's Network has signed up to the anti-ageism campaign being run by **Help the Aged**.

Further details are available from Help the Aged, 207-221 Pentonville Road, London N1 9UZ (Tel: 020 7278 1114) or on their website www.helptheaged.org.uk



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