

Musselwhite, C (2014). Travel and transport in later life. *The Herald, Vale of Glamorgan 50+ Strategy Forum*, 22, 10-11.

Travel and transport in later life

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Introduction

Despite being in better health and physically fitter than ever before, older people still report great difficulty in accessing shops, banks and hospitals and to stay connected to local communities), especially when no longer drivingⁱ. The need to be mobile and to travel is also related to psychological wellbeing in old age and a reduction in mobility can result in an increase in isolation, loneliness and depressionⁱⁱ and overall a poorer quality of lifeⁱⁱⁱ. Sadly around 342,000 over 75 year olds 'feel trapped' in their own homes through lack of suitable transport^{iv}. In this article I want to explore four elements of travel and mobility in later life. First, to expunge the myth that older drivers are a particular danger on the road and need to be given a test. Secondly, the importance of free bus travel. Third, how to create age friendly pedestrian areas. Finally the role that cycling could play, all hopefully citing mobility and accessibility could be improved in later life.

Should we test older drivers?

On a chart (see figure 1) of casualties by age resulting from road traffic accidents per mile driven, you will see an increase in number of casualties from around 75 and certainly 80 years of age . However, much of this increase is because the older person is more likely to be susceptible to injury or death due to increased frailty^v and is especially an issue for those who drive a low number of miles^{vi}. Interestingly, countries that have more stringent licencing for older people (such as in New South Wales, Denmark, Norway and Sweden) do not have any fewer road traffic casualties among that age group than in places with relaxed procedures (such as in the UK with self-report), suggesting introducing a test would not necessarily have positive effect^{vii}. Many countries are relaxing their licencing for older people as a consequence. Finally we are seeing increasing automation of vehicles, perhaps with full automation possible in the future, this changes dramatically who might be able to drive a vehicle and open opportunities up for continuing driving in later life.

That said, not all older people are good drivers, however, and many of the things associated with old age can affect driving including changes in physical health, eyesight, hearing, cognition (e.g. memory, attention, distraction etc.) Also, since driving is a fairly automatic skill, we don't always notice subtle changes in our driving ability and it is always a good idea to seek advice on driving ability from others, from family and friends that you trust and can give valid feedback. Then it may be useful to visit one of the local driver assessment centres or book a driving instructor to give you some professional feedback and tips on staying on the road. Planning to give-up driving and working out new ways of getting out and about without the car using lifts, public transport, taxis or walking, is best done way in advance of needing to give-up driving, so best to start from a young age!

The value of the free bus pass

The free bus pass for the over 65s has been excellent in meeting practical needs , for example helping to meet essential health care appointments and shopping needs, reducing missed appointments and providing access to variety of goods. It can improve health by creating space for

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exercise, for example taking people to places for walking, and in creating walking to and from the bus stops themselves^{viii}. It is also good for mental health, as Geoff Andrews^{ix} and colleagues point out, the bus becomes a focus of social activity itself, with many going for journeys for their own sake, sometimes not even knowing where the route will take them, something that is traditionally missed when giving-up the car^x. However, there must be provision of bus services in the first instance and in the current climate of cuts in local authority funding reducing services is a reality that can have detrimental effect on those that need them most. In addition, the buses must be accessible, have comfortable, sheltered places to sit and wait, with good information on services provided. Many bus companies are also providing training for bus drivers to understand older people's needs, helping older people gain confidence in using the bus that the drivers will be patient and help with payment and ticket types and not drive off until being seated.

Age friendly pedestrian areas

We need to create environments for older people that they are able to walk in. Cracked pavements, steep steps, unlit areas are all too commonly barriers to getting out and about. Lack of toilets and lack of benches are often cited as reducing the accessibility for older people too. But it is also about desirability of an area, there must be something that pulls people to want to get out and about, decent shops with understanding and friendly staff, affordable coffee or tea shops, attractive architecture, a sense of place and history remembered and revealed. All too often these elements are forgotten, as needs of different users ignored.^{xi}

Modern town or city centres have prioritised commercial interests over social, the worst of these a lack of places to sit, forcing people into expensive café and coffee shops and the advent of big television sets in city squares, as if we can't live without our televisions for the time we want to visit the shops (see figure 2).

A big issue is also crossing the road. The Department for Transport in the UK set the suggested crossing speed for a pedestrian at 1.2m/s. Countless studies suggest this is way too quick for older people and in my recent study 85% of all older people and 94% of women, over 65, did not walk at this speed^{xii}, making crossing the road inapproachable and dangerous. Smart crossings that follow people as they cross, only turning back to green for vehicles once completion of crossing has occurred should be rolled out.

A note on improving cycling

Cycling is great for fitness and health for older people and has less impact on hips and joints as other cardio-vascular activity such as running, yet in the UK only 1% of all journeys by the over 65s are made by bicycle; compare this to 15% in Denmark and 23% in Netherlands. We need better supportive infrastructure and a change in attitude; roads are not just for cars and cycling isn't just for the young^{xiii}.

Conclusion

Driving is often felt to be a pancea in later life, as it enables almost door-to-door travel with little physical or cognitive effort. Research shows that giving-up driving is usually associated with a huge increase in depression and poorer health. However, planning to give-up driving, gathering information on alternatives, trying them out before having to give-up driving altogether can help, as

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can emotional and practical support from family and friends. We need to improve the accessibility and desirability of our urban and pedestrian areas, shout about the benefits of free bus travel and possibly look to active travel such as cycling to help improve life beyond the car in later life.

ⁱ See Musselwhite, C. (2011) [Successfully giving up driving for older people](#). Discussion Paper. International Longevity Centre - UK.

ⁱⁱ Ling, D. J. & Mannion, R. (1995), Enhanced Mobility and Quality of Life of Older People: Assessment of Economic and Social Benefits of Dial-a- Ride Services, in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Transport and Mobility for Older and Disabled People*, Vol. 1, DETR, United Kingdom.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Musselwhite, C. and Haddad, H. (2010). [Mobility, accessibility and quality of later life](#). *Quality in Ageing and Older Adults*. **11(1)**, 25-37.

^{iv} WRVS (2013) Going nowhere fast: Impact of inaccessible public transport on wellbeing and social connectedness of older people in Great Britain
http://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/Uploads/Documents/Reports%20and%20Reviews/Trans%20report_GB_web_v1.pdf

^v See Box, E., Mitchell., K. And Gandolfi, K (2010). *Maintaining, Safe Mobility for the Ageing*. London: RAC Foundation Report for a review.

^{vi} Langford J., Methorst, R. and Hakamies-Blomqvist, L. (2006) Older drivers do not have a high crash risk—A replication of low mileage bias, *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, 38 (3) , 574-578.

^{vii} See Box, E., Mitchell., K. And Gandolfi, K (2010). *Maintaining, Safe Mobility for the Ageing*. London: RAC Foundation Report for review via <http://www.racfoundation.org/media-centre/Older-drivers>

^{viii} Green, J; Jones, A; Roberts, H (2014) More than A to B: the role of free bus travel for the mobility and wellbeing of older citizens in London. *Ageing and society*, 34 (3). pp. 472-494. See http://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/1520149/1/-ASO-ASO34_03-S0144686X12001110a.pdf

^{ix} Andrews, G., Parkhurst, G., Shaw, J. and Susilo, Y. (2011) The grey escape: How and why are older people really using their free bus pass? In: 43rd Universities Transport Study Group Conference, Milton Keynes, UK, 5th-7th January 2011. See http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/16908/1/utsg2011_andrews_et_al.pdf

^x Musselwhite, C. and Haddad, H. (2010). [Mobility, accessibility and quality of later life](#). *Quality in Ageing and Older Adults*. **11(1)**, 25-37.

^{xi} See the excellent IDGO project for more details <http://www.idgo.ac.uk/> and the recent community matters paper from ILC UK at http://www.ilcuk.org.uk/index.php/publications/publication_details/community_matters_making_our_communities_ready_for_ageing_a_call_to_action

^{xii} Musselwhite, C.B.A. (2014). [Environment-person interactions enabling walking in later life](#) Proceedings of the **46th Annual UTSG Conference**, Transport Operations Research Group, Newcastle University, 6th January

^{xiii} There is a three year project just kicked off aiming to develop a deep understanding of cycling amongst the older population in the UK - See www.cycleboom.org for more details.