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‘Faith and Older Age’; A Selected Literature Review of Partnership-Working in the Voluntary Sector and Equality of Access to Services

Introduction

This paper summarises the main findings from a literature review conducted in June 2016 and includes feedback from a consultative event held in January 2017 that both investigated the following two key themes in relation to faith and voluntary sector research:

1. Collaborations between faith groups and older people’s organisations with a view to highlighting success criteria for partnership-working.
2. Equality of access to services for older people of a particular faith background with a focus on the interaction effects of both faith and age on individual experiences.

The review scope included journals, publications, media reports, voluntary sector articles and government publications. Additional papers of interest were accessed through the HEAR network. By focusing mainly on accessible online resources and feedback from 25 consultation attendees, the intention of this report is not to provide an exhaustive review of every possible resource but, instead, is to provide a cross-section of views, ideas and experiences from which to frame key ideas for further investigation.

Collaborations between faith groups and older people's organisations

With government cuts to public services, there are growing expectations that the faith and voluntary sector will fill some of the gaps. As older people make up proportionally high numbers of users of many services and changing population-demographics indicate that these numbers will increase over time, this will have a significant impact on the sector's capacity to cope at a time where many organisations and forums are struggling to maintain sustainability with decreased availability of funding. There is a need for charities working for older people as well as faith organisations (that are often highly-represented by older people) to be innovative in 'doing more with less' to meet the needs of older people in communities. Increasingly, the potential for collaboration between faith organisations and the wider voluntary sector has been pointed to as being a way forward in terms of skill-sharing to provide holistic support to older people in communities (e.g. LGA, 2012, Faiths Forum for London, 2013) and there is evidence of mutually beneficial working practices within the literature. Faith to Engage (2013) summarised findings from a number of case-studies where faith-based organisations had collaborated with VCS organisations and had benefitted from established pathways of information-sharing, access to training (often at no charge) and awareness-raising in relation to policy-changes locally. In return, VCS organisations benefitted from collaborations through access to inexpensive meeting space and through providing the 'link' for VCS organisations to reach distinct local communities. It has also been suggested that there is capacity for further engagement with, for example, including faith groups in pilot-testing of new initiatives and, at a recent consultative event, there was considerable debate over the potential for the structuring of regular, planned meetings between faith group and wider VCS representatives (HEAR, 2017). The following key criteria for faith-group collaboration with the wider VCS are implicated:

- Mutual recognition of faith-group similarities to the wider VCS as well as the differences
- Recognition of mutually beneficial and aligned goals/outcomes of collaborative working that are based on shared value systems
- Effective communication where partners speak a common language
- Clear understanding of how each partner works and prioritises outcomes
- Collaborative working where partners have enough in common to prevent duplication of services whilst being able to bring something different to meet client-need more holistically

Equality of access to services

This section looks at experiences of services for older people from a specific faith background. There is evidence to suggest the presence of age-discrimination in relation to provision of some services (e.g. CPA, 2009) and to suggest that older people from different faith backgrounds can feel excluded from services and support. Despite this, there is often insufficient evidence to guide informed policy and equality-assessments frequently look at age and faith as independent dimensions rather than look at any possible interaction between the two (see Department of Health, 2011). Many older people do face barriers as a consequence of transport-difficulties and lower computer-literacy and correlates of faith and ethnicity mean that many people of certain faiths can experience barriers related to language and ideas of acceptability such as dress codes (HEAR, 2017). However, beyond this, there is also an interaction of the two equality criteria that predisposes certain groups to very specific issues related to accessibility. Broadly speaking, the following list provides a non-exclusive list of relevant issues in this area:

- Different perceptions of ageing inherent within people of different faith backgrounds can influence the likelihood of seeking 'help services'. (Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2012)
- Different beliefs in relation to 'cause' of health issues can influence likelihood of accessing services. Older people with a spiritual-causal model for health-issues may be unlikely to seek help in a medical environment. (Keynejad, 2008)
- The way in which services are run can erect barriers to participation. People of a variety of faith backgrounds have different faith-needs in relation to how services are run such as the provision of prayer-space or being able to talk about 'faith' in the context of rehabilitation.
- Designing services around the needs of local communities is critically important in maintaining equality. Issues such as dress-modesty and/or the need for single-sex class participation need to be considered. (Age UK, 2012)
- There is an interesting question over the extent to which a truly 'multi-faith' service can be provided or whether, by making a service 'open to all', it takes away the defining characteristics of a service that would make it welcoming to someone of a particular faith background. It also raises the question over the extent to which 'no faith' is considered as a 'faith choice' on a level footing (HEAR, 2017).

References

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LGA (2012) – Faith and belief in partnership; Effective collaboration with local government. Available at: <http://www.local.gov.uk>

Moriarty & Manthorpe (2012); Diversity in older people and access to services – an evidence review. Available from: <http://www.equalitiesinhealth.org/Publications>

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** For the purposes of this report, the word 'faith' has been used in its broadest sense. Many reports use different words such as 'religion' or 'beliefs' depending on the context and the definition used by the author for the respective research. Similarly, the reference to 'faith groups' has been used in its widest definition to include places of worship, community groups and faith-based charities.*

**2 For the purposes of this report, all services were potentially open to being part of the review, irrespective of what sector the provider worked in or of the specific nature of the service itself.*