



UK Research
and Innovation



www.sciencewise.org.uk
info@sciencewise.org.uk
+44 (0) 20 3745 4334



Sciencewise Roundtable on Ageing: Summary Report

This short report summarises the main themes discussed at the Sciencewise roundtable on ageing, held on Friday 18th October 2019. It draws on the notes of discussions produced by attendees and, for that reason, will not reflect the full richness of their conversations.



About Sciencewise

Sciencewise is an internationally recognised public engagement programme which is led and funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) with support from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS). We enable policy makers to develop socially informed policy. This is achieved by supporting government bodies to design, commission and deliver public dialogues on issues relating to science and technology.

We provide support and materials including:

- **Funding** – co funding to Government bodies to run public dialogues
- **Expert support** – one-to-one advice and guidance from the start of a project
- **Guidance** – materials that will help you commission a public dialogue

If you would like to find out more about Sciencewise and the support we can offer, you can:

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Sciencewise Roundtable on Ageing: Attendees

Age UK

Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research (BBSRC)

Centre for Ageing Better

Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS)

Department for Transport

Department of Health and Social Care

Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

GMCVO

Glasgow University

Innovate UK

Newcastle University

Swansea University

UCL

UK Research & Innovation

University of Brighton

University of Hertfordshire



Section 1. About the roundtable

The overall aim of the roundtable was to begin to identify if, how and where public dialogue can add value to policy and research on ageing, particularly in relation to the Industrial Strategy Ageing Society Grand Challenge mission to “Ensure that people can enjoy at least 5 extra healthy, independent years of life by 2035, while narrowing the gap between the experience of the richest and poorest”.

The 17 attendees included policy leads from a number of government departments; academic researchers from universities and research councils, and representatives from charities. A list of organisations represented at the roundtable can be found at the end of this report.

The roundtable was structured around the seven challenges in the Healthy Ageing Challenge Framework:

- Sustaining physical activity
- Maintaining health at work
- Design for age-friendly homes
- Creating healthy, active places
- Supporting social connections
- Living well with cognitive impairment
- Managing common complaints of ageing.

The aims of the roundtable were to understand:

- Current and future (next five years) policy and research priorities on ageing, particularly in relation to science and technology
- What we already know about public views and where the gaps are
- What are the priority topics for public engagement to inform current and future policy and/or research?
- The role of public dialogue within the broader field of public engagement.

In addition to themes that recurred in all four of the small group table discussions, attendees focused primarily on three themes:

- Sustaining physical activity
- Maintaining health at work
- Supporting social connections



Section 2. Cross-cutting themes

Attendees worked in small groups, each group focusing on the challenge or challenges that were of most interest to them. Each group discussed the policy challenges, the role of science and technology in addressing these challenges and the priority topics for public engagement. Groups also identified research and engagement projects that provide some insight into public views on ageing. Across these discussions, a number of cross-cutting themes were evident: these are summarised below.

The first cross-cutting theme relates to the narratives surrounding ageing, which are a consequence of, and serve to reinforce, ageism across society. Attendees argued strongly that older people are often reduced to “just health and social care problems”, and that the value they bring to society as a whole is under-recognised or ignored. This, in turn, informs older people’s perceptions of themselves, their capacities and abilities and with that, the possibility of change and improvement late in life –particularly in relation to physical activity.

The increasing diversity of the ageing population was a second cross-cutting theme, the implications of which attendees felt needed addressing across the challenges. As increasing numbers of people survive previously life-threatening conditions, or live longer with chronic conditions, care provision will need to accommodate their needs. More broadly, questions were raised about the willingness of current care homes to welcome (for example) older LGBT residents openly and enthusiastically. These discussions highlighted a further theme: attendees emphasised that action on the challenges presented by an ageing population needs to be preemptive and preventive, rather than reactionary and responsive.

A third theme related to data and the importance of data security and management arrangements that are accountable and reliable: this was emphasised repeatedly, particularly in relation to technologies collecting health data.

Three further general themes were evident, but less discussed. The first relates to cost, and the question of who pays for technological interventions (particularly where their benefit in relation to social interventions is not evidenced). The second theme concerned whether we have a shared view of what is meant by “health” and, once defined, how health should be measured. The final theme was about accommodating public and shared or working spaces to older people’s practical needs: the importance to older people of widely available and accessible toilets was mentioned on several occasions, as a basic requirement, and essential to realising many of the seven challenges.

Evidence and evaluation

Throughout discussions, attendees emphasised the importance of policy development and interventions being informed by evidence. At the broadest level, attendees asked how much we know about the value and benefit of, or call for, technological rather than social interventions. Evaluating both social and technological interventions to generate evidence on how these work in different contexts, and if and how they might complement each other, was seen as particularly important. Good evaluations would provide insight into any unintended consequences of technological interventions and how views on technology change as people age.

Section 3. The Challenges

This section is structured thematically, by challenge. Time limits and interests in the room meant that attendees focused on just two or three challenges. For each challenge discussed, we look in turn at the policy questions identified, what attendees saw as the role of science and technology within that challenge and the topics on which public dialogue might add value. The section is based on notes taken by attendees during the workshop, and on comments made on evaluation forms.

Sustaining physical activity

Policy questions

Attendees raised a broad question about the government's immediate term policy on physical activity in mid- and later-life: to what extent does the government want to be more interventionist in this area? They felt that, at the moment, policy in this area is limited and not cohesive across government, and queried where responsibility for the policy area lies and whether it is sufficiently joined up. For example, they felt that the current focus on electric cars is at odds with the need to encourage more active lifestyles. They noted too that a broad policy aimed at reducing inequality overall and building a fairer society would help to reduce inequalities in people's ability to sustain physical activity as they age.

Attendees identified three broad questions:

- what offer is available to older people wanting to sustain levels of physical activity?
- what support do older people need in order to take advantage of what is on offer?
- what barriers to sustaining physical activity do older people face?

Attendees emphasised the importance of diverse offers which promote and support social connections and wellbeing, as well as physical activity. They suggested that physical activity offers need to be more accessible and support the reduction of inequality. Attendees were unclear about how we currently support people to retain independence in later life, but emphasised that active lifestyles need to begin early in life, and that support may be needed in mid-life, to set the foundation for physical activity in later life. In particular, support for the "sandwich generation" (age 45-65) was seen as important, helping them to sustain their own wellbeing whilst they themselves are supporting others. In addition to straightforward physical activity, attendees identified support for managing common complaints, healthy workplaces and the widespread availability of public toilets as important.

They noted too that some will need more tailored or bespoke support, for example, people with multiple conditions or disabilities. A question was raised about the extent to which support should be interventionist and, if so, what might trigger such an intervention.

Finally, looking at the barriers to sustaining physical activity, attendees differentiated between the barriers that might face people aged 50+ and those aged 65+. Attendees noted in particular that issues of inequality need to be explored: what the different barriers are, how they are experienced and the support needed to overcome them is likely to vary across different groups. Attendees reiterated the importance of a range of choices being available, and questioned too what role and impact place, environment and technology have on reducing barriers to sustaining physical activity.



Section 3. The Challenges continued...

The role of science and technology

Attendees felt that more and better use of technology could allow people to work for longer, particularly those with disabilities, and offer both lifestyle support and health management tools.

They emphasised the importance of technologies being accessible and affordable, as well as adaptive and personalised, if their benefits are to be fully realised. Technologies need to have aesthetic as well as functional appeal and be “desirable long before they are needed” as well as intuitive in use, and design needs to be inclusive of those who will be using them in their lives.

Attendees also emphasised the value of exploring and expanding the role of existing “non-shiny” and everyday technology to improve people’s lives: this was felt to be as important as developing new and innovative products, with a focus on supporting everyday activities such as washing, cooking and diary-keeping.

Some attendees gave examples of how technologies might be used to help older people remain physically active:

- smart footwear or other high-tech exercise gear, to help with monitoring balance
- personalisation tools that will help tailor exercise regimes to individual needs and provide individual measures of progress
- gamifying aspects of physical regimes to encourage use
- developing urban environments to promote and encourage activity

Social and ethical questions

The ethical issues raised in relation to tools which involve the capture and use of data to support physical activities were concerned primarily with data security and use. For example, what level of monitoring would be acceptable, who has access to or can use the data and how are data interpreted. One specific example related to an assumption that an individual who is using tools that allow their whereabouts to be tracked is “wandering” when they are simply out for a walk, the data triggering unnecessary and perhaps distressing interventions. A question was raised about whether we have the tools that would be needed to process data gathered in these ways. Attendees stressed that data about an individual’s health or activities should not be available to insurance providers.

Attendees also emphasised that an ethical approach required that policies lessen inequalities rather than increasing it, and that ensuring five extra years of healthy, independent life should not be at the expense of ignoring people who are already in ill health or dependent on others.

Finally, attendees highlighted that older people have a right to take risks, and that, as far as possible, technologies that support and monitor physical activities should not curtail their ability to do so.



Section 3. The Challenges continued...

Maintaining health at work

Policy questions

Attendees posed two main questions about the relationship between work and health:

- what impacts does work have on health (both physical and mental)?
- what is the relationship between healthy ageing and changes in the retirement age?

Some attendees took a broader perspective, suggesting a distinction between employment (paid) and work (unpaid). This would enable the inclusion of caring responsibilities in the category of work, the health impacts of which might be different to those of paid employment. Queries were also raised about the impact of later retirement on the pool of volunteers who contribute to the wellbeing of others and their neighbourhoods and communities.

The role of science and technology

Attendees noted the value of technologies such as exoskeletons in occupations involving lifting – for example, nursing – which could help to prevent back injuries and hence reduce the number of people leaving employment for this reason. Much of the discussion focused on workplace design, particularly the importance of including social spaces within the workplace, and on using design to reduce features in the workplace which may have a detrimental impact on older people's ability to participate fully – for example, to limit ambient noise.

Social and ethical questions

The importance of work as a social space was highlighted. In a discussion of the increase in remote working, attendees noted that this is, of itself, socially isolating. So whilst paid employment might, in general, be beneficial for older people, some working arrangements might detract from those benefits. Attendees also discussed the tendency for work and social time to become merged, a problem they felt was exacerbated by technology.

Supporting social connections

Policy questions

Attendees discussed how best to create shared spaces, both physical and virtual. As digital natives age, digital networks and communities will be increasingly used and thought needs to be given to how these will meet the needs of different groups of people, with different needs and capabilities.

The role of science and technology

The internet was seen as a valuable technology for supporting social connections. Widely available, affordable and presenting a wide range of choices for people – particularly those less able to travel, its value to older people was seen as under exploited. Attendees felt that better access to the internet and smart in-home technologies could give older people more control over their social and personal environment – for example, managing home deliveries. One group discussed social media, arguing that it has a value in supporting shared spaces, but cannot replace them, and discussed ways in which technologies might help to create a sense of community.



Section 3. The Challenges continued...

Two particular points were raised. The first, echoing the comments made in discussions about technologies that support physical activity, is that aesthetics matter: widespread adoption of tools seen as “assistive” will require them to be pleasing objects to have in the home. One group suggested more co-design would help to achieve this.

A second point was that public infrastructure – health, care, transport, for example– needs to become more agile and responsive to progress and innovation.

Ethical questions

One of the main issues raised in relation to technologies to support social connections was the risk of increasing, rather than reducing marginalisation: the internet is not available to all and whilst online contact can go some way to reducing isolation, it is not sufficient nor a replacement for physical social spaces. The decline of the high street and growth of online shopping was seen as exacerbating social isolation, with relationships between retailers and their customers becoming increasingly impersonal.

Other themes

Attendees also discussed creating healthy, active places, and transport. Again, the decline of the high street as a factor in the disappearance of thriving town centres. The increasing automation of vehicles was seen as offering advanced driver assistance, but potentially also moving people away from active physical lives and transport modes such as walking or cycling.

Conclusion

While science and technology has much to offer to people as they age the far greater challenge identified by attendees is that of the social attitudes towards growing older. These attitudes frame the questions asked by science, the technological products developed by industry, the spaces in which we live, work and play, and the opportunities that are available to us. Many of the themes discussed in the roundtable – the importance of co-design, the challenge of digital exclusion, the value of physical activity and the dangers of social isolation – are not specific to older people. However, when placed in the context of an ageist narrative, they become problems of a different scale and nature. Addressing the Healthy Ageing Challenges cannot be done without addressing ageism.