

10 June 2009

It's never too late: a new collaboration to help older people keep fit and active

It is widely acknowledged that keeping fit and active in the later stages of life reduces risk of several diseases and protects against mental decline and dementia. This week sees the launch of the Avon Network for Physical Activity Promotion for Older People in the Community. The aim of the network is to produce 'best bet' policies for helping older people remain active.

The network is funded by the Lifelong Health and Well-Being Initiative, which is managed by the Medical Research Council. It is a collaboration of government agencies and charitable trusts that promote research into the quality of life of older people. The network brings together academics from the three main universities in the west country: Bath, Bristol and the West of England. It involves experts in public health, transport and urban planning, primary care, health psychology, health inequalities, social policy, physical activity and nutrition.

Dr Afroditi Stathi, Lecturer in the School for Health at Bath University who will lead the network, said: "This is a wonderful opportunity to get academics to work in close partnership with those who design and deliver physical activity promotion services. It's exciting that primary care trusts, councils and local charities want to work with us on this important project."

Evidence indicates that physical activity helps people maintain their independence and social networks. However, research conducted in several areas of Bristol shows that activity patterns of older adults are lower than recommended, and influenced by people's ability to get 'out and about' in local neighbourhoods.

Ken Fox, Professor of Exercise and Health Sciences in the Department of Exercise, Nutrition and Health Sciences at the University of Bristol led Project OPAL (Older People and Active Living), a forerunner of the Avon Network. He added: "It's becoming clear that activity for older people is not just about motivation. It can depend on characteristics of the locality such as availability of nearby services and shops, how useful and appealing they are, and safety. People in poorer neighbourhoods are less active than those in well resourced areas."

Graham Parkhurst, Professor of Sustainable Mobility in the Centre for Transport & Society, University of the West of England noted that: "The Bristol area is a very appropriate location for a network researching opportunities for active living. Bristol is the UK's first 'cycling city' whilst Bath is developing an innovative electric bike hire scheme but both cities have

some of the worst traffic congestion in the country. Sustainable travel opportunities need to be realistic options for citizens of all ages.”

The network will run for a year in the first instance and gather evidence from research, and from local and regional practice, to provide guidance on ‘best bet’ policies to facilitate activity in older people. A key outcome is a large collaborative grant proposal to the Lifelong Health fund that will help develop and evaluate physical activity programmes in the Avon region.

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Notes to editors:

For information about Project OPAL (Older People and Active Living) go to <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/enhs/opal>

For further information about the Avon Network for the Promotion of Active Ageing in the Community contact the academics leading on the project:

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