



**Older people building
better communities
through informal
community leadership**

June 2012

**Productive
Ageing Centre**

**National Seniors
Australia**

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Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

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FOREWORD

What leadership role do older people play in building better communities? What motivates older people to get involved in community development, and how do they come to be regarded as ‘leaders’? What skills do they draw on? These and similar questions lie behind this report.

The social and economic challenges created by Australia’s ageing population have prompted significant policy debate about productive ageing. Supporting the participation of older Australians is a key policy platform of all levels of government.

This study aimed to contribute to the debate by developing a deeper understanding of older residents displaying leadership in community action and community development. It examined the reasons older people became involved, what knowledge and skills they brought and the benefits they gained from participation. It also looked at barriers to participation and leadership, and how those barriers might be overcome.

The qualitative study was small and local, centered on an inner city community (‘Beacon’) with a diverse population including severely disadvantaged groups. The findings shed new light on community involvement and show how older people are leading the way in building a vibrant, active community. This local study suggests a broader point – namely, that the energy and initiative of older residents are valuable for any community.

Peter Matwijiw
General Manager Policy and Research
National Seniors Australia

June 2012

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The research team included: Deanna Davy, Rebecca McKenna, Mai Xuan Le, Alison de Pree-Raghavan, Lise Lafferty, Bec Reidy, Lindsey Napier and Margot Rawsthorne.

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INTRODUCTION

Supporting the participation of older Australians is a key policy platform of all levels of Government, with the aim of improving health and wellbeing. How older people are perceived and included in mainstream society will be a major challenge. Stereotypically, older people are portrayed as passive, unproductive, conservative, and unable to learn anything new or resistant to change (Kam, 1996). This portrayal is at stark odds with the attributes usually associated with community leadership. Kam (1996) challenges these stereotypes and demonstrates how older people are often in a better position to contribute to the community due to working less hours, identifying strongly with the local community and having extensive networks built up through years of residency.

Existing research on leadership

There is an extensive literature on leadership within the business and psychology fields. The characteristics of 'good' leadership often include being charismatic, being a good communicator, having a vision and being energetic. Most often leaders are characterised as 'individuals' (often egotistical individuals who have 'followers'). Hierarchical relationships and the notion of control are inherent in these understandings of leadership. The literature focuses strongly on leadership 'styles',

such as the three identified by Bamberger in 1967: democratic, autocratic and laissez-faire (Bamberger, 1967). These and other styles identified later are viewed as approaches or strategies individuals can use in a particular situation.

The concept of a 'community leader' is found in community development literature (see for example Taylor, Wilkinson & Cheers, 2008). Some writers make a distinction between formal and informal leaders, arguing that formal leaders are usually embedded in an organisational structure of some sort.

Informal leaders are the focus of this study, although the distinction between formal and informal leaders is more fluid than the literature suggests. Griffiths defines informal leaders as:

"people who are completely a part of the local culture and economy: who are distinguished from their fellows solely by their ability to offer advice which is respected, or speak on their behalf, or perhaps have that rare skill of being able to detect and present the group decision on matters which affect the group as a whole" (Griffiths, 1971, p. 81)

Taylor et. al. (2008) argue that community leadership arises not from formal positions but from having multiple networks across communities, having external links and having 'vision'.

Community leadership is consistently identified as an essential element of successful community development, although others have used the less problematic term of participation (see Tesoriero, 2010 for example). Griffith simply states that community leaders must be involved in development projects ‘if the programs are to be successful’ (1971). There is a gap in the literature on who these community leaders are, why they become involved in social action and how they gain status as ‘leaders’ (Onyx & Leonard, 2011).

This project explored the *how* and *why* of leadership that emerges from within communities and on which community development is so reliant. It focused on the process through which informal leaders develop and gain power or influence. Griffiths argues that an informal leader becomes recognised and recognisable due to the frequency and extent of their personal network. An individual’s ability to act as a community leader derives from and is dependent upon this pattern of relationships as well as the effectiveness of community infrastructure or system of procedures (Griffiths, 1971).

More recently a number of writers have focused on the network of relations that operate within communities to provide leadership. Warburton and McLaughlin (2007) identified the sometimes unrecognised ways in which older people from migrant backgrounds and Indigenous Australians contribute to their communities. They highlight the important role of Elders in the community passing down stories, culture and customs, which is a vital form of education for young people in a community. They found maintaining cultural knowledge was of particular concern to both migrant-background and Indigenous participants in their study. Their work described ‘lots of little kindnesses’ by older people to family, friends and neighbours, which they identified as informal volunteering (Warburton and McLaughlin, 2005). Other forms of participation were identified including general support to their communities, treating all people within the community as extended family members and being a support to younger people.

KEY TERMS DEFINED

This study defined key terms in the following way:

Leadership is used in this study to describe the actions of individuals rather than the characteristics of individuals. Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2007).

Informal community leader is used to describe individuals whose community involvement is self-initiated, multiple and not reliant on an external or formal appointment. They seek to influence decisions affecting the broader community through mobilising others to act. They are people in the community who help to develop and care for the wellbeing of the community.

Community development is understood as working in ways that create a fairer environment, where people are treated with respect, can exercise their rights and have opportunities in life. At a broader level, fairness creates a generosity of culture and society. Community development can

occur organically through civil society as well as within the formal community services sector.

Social action and activism are used to describe initiatives undertaken by or with local residents to bring about change of some kind. It encompasses activities instigated and embedded in broad civil society, rather than welfare programs delivered by agencies.

Formal volunteering is defined as “an activity which takes place through not for profit organisations or projects and is undertaken to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer; of the volunteer’s own free will and without coercion; for no financial payment; and in designated volunteer positions only” (Volunteers Australia, 2009).

Beacon is a pseudonym for the community in which this study was undertaken. To protect confidentiality all names and details have been changed throughout this report.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This project adopted a qualitative research design in order to explore the lived experiences of older community leaders. This approach complements large-scale quantitative studies on volunteering and participation (see for example, ABS, 2006). The value of a qualitative approach lies in the fact that it explores the 'how' and 'why' questions and enables the development of a more in-depth understanding. The current study describes *how* and *why* individuals come to be community leaders and active in community life. The study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Sydney.

The broad aim of this research was to develop a deeper understanding of older residents involved in community action and community development.

The specific research questions were:

- (a) Why do older people become involved in community action and community leadership?
- (b) What knowledge and skills do they bring to community action?
- (c) What new skills or capacities have they gained from participating in community action and community leadership?
- (d) What facilitates, encourages and enables their participation in community action and community leadership?
- (e) What are the barriers to the participation of older people in community action and community leadership?
- (f) How can these barriers be addressed?

The study sought participants who were:

- identified as a community leader;
- resident in Beacon area;
- aged over 55 years, and from both genders;
- Indigenous residents;
- culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) residents;
- from a range of age groups (55-64 years; 65-74 years and 75 years plus);
- from different socio-economic backgrounds, and
- active in a range of community issues (e.g. environmental, sport, business, youth, heritage and welfare).

This sample aimed to ensure a wide range of experiences and opinions were included in the study

but also to strengthen the relevance of the findings to communities beyond Beacon. The participants in this study are not necessarily 'typical' of older residents involved in community action and community development, but they encompass a broad range of experiences.

The participants were recruited via the Beacon Community Development Project and subsequent snowballing. This recruitment strategy aimed to include not only the 'known' or visible leaders in the community but also those thought to have influential relationships. Initially, ten older people were identified by the Beacon Community Development Project as being active in community activities and providing community leadership in Beacon over the past five years. They were catalysts as well as contributors to a wide range of events, social action groups and advocacy. When interviewed, they were asked to suggest other community members active or influential in the community. After the initial ten interviews specific strategies were used to recruit residents whose first language was not English, Indigenous residents and men to ensure the study moved beyond the bounds of the formal service system.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken in 2011 with 23 people from a range of backgrounds involved in community action in the Beacon area. Most interviews lasted for about an hour, although some went for much longer. One interviewer was bilingual, enabling the inclusion of Vietnamese-speaking women in the study. The interviews were analysed to identify recurring patterns and narratives, and the findings were tested through reflection and feedback from the research team and the participants.

This research is small and local in scale. It follows Sandercock's lead in searching the city for 'one thousand tiny empowerments' (1998). Caution should be used in generalising the findings from this research to other settings. The research does, however, provide general insights into the experiences of older people seeking to influence decisions affecting the local area through leadership on social action.

PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

All participants were connected in some way (either through residency or business) to the Beacon community at the time of the interview. Beacon is an inner city suburb with a village-like strip-shopping precinct. It is a diverse community with a rich history of community action. Beacon has a large number of Aboriginal residents as well as migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds. Resident accommodation has seen vast changes over the decades, with the area once being a thriving student hub with many young people establishing a squatters' community.

Currently, there are a large number of Housing NSW units within Beacon. It also has several pockets of

middle and upper-middle class neighbourhoods, thus creating a wide socio-economic community spectrum. Beacon is an inter-generational community, and this spanning of ages is noticeable along Beacon's main street, with primary schools and a retirement village situated only half a kilometre apart.

In total, 23 people participated in the study (19 were interviewed individually). As indicated in Table 1, the majority of participants were aged 56-75 years, although the youngest participant was 44 years (an Indigenous person) and the oldest was aged 81 years.

Table 1: Age Group

Age group	Male	Female	Total
44-55 years	1	2	3
56-65 years	4	4	8
66-75 years	4	6	10
75 years +	1	1	2
Total	10	13	23

The Beacon area is culturally diverse and specific efforts were made to include people from different cultural backgrounds, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Age Group

Cultural background	Male	Female	Total
Australian born	8	6	14
Born in English speaking country	-	2	2
Born in non-English speaking country	1	4	5
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders	1	1	2
Total	10	13	23

The socio-economic diversity of the area was reflected in home ownership, with eight participants currently living in Housing NSW properties. Most public or social housing tenants are low-income earners, often receiving income support.

FINDINGS

This section reports participants' responses to each of the key research questions.

Involvement in community activities

The participants described extensive involvement in community activities and social action. They had been involved in many local social actions in relation to community infrastructure over the years, including parklands, sporting facilities and community facilities. Most recently many of the participants were actively involved in the campaign to prevent closure of the local post office. Some were also currently involved in trying to influence the outcomes of major housing redevelopments (both public and private sector). Other social action was more small scale, such as improvements in seating and lighting, but as important to the overall amenity of the suburb.

Table 3 below documents the level and scope of social action among the participants.

It reveals that most were involved in more than one activity, creating a network of influence across the community. For most, their community involvement arose from opportunities or needs as they occurred, such as the proposal to close the local post office, NAIDOC celebrations, the establishment of a community bank or the sale of public lands. Some spent two days per week in community activities, although not necessarily every week. Over half of the participants' community involvement was through an existing community forum (such the Beacon

Club or cultural groups). However, about one-third of participants were involved in a wide range of forums (up to four) across the many differences in the community. Social action in Beacon was marked by emerging, fluid community forums.

Community leadership in Beacon is decentralised, diverse in its character and diverse in individual attributes. Informal community leaders could be found across all older age groups, in diverse issues across gender, ethnicity and class (including both labour force experience and housing status). Age did not seem to affect the extent or breadth of involvement. Female participants were more likely than male participants to be involved in a wide range of forums.

Why do older people become involved in community action and community leadership?

- (a) A sense of place and belonging was a very strong theme in many participants' stories about their community involvement. The suburb was crisscrossed with networks creating connections, and belonging to the Beacon community was a source of considerable pride. This varied somewhat by length of residence but even those participants who had not lived in Beacon for more than a few years strongly identified with the community. Participants from diverse circumstances and backgrounds described Beacon as vibrant, friendly and tolerant.

Table 3: Involvement in community activities

Groups/activities	Number of Participants
Beacon Club (mainly environmental and heritage issues)	8
Traditional voluntary activities (Chamber of Commerce, Church Op-Shop)	6
Youth activities/sporting clubs or groups	7
Cultural groups	5
Arts or music based activities	4
Co-ordination groups	3
Tenants' groups	3
Older Women's Group	2
Local advocacy groups (such as 'Hands off Beacon')	2
Neighbourhood support (informal)	2
School based activities (homework assistance, breakfast club)	1

“ Love it, absolutely love living here. I’m out every day and there are wonders to look at and to listen to and I like people and I have free time and some volunteer time, two half days a week. I mean, there’s so much happening in Beacon; people could be out every day, they’re going to something free, going to something physical, going to hear something, visiting something. There’s something on. Three times a day. ”

(Anna, 73 years, private homeowner)

“ You can walk down the street and bump into half a dozen people you know, turn around and come back and bump into half a dozen more. I mean, it’s, yeah, it’s just so lovely to have that interaction and that sense of community. ”

(Susan, 65 years, social housing tenant)

(b) For those participants living in public housing, immediate concerns (such as tenancy rights, housing quality and community discord) were catalysts for community participation. These participants were more likely to focus their activism more narrowly than those living in privately owned homes. In some ways their activism could be seen as arising from necessity, such as wanting to feel safer in their homes and on the street. Low incomes and poor health amongst social housing tenants made participation in Beacon difficult. They expressed a greater sense of frustration and anger about the effectiveness of their community involvement, describing it as a ‘fight’.

“ Well, I’ve lived there for [blank] years now. So, since I’ve been there, I thought, ‘well, got to do something about it’ ”

(Olive, 79 years, social housing tenant)

(c) Some participants linked their activism to the long activist history of Beacon from the 1970’s Green bans onwards. They viewed their work as continuing a social justice focus in the

community. Among many participants this social justice focus was expressed as care for both the local environment and local people. These community actions were marked by a desire to have a say on the decisions that affect their and other local people’s lives. For some participants the ‘winning’ of these fights was not as important as working together, having a say and ensuring community input.

“ You trust people and that’s another big thing. I believe that you stand up and say something at a meeting or a community meeting and you’ve got to believe what you say and you’ve got to believe in the people that you’re doing stuff with. So it’s all a matter of trust too. [James] worked with us on the committee for the library, he was involved in the chamber at the time and he’s one of those people that networks and you have a problem or you have an issue he’ll say “I know someone” and people do things. ”

(Peter, 63 years, private home owner)

(d) The strip shopping area of Beacon and the local businesses clearly played a part in the creation of this sense of community and belonging, as the following quote reveals.

“ Our local fruit and veggie place, they’ve been there for 70 or 80 years. When I was really ill when I first came to Beacon, I’d phone them up and I’d say, whatever you have on special, fruit and vegies on special and whatever’s in season that’s good and they’d bring it to me in the van. They’d come in, plonk it on the counter top, they’d unpack it for me. The chemist next door, different chemist now but the one we’ve got is lovely, you could ring him up and say can you bring my medications up please and can you pick up a bag of oranges and he would. So I’m loyal for that reason and a lot of that goes on in Beacon as well. ”

(Susan, 65 years, social housing tenant)

- (e) A small number of participants explicitly described their involvement as ‘building of social capital’ whilst others described their work as ‘building a sense of community’. Bonded social capital was evident in tenants associations and with neighbouring public housing tenants. One participant, for example, spoke of encouraging her neighbour to call Housing NSW about a maintenance problem, offering to help with making phone calls and writing letters; she regularly accompanied her neighbours on visits to the Housing NSW office ‘for support’.
- (f) Participants were also keenly aware of the differences within the community and the need to build bridging social capital. Bridging social capital makes links to people who are different – people from different socio-economic background, age, generation, ethnicity or culture (Woolcock, 2000). Beacon is marked by its diversity in all these realms. In the quote below the diversity of the community, rather than being seen as a risk, is seen as an asset.

“ You’ve got several Beacons and they inhabit a different world, completely different world. Now we’ve got millionaires through to homeless. But the people who live here like living here because of the diversity; it’s not a homogeneous community. And it’s a very tolerant community... ”

(Anna, 73 years, private home owner)

The participants in this study built and took part in community infrastructure that sought to bridge across differences in the community. This community infrastructure was often supported by formal services, although resident involvement was paramount. Examples included: participants who created relationships with young people, through mentoring, educational support and committees; having free events open to all; supporting cultural events such as NAIDOC; and forming community coalitions that bring people together.

“ So there is a split in the community, there is, as I said it’s a bifurcated community and it’s important to work together across that. And part of it, an important part of that is actually doing things for the kids. ”

(Virginia, 60 years old, Aboriginal woman, social housing tenant)

- (g) The participants were also active in building ‘linking social capital’. Woolcock (2000) describes linking social capital as the relationships that people have with those who are in power. Repeatedly throughout the interviews participants spoke of their involvement in community action aimed at influencing decision-making, often in coalition with formal services. This ranged from the work to change bus routes, to participating in development approval processes, to working with local police on common issues, to working closely with local government on a wide range of social and economic issues. Most participants knew the local members by name and certainly felt able to raise issues, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds.
- (h) Parental values, employment backgrounds, particularly involvement with unions, and previous experience of ‘doing it tough’ were three other factors behind community involvement. For some participants all three factors were influential, whilst for others it might have been only one of the factors. There was a very strong sense that becoming involved at a local level reflected deep-seated and life-long values. For a few participants these values arose from religious beliefs but for most they were more a reflection of a commitment to ‘fairness’ and wanting to contribute to a welcoming community.

“ Well I originally went to [service] because I had a few problems and I'd heard that [it] was very good and I went there and I found [it was] very good and then I became a volunteer there. I stayed there for years. I was working mainly with people coming in from the street. I understood where they were coming from and I knew what they were talking about. I was proud to be able to do that because I'd been helped in that way and I wanted to help others. ”

(Pat, 64 years, social housing tenant)

“ Horrid. By definition the two [words] shouldn't go together. ”

(Pedro, 81 years, private home owner)

“ I'd just say I was a volunteer, yeah. I was a bit taken aback when the term “community leader” came at me, and I think activist carries some negative connotations, so yeah, I'd just describe myself as a volunteer. ”

(Frank, 56 years, social housing tenant)

“ My parents did lots of charity work so my dad used to pick them off the street - the homeless people and bring them home for food and all that. My mum used to tell us stories about him so I grew up in a family like this and so we would always give and we never ask for anything in return, we don't care. I think I have got it from my parents because you see your parents what they do and you feel like you have to. ”

(Peg, 59 years, private home owner)

“ Whoa! Not – To tell you the truth, if it was only me to whom you were talking, community leader is a little bit uncomfortable. Because I'll think, who do you think you are? You like to think you're the boss? No. Well, I'm only an organiser here. I'd rather be called an organiser. A community leader is like being called, no offence, but a pimp. So organiser would be better... We've got to make sure that we're working together without the word, 'leader'. ”

(Dave, 44 years, Aboriginal man, tenant)

“ I have been a person all my life through employment mostly that's been very much involved with unions you see. I always believe in fighting for peoples' rights and I saw wrong and I wanted to right it. ”

(Frank, 56 years, social housing tenant)

“ I don't consider myself as a leader at all. I'm more likely a spear-carrier, a volunteer. ”

(Susan, 65 years, social housing tenant)

‘Community leader’ – a contentious term

The participants' extensive networks and participation in various community forums lead them to be identified as community leaders, firstly by the Beacon Community Development Project and then by their peers. However, no participants felt comfortable with the concept and term ‘community leader’. Many rejected the notion of being a ‘community leader’. The participants were quite critical of the concept of leadership and argued instead for less prescriptive language such as ‘volunteer’ or ‘active community member’.

The rejection of the label ‘community leader’ suggests a discomfort with the individualistic, charismatic leader with ‘followers’. Repeatedly through the transcripts participants reflected on the implications of the label, particularly the notion of ‘leading from the front’ or imposing one's will on others. Participants were highly reliant on networks in their activism, suggesting that within Beacon a form of collective community leadership operates.

What knowledge and skills do they bring to community action?

The study explored the relationships between previous work experience and current community activism. Earlier research (Atchley, 1995) indicates that older people's participation in formal volunteering is a continuation of previous work experiences. Participants in the current study identified both formal and informal knowledge and skills they brought to their participation in social action.

The formal knowledge and skills included teaching, government, policy making, heritage issues including architecture, historical documentation, public service, community arts and music. Whilst the majority of these participants had previously been employed in these sectors, others, particularly those involved in community arts and music, developed their skills outside the formal workforce.

Most participants spoke of the importance of informal skills such as relationship-building, concern for others and a desire to break down isolation. Whilst more formal skills based on previous occupations are most commonly identified as the 'contribution' older people can make to communities, these informal skills appeared more likely to bridge across differences.

“ It's always useful to have a skill set, it depends on what the issue, project, exercise is, different skills will be required. They will always vary. ”

(Ros, 73 years, private home owner)

“ I used to be a primary school teacher, primary trained so there's a bit of knowledge behind it as well and not knowledge so much as exposure to so many different kinds of children who all learn differently so that opens your mind up. ”

(Peg, 59 years, private home owner)

“ I help my neighbour, even if it's only sweeping her yard, doing little messages for her, something. On Fridays, every now and again I'll collect the [unsold] bread with someone else or help pack it and I deliver to a few of the older people around here plus for myself and it's free. So that's just little things like that and a lot of us do little things. Just generally trying to be a community minded person, even if it's only as small as saying g'day to someone in the street. ”

(Susan, 65 years, social housing tenant)

The values of a fair go or social justice were common amongst most of the participants. This resulted in participation in particular forms of community activities based on a value-fit. One participant, for example, spoke of what could be described as racist, unjust, community activism in relation to the Vietnamese residents on the housing estate.

“ A friend was telling me someone was complaining about too many Vietnamese's on the housing estate. And someone called a big meeting at the Town Hall and a lot of the Australians knew what they were going on about [and] didn't go because they're idiots, you know, complaining about the Vietnamese. You know, they're our neighbours and [we] said we're not going, we're not complaining about our neighbours. ”

(Olive, 79 years, social housing tenant)

The Indigenous participants spoke of the importance of 'being there' for others in the community, particularly young people. They used art and music to create space for meaningful relationships to form. Both Aboriginal participants practised leadership in ways informed by their culture and life experiences. Virginia was involved in formal and informal mentoring of Indigenous young people. Her message to Indigenous young people was simple and blunt: "You have to keep yourself out of jail, you have to keep yourself out of court, keep yourself out of hospital because then your life is out of your hands." She described herself as 'shy', commenting that she was happy to contribute but never wanted to be in formal positions such as president or secretary.

Dave spoke of busking with his didgeridoo as a way of connecting with younger people in a non-threatening manner. He expressed concern about the gulf between adults and young people (lost to each other) and the need to create respectful connections. His involvement in the community was an effort to provide a positive adult role model for young people, particularly those whose parents struggled. Setting clear expectations of young people was important as a way of countering destructive behaviours. While he rejected the label of 'leader', Dave's informal community leadership drew heavily on his life experiences, his insight into Indigenous culture and a desire for a better future for Indigenous young people.

“ [Young people] are very temperamental sometimes, because they can read your mind faster than a horse can buck you off. You don't – like kids can sense fear about you too, not just animals. Humans can too. So [I ask], what's wrong with you, son? Or what's wrong with you, young lass? What can I do for you? Kids can ask questions nigh on til midnight. There's no time limit for them to stop asking questions. You've got to know your kids more than you know yourself, if you're working in a community, and you don't speak rugged to them, you don't speak obnoxiously, you speak normal to them. You don't speak 'little kid'. If you don't, they'll figure there's something wrong with you. I've been helping out the kids for years. And they call me 'Uncle' as a form of respect. ”

(Dave, 44 years old, Aboriginal man, tenant)

What new skills or capacities have they gained from participating in community action and community leadership?

With few exceptions, the participants did not become involved in community action to learn new skills or find employment, as is more common in traditional volunteering. They did not speak about new skills or capacities but about the benefits gained (both personally and within the community) from being involved in community action.

For most participants there were social and emotional benefits from participating in social action that appear likely to have a positive impact on their health and wellbeing (Clary et al, 1996). Making new friends and keeping connected with others was seen as an important benefit, particularly for those who were more isolated. Associated with this was the sense of belonging that came from participating and being involved. For others, keeping abreast of information about issues in the community, learning new information and sharing information was an important benefit.

Achieving outcomes gave many participants a great sense of pride and motivation to continue to be involved. These achievements and their active community participation enabled older people to keep feeling productive, particularly outside the more traditional sense of workforce participation or family caring roles.

“ Sociability. Contribution to others. Keeping my brain alive. Getting me out of 'sloth-ville,' which is very easy to do. ”

(Susan, 65 years, social housing tenant)

“ Well one [of the benefits] is to belong and I think that's terribly basic and you can belong to a community by being involved with it and [the network] is something that one can be involved with. ”

(Pedro, 81 years, private home owner)

“ Making the friends, yes, is important but not so much as seeing the achievement of things being done. Of what you have fought for being achieved. That's where I get the big buzz out of. ”

(Frank, 56 years, social housing tenant)

What facilitates, encourages and enables their participation in community action and community leadership?

For many participants, community involvement appeared to be an expression of deep-seated values. As such it was hard for them to identify factors that helped their participation. In general there was a sense that having 'more time' enabled community involvement, although not as unlimited as many had imagined. Between their community action, family caring and part-time work, many were in fact very busy. More time came with a greater sense of control or discretion about how this time was spent. Some participants identified family support as enabling their community involvement.

“ Now in retirement I have much more ability to shape what I do and shape my destiny and how much time we spend on various things in our lives, a balance of all of those. ”

(Ros, 73 years, private home owner)

Participants had various ideas about encouraging the involvement of others. Whilst many could identify specific ideas or strategies all recognised the challenge of 'getting people out'.

“ If you don't make an effort it's really hard, it's really hard to get people out and participating in a way that they feel comfortable with. It's really hard. And [the] other person has to do it and you have to put a lot of effort into [encouraging them]. It's not something mechanical, you have to have very particular strategies to get, to engage people. ”

(Anna, 73 years, private home owner)

Specific community engagement ideas identified by the participants included:

- community barbeques and low key social events;
- personal conversations;
- giving people specific tasks;
- acting as an example to others (telling others about what you are involved in);
- building confidence of others to be more involved ('just little steps');

- letter-box drops and word-of-mouth;
- taking time to get to know people and what they are interested in;
- don't overwhelm people – it puts them off;
- be aware of community conflicts;
- getting involved when you are young and encourage children at school to be active in their community; and,
- connecting others to your groups or activities.

Although they were aware of many strategies, participants were also aware of the need for authentic, continuous relationships to encourage participation.

What are the barriers to the participation of older people in community action and community leadership? How can these barriers be overcome?

The participants identified many factors that impede their own and others' participation in community action. In most cases these were expressed with considerable understanding rather than judgement. A few participants were critical of what they saw as 'laziness' among other residents, but most understood the many issues that might impact on someone's willingness and ability to participate in community life. Most of the barriers identified by the participants confirm previous research on community action.

Barriers included:

- Individual health (including mental illness) or caring responsibilities for others

“ But I got sick last year and I couldn't do anything because I couldn't use my hands, I couldn't stand up, I would pass out and I was always dizzy and if I go to the shops I can't do my shopping so I have to have somebody to help me and it was very hard. ”

(Liz, 72 years, social housing tenant)

- Bureaucratic processes, such as legislation, fees and insurance

“ What they should be doing is letting you do things that you want to do without charging you rent, insurance, everything else. It develops so much red tape that people in the community don't bother putting events on anymore. ”

(Susan, 65 years, social housing tenant)

“ They look at the TV news every night and they see alcohol related violence or domestic violence or anything down along that line and they just think well I don't want to get involved in that sort of thing. ”

(Olive, 79 years, social housing tenant)

- Lack of time due to other commitments (work and caring), which can result in burn-out and fatigue
- Lack of culture of co-operation, support and co-ordination

“ It's unfamiliar territory... the notion of working together in groups quite often with people you hardly know is foreign. I know in my own case for instance the first time I engaged in a cooperative way of people, I just, I didn't get it. I felt strange, and I made mistakes. So I understand why people have the impulse in a sense that they think it will be a good idea, but don't know how to do it, and don't know how to follow through. But when it comes to the actual first day you shrink away from it, because we're not, our society doesn't engender that sort of outlook. ”

(Frank, 56 years, social housing tenant)

Research undertaken in Scotland also identified a similar reluctance among people with less experience of exercising power to participate in times of change, expressed as 'not wanting to put your head above the parapet' (Rawsthorne, 2009).

For the participants from non-English speaking backgrounds, barriers were multi-layered, resulting in a strong disincentive to participate. These included the distance some people needed to travel to participate in cultural group activities, language concerns and juggling other commitments of work and caring. The challenge of enabling non-English speaking background residents to participate was also identified by a number of Australian born residents, who were unsure how to 'reach out'. Participants from specific cultural backgrounds tended to be involved primarily in activities for or of concern to their communities. The quote below illuminates the barriers facing residents (in this case Vietnamese) getting involved in broader community forums or action.

Participants were also aware of the specific difficulties facing those residents of lower socio-economic background. The interviews were undertaken at a time of much uncertainty about the future direction of social housing in New South Wales. Some participants identified fear and anxiety arising from this uncertainty as a potential barrier to becoming involved in community action.

“ I think there are many people who really struggle with their own needs, let alone be able to be open to and willing to participate. ”

(Anna, 73 years, private home owner)

“ Australians also very welcome our participation. However, I am sometimes afraid because I cannot speak much English, and that makes me feel uneasy. I feel I am isolated, so I am afraid of getting involved. Our people emphasise family; we pay more attention to family duties than to social activities. They are confused and anxious. They don't know where to begin, which is very important. ”

(Chau, 58 years, Vietnamese woman, social housing tenant)

A small number of participants also identified one other barrier, which may be specific to being older people – being labelled or feeling that they had nothing to offer. Some spoke about their struggles to encourage others to become involved failing due to what they viewed as a lack of confidence among older people. This lack of confidence, participants believed, reflected a sense of exclusion from educational, employment and other life opportunities. For example, some older women had not been in paid work or in work requiring writing skills. As a result they were reluctant to write letters to the local member or to help writing submissions for small grants.

Participants struggled to find ‘simple’ solutions to overcome these barriers. There was general acknowledgment that encouraging community involvement was an ongoing task. One of the best ways of doing this was to be an example or model through their own actions of the positive benefits of community involvement.

“ It looks dead simple, sometimes it can be extremely tiresome and very frustrating, but it’s that sort of stuff that builds communities. ”

(Ros, 73 years, private home owner)

DISCUSSION

This study sought a deeper understanding about the how and why of older people’s community leadership in social action. The overwhelming motivation for participant’s involvement in community action was the importance of place and community. Participants spoke with passion about Beacon, its people and their belonging to this community. Collectively these participants created a storyline, which was often traced historically, of Beacon as a vibrant, activist and diverse place. Care underpins the decisions of individuals to become involved, to participate and to lead. The informal community leadership practised by the participants was how they demonstrated and enacted this care.

Through linking informal community leadership to care we are able to broaden how leadership is conceived beyond traditional forms which focus on control. It redefines acts of caring (such as sweeping a neighbour’s yard and providing support to neighbours in their dealings with bureaucracy) as a form of informal community leadership. These acts of caring provide leadership on how the community works and reinforces the storyline of Beacon as somewhere people want to belong. Among the participants this care was embedded in life-long values such as social justice, a fair go and giving something back.

Community leadership by older people

Traditional texts on leadership focus strongly on the skill set or attributes of ‘effective leaders’. The informal community leaders identified in this study did not easily fit the image of ‘effective leaders’. Despite this, they clearly exercised influence within the community and motivated others to act. They demonstrated what Griffiths (1971) called ‘that rare skill’ of capturing the feelings of the community and communicating these to decision makers. They demonstrated an ability to mobilise others to action repeatedly, although not necessarily easily or always successfully.

Among the participants were the so-called “old-old”, women, Indigenous people, non-English speaking background people and social housing tenants as well as more ‘recognisable’ leaders. Their involvement in community activities and social action does not fit easily with traditional understandings of leadership, but showed the value of informal community leadership in building better communities. Non-traditional leaders (Aboriginal participants, CALD participants and social housing tenants) were very wary of assuming hierarchical authority or control of others, based on their life experiences of being subjected to this authority.

This study suggested that within Beacon there is a diversity of skills, expertise and experiences among residents. It is home to a significant number of retired or semi-retired public servants, professionals and academics. Whilst these skills are instrumentally very important in project management, for example, participants saw these as only part of their

contribution. Building relationships based on respect, trust and inclusion were identified as equally important to the skill set of effective leadership in Beacon. The diversity of the community of Beacon demanded that effective leadership had to bridge across difference (by age, culture, economic circumstances) on an ongoing basis.

The participants' ability to become involved in community activities was constrained by health, available time and bureaucratic impediments. Ageism was an additional barrier faced by older residents, with some organisations failing to recognise the contribution they can make or the leadership they provide. Ageism combined with poverty was a significant barrier to involvement for social housing residents, although it was not insurmountable.

The participants in this study in general rejected traditional notions of leaders or leadership. Instead, whilst not formalising shared leadership, there was a sense of collective leadership across the community. The participants developed and maintained highly productive networks in and beyond the community that provided the foundation for their leadership. These networks sought to bridge across differences based on age, gender, race and class. For example, the Chairperson of the Beacon Club fostered networks with people outside their traditional social network, including social housing tenants, Aboriginal residents and young people. Another participant, a social housing tenant, knew all of the significant local politicians (Ward Councillors, Mayor, State Member and Federal Member). Formal services in Beacon have been instrumental in helping older residents get the skills and support they need so they can work and connect with the community, even during hard times.

The findings from this study showed that informal community leadership included care: care for neighbours, care for community facilities and care for the essence of community. This was particularly the case for social housing tenants excluded from more recognisable forms of community leadership. In this way leadership was about everyday action, not only attending meetings (for example). Likewise, the two

Indigenous participants enacted their community leadership through shared creativity. They sought through their art to open up spaces for connection to Indigenous young people but also to others.

The experience of Beacon suggests that these older, informal community leaders play a particularly important role in bridging across difference and the creation of bridging social capital. Their efforts to bridge, of course, are not always successful with community conflict occurring occasionally. At times the participants showed confusion about 'how to do this'. What is quite clear however is that conflict deriving from difference is not the predominant feature of life in Beacon. The deep-seated values of social justice, a fair go and inclusion created goodwill and commitment towards diversity.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to understand, document and celebrate the contributions of older community members of the Beacon community. In doing so we hoped to learn about what motivates community involvement, what benefits flow from community involvement and how we can support older people's continued participation in community life. Contrary to many of the doom and gloom predictions of Australia's ageing population we saw in Beacon a vibrant, active community lead by older people. Their involvement and leadership were important in building a better community.

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23 Torrens Street, Braddon, ACT 2612 **P 02 6230 4588** **F 02 6230 4277**
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