

# PREPARING TO GROW OLD TOGETHER

Victor Forrest

Talking about and planning for our old age is something many of us are reluctant to do. This paper discusses the beginnings and early work of a project within the Brixton Housing Co-op which involves members working towards addressing their own needs as they start to grow older.

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## Background

This paper describes how initially one, and then a group of members of a South London housing co-op, started working towards improving their organisation for older people. It is written by the member who initiated the project in response to issues facing the co-op's ageing population.

The main aim of this paper is to share the co-op's experiences of working together to achieve the following aims:

- improving member's chances of staying out of residential care for as long as possible;
- counteracting potential loneliness in later life and lack of positive day-to-day social interaction and support; and
- improving the quality of our relationships and support for our current, as well as future, wellbeing and enjoyment.

The paper discusses the learning and progress that have taken place in the project until May 2012. It also reflects on how living co-operatively can or could enable people to support each other into old age, what resources it can unleash, and what either hinders or helps this (both within and outside the Co-op). This may have lessons and messages for older people more generally who are living in the community or in care settings – and for those who support them.

## Key points

- To begin talking with others about the issue of ageing and how as a community we might help ourselves is the most significant action we have taken.
- Perhaps it is important for all of us to recognise that it is not being older that is a problem but being older in our current society; and that we can work together now collectively to start to make positive changes.
- Building a mutually supportive community is not easy. It was important that the people involved in this project were able to work together in a group and support, encourage and inspire each other.
- Social and fundraising events have led to more people becoming involved in co-op activities and to an increased level of communication and friendship. This has been key in helping us to start developing a mutually supportive community.
- We decided that we all have something to give, and in our lives we all need support of one sort or another. Taking this stance sidesteps the issue of the power imbalance that can exist between givers and receivers of health and social services.
- Effective creative communication between the people involved in this project, other co-op members and workers and useful outside organisations has been important.
- The project has moved us to a place where we should be better equipped to adapt to meet our future needs. We are also more comfortable with the idea of planning together for our old age.
- It might be important to remain open to positive changes that can happen incidentally as the project progresses. For example, while focussing on improving our co-op for older members and our ageing community, we also found ourselves looking at support in general for anyone who may need it and green issues.

## Our community

My name is Vic Forrest and I have been a member of Brixton Housing Co-op (BHC) for around 30 years. The flat I live in with my civil partner, Jack, is in a part of BHC that is known as the lesbian and gay community. Five terraced houses on one street and four on the street behind have been converted into 22 flats and one large enclosed beautiful garden, and all the people who live there are either lesbian or gay.

Back in the 1970s the buildings were squats that were inhabited by a group of gay male pioneers called The Brixton Faeries. They played a real part in early gay liberation, and lived communally in whole houses. Those who stayed living here after the group joined BHC in the 1980s opted for the houses to be turned into independent single-person units. We opened up our community to lesbians in the 1990s and have mostly housed lesbians since then, on the rare occasions when flats become available.

Groups of us meet in our communal garden from time to time for shared lunches, dinners, cups of tea and glasses of wine. For me the garden is full of memories of such meetings and the big parties and fundraising events we have held there over the years.

We are a mixed bunch of people. For example, we have a lawyer, an accountant, a shop worker, some people on disability living allowance and other benefits, a teacher, a scientist, a nightclub manager, artists, a housing services manager, a bus driver, an osteopath, academics, community activists, an art gallery manager, and a professional gardener. We come from a variety of countries and cultures and are a truly mixed race community of Asian, Afro-Caribbean, African and European people.

## How this paper came about

When I moved into our flat I was a young man, surrounded by young people. I'm now 57 and with a few exceptions most of us in our community are well into middle age and older. A few people have left our community for one reason or another over the years and two of our members died. Most of the people who move in don't move out.

The issue of us ageing together and what our future might hold is what brought the processes described in this report about. My own mother and the older parents of several of my friends are now supported by their sons and/or daughters (as well as

any services they receive). While there are a few people in the wider BHC with children there are not many, and as far as I know nobody in the lesbian and gay community has any. Philippa Hare, the JRF Programme Manager co-ordinating the *A Better Life* programme (of which this report is part), has written about this subject in her blog about supporting older 'gay people' (2012).

While I'm certainly not claiming that all older people who have children are supported by them there is no question that many members of BHC would not receive that type of support. In addition, services do not always meet the needs of service users or help people to live as independently as possible (Beresford *et al.*, 2005; Taylor *et al.*, 2007). Direct payments and benefits can also be quite meagre, and it seems that the future is not looking bright for the funding of these resources (Thornton, 2011).

A couple of years ago Fran Branfield, who was a member of a JRF programme team looking into the needs of older people, explained to me that, in order to remain independent and stay out of residential care, older people might need access to the following resources: good company or positive social situations and some help or support with different smaller day-to-day jobs. I decided to try to work with others to improve these resources in our co-op. JRF agreed to support me in writing this paper about what happened.

## **This paper in the context of JRF's work**

I looked into the research JRF has carried out about the needs of older people and some of the suggestions for positive responses that could help people to live better lives when they are older. First of all, it is important to note that as a nation, we are, on average, living longer than we used to. Also it looks likely that in the future we will have to pay more out of our own pockets for long-term care in old age (Collins, 2007) – which does not bode well for poorer people. In relation to this, JRF has taken an interest in alternative approaches to support older people, for example (and I could have mentioned several more), Burke, S. (2010) and Blood, I. (2010). JRF has also taken an interest in support for older people based on reciprocity and mutuality (Bowers *et al.*, 2011). JRF also recognises that older people face ageism (JRF Task Group on Housing, Money and Care for Older People, 2004). This report fits with JRF's interests in finding new, cost effective ways to support both the self-empowerment of older people and their wellbeing in general.

In the next part of this report I will explain how BHC was formed and how it works. This should help the reader to understand just how we can try to organise our own prospective care and support together.

## **Brixton Housing Co-op background**

Brixton Housing Co-op was formed in the 1970s. The co-op grew in size between the 1970s and the 1980s but later changes in government policy and the dramatic increase in house prices forced us to stop developing. The majority of our housing units are one bedroomed flats as we prioritised housing single people. At one time our members were predominantly white. For several years in the 1990s we employed a system of positive discrimination and only housed minority ethnic people when flats became available. Now, people get extra points in the shortlisting process for prospective new members if they are minority ethnic or disabled. At this point our membership is made up of people from many different races and cultural backgrounds. Up until the 1990s, in order to be housed, new members had to become active in the co-op. This meant that they had to attend co-op committees and lend a hand in running the organisation. In the 1990s we stopped having activity as a criterion for being housed and based our criteria solely on housing need. At the time the co-op's management committee felt it was unfair to ask new members to be active before being housed as they may have to wait a long time before a flat became available. They also thought (surprisingly) that there was not a lot to do in the co-op. For reasons that are not clear to us the number of active members across the whole co-op decreased throughout the 1990s and has remained at a low level ever since.

## **How the co-op is run**

BHC is a fully mutual housing co-operative. This means our members own all of our property collectively and are responsible for managing and maintaining it as social housing landlords (Co-operative Assistance Network). When I explain to people how the co-op works, they often make comparisons with privately owned property and ask the following questions: 'Can you sell properties if you want', and 'if your flat was sold would you get the money'? The answers to these questions are yes, we can sell properties if agreed and the co-op gets the money, to improve other properties, not individuals. Then people have said things like 'oh, so you don't own the property'. However we do. Nobody else does, and at any given time at least some people in the co-op are responsible ultimately for everything to do with the buildings, the rules

about how we can live in them and what our responsibilities are in relation to the co-op and each other.

We have different committees and task forces for dealing with different issues. We have a Management Committee made up totally of members. I am on the management committee and most of the main policies we work to within the co-op are either decided upon or approved there. However, some policies are approved at general meetings that all members are invited to (not that any members are excluded from attending any management committee meeting). Management Committee members are elected at our annual general meeting, to which all members are invited.

## **The beginnings of the project: an informal start**

A few weeks before meeting with JRF in March 2011 I began to mention informally, to the Management Committee and other members, my interest in looking at the issue of us ageing together and how we could organise to maintain our independence in old age. While people certainly didn't object to it, some members laughed or didn't seem too comfortable talking about the issue. Others were calm about it. It seemed to me that the subject was a sensitive one. One person, who later decided to invest a significant amount of time and energy into the project, told me that she was not going to get old. While there was an element of humour in her reaction, when I questioned her further she admitted finding it hard to think about the subject of ageing.

I met up at a local pub with a couple of active members, Nel Burke and Lesley Hilling, to talk about the idea of us getting older and what we might want to do about it, collectively. They were both interested in the idea and in broadening out the issue to look at how we could improve our co-op generally in relation to social, community and green concerns. At this meeting the concept of a new sub-committee or group within the co-op was formed. We decided at Nel's suggestion to call it the 'Navigation Group'.

At that first meeting, drinking beer together, we got excited about the prospect of building something new and interesting in our co-op, and we achieved a lot. Together, we explored what the Navigation Group could be and what our basic aims were. We decided that we needed to turn two floors of our rundown office building (a ground floor stuffed with objects members had put in there to store, and a first floor that was a meeting room) with a very small sink and work surface and

microwave, into a dynamic social space that would have a part to play in the wider local community as well as within our co-op.

We decided that, if we were to stand any chance of supporting each other better in the future across the whole co-op, what mattered most was to try to develop ways to encourage more of our members to become active in the co-op or just to mix together socially more. We mentioned that we could let other organisations who needed a space use our building. We also said that perhaps we could use the building to practice becoming greener within the co-op.

I kept coming back to the idea of us forming some sort of structure that would not only help us to share our skills as co-op members but also to lend each other a hand in a very practical and ordinary way. I talked about how, for example, some of us might end up needing a hand to put things on high shelves or to get our food shopping on some days. We agreed it would be a good idea to try to develop a system for helping each other out, but that was as far as we got at that time.

At that meeting we also talked about the idea of sharing food together, cooking for each other and perhaps pooling our resources to buy food in bulk to save on costs. We acknowledged that many of us could be struggling to make ends meet when we are older. Some of our members could be said to be living in poverty already.

## **The beginning of the Navigation Group**

Friends within the co-op felt strongly that the Navigation Group should be open to all members, so that everyone had a chance to participate. With the support of Lesley and Nel I advertised the group in the newsletter and waited to see who turned up. The first meeting was on 20 October 2011 and seven people came. Since then we have had a Navigation meeting once a month. Some new people have come since we started and we don't get everyone who is part of the group at every meeting. The group now includes four lesbians, three gay men, four heterosexual women, three or four mental health service users, one person with hepatitis C and cirrhosis of the liver, one person who is HIV positive, two black people, and one woman who has three children on the autistic spectrum.

In the next section of this report I will set out our achievements so far and what our next steps are likely to be.

## Navigation Group achievements and next steps

This paper explains where the Navigation Group got up to by May 2012.

We have gained approval from the Management Committee to make several changes to what used to be just our office building. One of these is to install a working kitchen. The idea came to me when I visited All Together in Dignity, a charity for people living in poverty, and was invited to join people for a meal there. The members had all paid a pound which covered the cost of the food and some of them had cooked a good meal in their lovely kitchen. Sitting down to this meal made me realise what a wonderful resource their kitchen was and prompted me to start the process of getting one in our co-op office building.

We have now designed the kitchen and expect that by the end of the year it will be in place and useable. This means that our members will have a neutral place to meet in and cook for each other. This has the potential to serve two main purposes: we can pool our resources and energy towards making cost effective meals for each other which could help us to eat better in old age, and it gives us the opportunity to socialise together at a local venue while sharing food – and socialising anywhere that is not local could become more difficult for many of us as we get older. We still have to deal with the issue of the kitchen being on the first floor and in time we will need to look into installing a lift.

Right from the start of the Navigation Group we have cooked for the meetings. This has been so successful that now members also cook for the Maintenance and Management Committees. To me it feels nurturing and caring. Here is a description of one of our meals, taken from an article Sue Opie wrote for our Winter 2011 newsletter:

“Pot luck dinner a great success” say BHC’s newest sub-committee ... “This is what we talked about over juice, sushi, roasties, pasta primavera, carrot cake, apple cake and satsumas”.

As part of a larger article, for the Winter 2011 newsletter, another member of the Navigation Group, Anthea Toorchen, wrote about the significance of the home cooked food and the difference between housing co-ops and housing associations.

“I had rushed to get to the meeting, so to be fed with Vic’s home cooked pasta and Les’s apple cake was a nourishing treat. There were some good ideas and people spoke well, like Yvonne, who made me feel proud to still be a member of our

co-operative. Despite living locally I don't often bump into her. And yet the very next day I met one of our alumni; Mathew Meadows. Apart from art our talk was of the qualitative difference between BHC's self governing community and that of an impersonal housing association".

We are continuing to transform the ground floor of the building into a social space and have now cleared out most of the objects stored there. Since the onset of this project we have held two fundraising events (a new activity in our co-op) there and a big party on the ground and first floor. Members have also hung pictures, painted the ground floor room and put up curtain rails.

Here is a description of the party one member provided for our New Year 2012 Newsletter:

**"Great music played by Diamond Simon, great food cooked by us all ... Dancing and a top prize draw in our almost finished co-op downstairs community space which needs a name!"**

Member who attended the BHC Xmas Party

The Navigation Group has been instrumental in the procedure for accepting new members and housing them. New members are now required to be active within the co-op before they can be housed. In addition several members have become active in the co-op again, either within the Navigation Group itself, or in relation to activities that have been generated by it. Since this project began I have met members that I have either not spoken in any depth with before or have not worked with for a long time.

We have made considerable progress with the idea of developing a more formal or structured way of offering day-to-day support to each other within the co-op. This subject is discussed in more depth in the next section of this report.

We have taken the issue of making the co-op greener forward, and now green issues are an agenda item at every Maintenance Committee meeting. We have had lessons in how to insulate the co-op building effectively and cheaply, and Navigation Group members have insulated the windows of the second floor meeting room and ordered reflective panels for the radiators. We have also made some recommendations to the Management and Maintenance Committee and our workers on how we can use less packaging and make less waste.

We have also changed our newsletter from a relatively dull document that just contained formal minutes from the Management and Maintenance Committees to a more lively and intimate communication between our members. Since the onset of the project we have had poetry, pictures, invitations to events, articles on different topical subjects and photographs of co-op community occasions in it.

Veronica Rago, a Navigation Group member, wrote the following on the importance of drawing together for support in her article entitled 'Being Involved' which was printed in the Summer 2012 Newsletter:

"These are hard times for everyone. All the more reason to come together rather than remain isolated and not have your voice heard".

Nigel Young, a member of the Navigation Group in his mid to late sixties, published a poem about ageing and power in the New Year 2012 Newsletter:

### Community

old man  
slightly bent  
the way old people can be  
skull supports his cap  
shoulders support his coat  
shopping trolley supports his hand  
frail legs support him  
he treads carefully  
as he moves across the cafe floor  
and quietly orders tea  
when he leaves pulling his trolley  
I notice a sticker on it  
it reads  
I Support The Signal Workers

Another co-op member and I have held a couple of open drawing and painting evenings in the co-op building. One of the members who came to one of these evenings said he dropped by because he was lonely. We have stopped doing these evenings for the time being until we can work out how more members can have keys and access to the co-op building. However, Navigation Group members plan to organise an exhibition of local art in the co-op building. We see it as the co-op hosting something that the local community can take part in.

Overall, we have come some way to building the community that we in BHC's Navigation Group think will serve us well in our old age. However, it seems that we all agree that the main problem we still face in our co-op is that many of our members remain inactive. Activity, and how it is needed to make a co-op work, was something of a theme in our last newsletter. It was also the focus of a significant amount of discussion in our last Management Committee meeting. Now this subject is embedded in our agendas we can continue to try to find positive ways to overcome the problem.

## Developing a structured support system for co-op members

The issue of setting up a structured system for supporting each other proved to be difficult to work out. Only about one-quarter of our members are 'active' (take part in the running and upkeep of the co-op). Those of us who are active can feel as if we do more than we really would like to. We were worried that if we started to offer extra support it would be the small amount of active members who would end up doing it, stretching themselves even further.

It is for this reason that members of the Navigation Group thought we could be setting up problems for ourselves if we were to undertake a survey in the co-op asking inactive members what they needed as older people, or in the future. We thought there was a danger that inactive members could expect even more from the active members. Through our own experiences and through speaking to our workers we ascertained that some people needed help with gardening, accessing benefits and the support of outside services, household tasks and small repairs, and, at times, shopping and meals. We had also been told by one of our workers that several of the inactive members were lonely and in need of emotional support and company.

We decided that we did not want to split the people who need support from the people who can give it. We felt that people might need support in one area and want to give it in another. In my opinion this was an important and very interesting decision, as it is completely different to the way that support is offered by services (Bowers *et al.*, 2011). We decided to ask people what support they would like to give and make this information available to other co-op members in a safe and helpful way.

After a while we started to wonder if perhaps we were working towards a 'time bank' model. I went to a meeting on how time banks are run at Time Banking UK. It helped us to understand what time banks were and how they usually work. The time bank principle is based on people offering support or services to other time bank

members. Then, they are entitled to ask for support or services back for the amount of time they have given (<http://www.timebanking.org/>). We didn't want our system to be too rigid. We felt that some people might give a bit more than they receive or receive a bit more than they give. However, at the same time we didn't want this to get out of control to the point where some people could feel pressured to give more than they want to and others were only taking, when they were capable of giving support themselves. We decided that we would like to manage our structured support system, as members, through the Navigation Group. At one point we also looked at extending the support network or 'time bank' into the local community outside of the co-op. However, we dropped this idea because we thought it might be hard to manage and we wanted to focus on building relationships and activity levels within the co-op and on tying interpersonal support relationships into the co-op's activity criteria. We aim to find ways to do this and present our ideas back to the management committee for approval.

One of the Navigation Group members, Cate Mason, drafted a simple form explaining the concept of supporting each other and asking members what support they might be willing to offer. Here is a statement from the form that explains the tone of our information gathering: 'Small acts of kindness are recognised as an important contribution to everyone's wellbeing. There are no limits at what we can achieve together.'

This form will be sent out with our next newsletter. We thought it was important to reassure people that, by giving information to us, they would not be put under any sort of pressure by other members.

This is what Cate wrote on the subject:

- The system is not yet up and running. It will take time to collect forms and establish a system. We will let you know when and how to access the scheme.
- All personal details will be kept strictly confidential. Any contact between participants, whether asking for or offering time will be mediated through the project co-ordinator.
- The project will not be an emergency service. It is about ways of offering support and comfort without feeling pressurised.

When we receive the replies we can look at how we might implement the support; for example, how we might put people in touch with each other and monitor the levels of activity.

## Sharing information and learning from others

In order to move forward with this project Navigation Group members have had meetings and made connections with a number of different people and organisations both within and outside of the co-op. JRF introduced me to Steve Lancashire, a member of bOLDER, an organisation of older people who were meeting to try and reframe what being older means and to tackle ageism. I found meeting him and other people like Dorothy Runnicles, who is also trying to raise awareness about ageism and make positive changes in that area, interesting. Members working together, to support each other and mould our co-op into an organisation that continues to meet our self-perceived needs, can only help us to tackle any attempted disempowerment we could face as older people in the community.

I also took part in a study day on co-housing for older people organised by JRF and learned quite a lot there that I passed on to other members of the Navigation Group. For example, it could be a good idea to keep one or two of our flats empty eventually so that supporters or carers could stay in them when necessary. It could also be a good idea to let some of our flats, on short contracts, to exchange students in exchange for them providing some support hours to co-op members. When these two issues were mentioned to the Management Committee it didn't seem like they were feasible, at this stage. However, we can always continue to look at issues such as where supporters or carers could stay and if we could work with volunteers in some useful way.

When I talked with other people at the study day about the issue of more intimate or intense care being offered by members of a co-housing project, I got the impression that nobody was planning to provide that sort of care formally. However, we had an interesting discussion about how co-housing members could support each other as advocates to campaign or argue for better services. The group I was in seemed to agree that any intimate or intense care would need to be given on a voluntary and informal basis, if it was offered at all. Perhaps when we have achieved our current aims we could put this subject on the Navigation Group's agenda for further discussion. One person at the study day said that if we wanted to we could turn BHC (or part of it) into a charity or our own care home of sorts; or sell some of the properties so that members could move to the seaside. I think this would make for an interesting conversation in the Navigation Group at some point. Another interesting point that was raised at the study day by the speakers at the event was that age peer groups work better than intergenerational ones. We will need to look at the reasons for this claim as people in the Navigation Group have talked about the importance of getting younger people into the co-op to keep it going and

possibly to provide some of the support for us as we get older. At the study day I was aware of how much experience of living and working together we actually have in BHC. This could be shared more with other people who are thinking of embarking upon co-housing projects.

At the study day I was aware of how white and middle class the people were as a group. At the start of this project JRF and I thought that within our co-op we might want to look at issues of diversity and how we will cope with that when providing support for each other as we get older. We haven't done this yet. Perhaps we should at some stage, but I would like to say that despite our co-op being an extremely diverse group of people, or perhaps because of it, I do not recall a single meeting where any members have felt the need to discuss problems or issues related to diversity (and I can assure you our co-op is not run in any way by white middle class heterosexual men, or women for that matter). It seems to me that perhaps we are so diverse that no one culture or way of being prevails. Presumably, racism and homophobia, for example, must exist in the co-op but I've not noticed it. Not once, in the entire time that I have lived in the co-op have I noticed any homophobia being directed at me by a member of the wider co-op, and when I asked Jack if he had experienced any racism in the co-op as a Chinese man he said he hadn't. We do have an equal opportunities policy and despite a reasonable amount of complaints being levelled at the co-op as an organisation and at individual members I do not remember the co-op as an organisation or any of our individual members being accused of breaking it. Perhaps, we have learned to deal with diversity because we are so completely immersed in it and we will carry on responding to each other's differences in a positive and constructive way throughout our old age. Or perhaps, if and when we do begin to talk about it, my current views will be regarded as naïve and we will find a whole can of worms waiting for us.

As a Navigation Group member I asked the Management Committee if we could buy and collect any reference books or other information that would help us offer support to our members who were struggling to get resources they need from organisations such as the social services and the Department of Health. The Management Committee also discussed members acting as advocates and advisors for each other. This discussion grew out of a practical situation where one of our members needed to argue with the local authority about funding to make adaptations to her flat so she could continue living there. Members of the Management Committee have supported this member, to some extent, in taking forward her argument and moving closer to getting the funding she requires. We see this as the first of many possible similar scenarios as we do not have any flats that are adapted for wheelchair access at the moment. As we are likely to need

more accommodation with wheelchair access or without stairs we responded to an enquiry from Lambeth Council asking us if we were interested in buying some houses in Camberwell from them. At this stage we are not completely sure if we want the houses but we have told them that we are interested in finding out more. In addition we plan to keep up to date with local services and organisations within the borough that can provide support and advice to our members. Our housing manager has already made positive links with an organisation that provides counselling and practical support for people who are in debt and another organisation that supports people who are compulsive hoarders. I have recently referred one of our members to a disability advice service and another to experts on funding for building adaptations for disabled people.

With all of the changes going on in the co-op and a completely new group meeting every month it has not been easy to maintain communication between the different groups within the co-op and our workers, but we have done our best. What this has meant in practice for some of us members and our workers is that we have had quite a lot of work to do around keeping each other up to date and making decisions outside of meetings.

## Reflections

If this project goes well over time I believe we should be providing at least some of the support we will need in later life – putting us in a position where we are more likely to have a better quality of life in the future. Now that the Navigation Group is in place and our members, including myself, are more comfortable with the idea of planning together for our old age we can keep adapting to meet our future needs. Hopefully, and perhaps most importantly, we will be able to ensure that at least some of our members stay in their own homes within a community they have been part of for longer than they would do if BHC members had not worked together and started this initiative.

This report has been about one specific organisation and how we have begun to respond together around the subject of our ageing. However, in the following part of this report I have attempted to draw out lessons from our work for any older people, who are living in the community or care settings, and the people who support them.

Bowers *et al.*, have explained in their JRF paper on ‘...older people’s experience of support based on mutuality and reciprocity’ (2011:1) the importance of recognising what older people have to offer. This is how they put it:

“There is a great deal of interest from older people and their families about the concept of mutual support, and enthusiasm for finding out more about how to make it happen...older people with high support needs are still largely perceived as people ‘in need of support’ who need to be ‘taken care of’ – rather than as citizens with rights, responsibilities and contributions to make. In reality this is an extremely diverse population spanning different generations, communities, groups and individuals, with widely different experiences, expectations, aspirations, needs and gifts, talents, skills, networks and resources to offer (2011:5).”

Navigation Group members came to the conclusion that in most circumstances we all have something to give, and in our lives we all need support of one sort or another. This led us towards a less usual model for support, one that sidesteps the issue of the power imbalance that can exist between the givers and receivers of social and health services (Taylor *et al.*, 2007). Perhaps other people in different settings could consider ways to work away from the power imbalance and support people to give as well as receive support, if they wish to.

While fully mutual housing co-operatives are unusual there is nothing to stop individuals or groups of interested people working on trying to improve the support local people could offer each other in any community. People on housing estates or in villages or in any other neighbourhood could try to find out how to do this and what would work for them and their community.

Our focus was on building supportive social relationships between us. In the report of a JRF project about what older people with high physical or mental support needs have said they want, the authors claimed that participants really valued their interaction with other people and their relationships (Katz *et al.*, 2011). We, and other early starters like us, are in a great position to develop the quality of those relationships over a considerable period of time. In the same report the authors stress the importance of good quality time spent with participants:

The quantity and quality of time spent by formal carers and others made a significant impact and helped paid carers to understand the person and how they wanted tasks to be done (Katz *et al.*, 2011:3).

However, it is hard to develop a mutually supportive community (even inside a housing co-operative). We don't live in a society that works like that very often. It takes a certain amount of imagination and positive thinking to be involved in a project like the one described in this report and some people might feel right from the start that the whole exercise is pointless idealistic dreaming. However, without dreams and imagination nothing new happens and as Patricia Chambers said on JRF's recent Change in Action Programme, 'good and worthwhile changes don't come easily'. I think it is really important for any people who want to take a similar path to us to bear this in mind. Navigation Group members have encouraged each other.

I think that perhaps the most important and significant action we have taken has been to begin talking with others about the issue of ageing and mutual support in general and how as a community we might want to help ourselves. It's the idea that perhaps we can face up to our ageing and do things together to help ourselves that some of us have found inspiring. Other groups of people could do this. It's not rocket science. It's just about understanding the concept and having the will to do it.

It has certainly helped that we have had social and fundraising events. These have led to more people becoming involved in co-op activities and to an increased level of communication and friendship (to some extent). Just forming the Navigation Group has led to more people becoming involved in co-op meetings and the development of new supportive friendships. The people in that group have offered support to each other outside of the group.

Members of the Navigation Group have encouraged each other to keep recognising the changes we have made. We might not have got everyone in the co-op involved but when a little bit more of it happens it's good to recognise that it wouldn't have happened if we hadn't started this project and continued to work on it. I would say to other people that it is important to be focussed on what has or could happen rather than on what isn't working yet. Every little helps.

Perhaps it is important to be open to the positive changes that can come incidentally from a process like the one we have been involved in and go with them. At the start of this project I had no idea that we would choose to work together on green issues or put our main focus into developing our community and encouraging people to be active.

After becoming involved in this project I have begun to think that perhaps it is not ageing that is the problem so much as ageism and the denial of the idea that (if we

are lucky) we will all live to be older people. It is important for all of us to recognise that it is not being older that is a problem but being older in our current society; and we can work together now collectively to start to change this.

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## About the project

The Brixton Housing Co-op have recently started working towards improving their organisation for older people. Together they aim to: improve their chances of staying out of residential care; combat loneliness; promote positive day-to-day social interaction in later life; and improve the quality of relationships and support for (current and future) wellbeing.

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## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This *Viewpoint* is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the JRF.

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