
NEWS FROM RSA WORKING GROUPS

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Regional Studies Association Seminar Series on Demography and Ageing

Seminar Two London 25th May 2004

The second seminar of the Regional Studies Association's Working Group on the regional dimensions and implications of demographic change and ageing was sponsored by Age Concern England and was held at the Ibis Hotel, Cardington Street, London NW1. The seminar attracted 25 delegates who came to hear speakers from five countries (Finland, France, Ireland, Scotland, and Spain) examine demographic ageing strategies and policies from the perspective of their country. The morning began with Richard Baker of Age Concern England providing the context for the seminar. Richard referred to developments at the European level, especially the 3rd Cohesion Report published by the European Commission (February 2004), which identifies the ageing of the population as one of the four key drivers to cohesion policy and proposes performance indicators for the 2007-13 European Social Fund linked to:

- the promotion of active ageing;
- the promotion of life-long learning.

Richard also described the Regions for All Ages research programme that Age Concern England and the English Regions Network co-sponsors. This work programme (www.ageconcern.org.uk/regionsforallages) aims to highlight the importance of population ageing to the economic and social development of the English regions.

After Richard's opening remarks the morning session consisted of three presentations. Jess Barrow Head of Policy and Public Affairs with Age Concern Scotland focused on policy developments relating to demographic ageing since devolution. She noted that Scotland faces one of the greatest demographic changes in Western Europe. Net out-migration and a declining birth rate, combined with increased longevity, means that Scotland faces significant demographic challenges. The political response has been focused upon encouraging younger people to stay in Scotland and encouraging greater immigration, but little has been said about the positive contribution of older people. The public policy focus of

older people has been on issues around care, transport and heating – all issues which position older people as passive recipients of resources. The Scottish Executive has established the Older People's Unit, but this is within the Health Division, an indication of the positioning of older people's issues. There is a need to broaden the public policy debate to recognise the economic contribution of older people as workers, carers, and volunteers; and as consumers.

Phil White of Edinburgh University then presented the results of one piece of research commissioned by the Scottish Enterprise that he and Wendy Loretto have undertaken. They examined the position of older workers in the Scottish Labour Market, against the background of changing demography, and imminent legislation on age discrimination in the labour market. They have examined barriers to employment faced by older workers, such as health, work experience (skills and qualifications), willingness to work, availability of jobs, the role of the state and employers. Their research involved a survey of employers and older adults (currently in paid work, those currently unwaged, either receiving Job Seeker's Allowance or on Incapacity Benefit). Their research involved addressing supply and demand side issues, and found that geography matters, with economic activity of the over 50s higher in rural areas than in urban areas, along with a variation in the helpfulness of Jobcentre advisers. One of their key findings for employers and the impact of the age discrimination legislation in 2006 relates to retirement policy, with larger companies emerging as more inflexible than smaller companies, with their less rigid retirement policies.

The final speaker before lunch was Didier Bésingrand of the University of Angers. Didier explored how a natural disaster has caused deep reflection by politicians and the public into the situation of older adults in France. He began by looking at the French constitution of 1946, of the Fifth Republic, which states that: 'the protection of health, security, rest and leisure, especially for children, mothers and the elderly' as being most important. He then referred to the heat wave of the summer of 2003,

which adversely affected mortality rates for older French people, during which national and local administrations made political and administrative mistakes, with blame thrown at families for 'abandoning' elderly relatives. The administrations were totally overtaken by the unprecedented sanitary crisis. Subsequently new laws have been passed, and studies undertaken which revealed that the non-existence of alert systems, the lack of coordination between the different actors, as well as the incapacity of retirement homes all contributed to the higher death rates and suffering of vulnerable older people.

After lunch we had three further presentations. Petri Kahila, of the University of Helsinki presented a review of national policies to older adults, and local services available to them. Petri began by providing a demographic overview of Finland, which is a nation getting greyer slowly but surely, but peripheral areas have an older age structure than other areas. The general aim of national and local policy is to support older people to live independently for as long as possible. He also described research into flexible lifestyles, which includes the use of summerhouses, which is opening new economic possibilities for some local areas.

The discussion then moved to Ireland, which has a younger age profile than some EU countries. Louise Richardson of the Older Women's Network (OWN) Ireland noted that almost half of Ireland's older adults live in rural areas, and she examined the evolution of policies to older adults in Ireland since partition, Louise drew attention to the Irish Constitution, which has strong statements about the role of the family, and even though there are some state services, the voluntary sector plays a very important role in service provision. There remains a reluctance to use these services as it is felt by some to reveal that the family is not providing what it should for its older members.

At the time of the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, social policy in Ireland was informed by 19th century British policy and a uniquely Irish mixture of independent activity by families, voluntary organisations, religious orders and charitable trusts. In 1965, the Minister for Health set up an interdepartmental committee to examine the problem of care of the aged and to recommend improvements in terms of income maintenance, housing, health and welfare services. The *Care of the Aged Report*, published in 1968, marked the beginning of dramatic changes in health and social welfare policies for older people. In 1988 *The Years Ahead, A Policy for the Elderly* was produced by a working party at the request of the Minister of Health. This report reviewed the implementation of the *Care of the Aged Report* and made its recommendations on 'society's

obligations towards its elderly citizens, tempered by the economic realities of the times in which we live'. It showed a dramatic shift in attitude towards older people with the emphasis on supporting them to remain healthy and independent in their own homes.

In 1997, *The Years Ahead Report: A Review of the Implementation of its Recommendations* was produced by the National Council of Ageing and Older People, followed in 1998 by a health promotion strategy for older people, *Adding Years to Life, Life to Years*, which concentrated on principles and emphasised the need for older people to be part of the decision-making process. This strategy also recognised the unique demographic situation in Ireland where the proportion of older people in the population had remained static since 1971 unlike most other EU countries. While life expectancy for young people in Ireland compared favourably with other EU countries, life expectancy at age 65 for both men and women in Ireland was the lowest in the EU. The strategy therefore focussed on a programme to promote healthy ageing. The issues are now recognised, strategies are being produced and reviewed, and voluntary statutory partnerships are being regularised. But, despite the many excellent recommendations and the increased prosperity of the country, policies are slow to be implemented. Ireland has not taken advantage of its unique demography of ageing to learn sufficiently from its EU neighbours nor has its policies for older people kept pace with the rapidly changing social fabric of the country.

The final presentation was by María Luísa Marrugat, of the Asociación Multidisciplinaria de Gerontología, Barcelona, in which she described the situation of the elderly in Spain today. Specifically, she stressed the differences and inequalities between elderly generations and the background that has influenced this situation, including the present framework of social policy. Up to three generations comprise the elderly, each with very different expectations. Therefore, first we need to make some historical, cultural and political references in order to understand the complexity of the elderly situation today; these include: migration from rural to industrial areas and employment experience; the heritage of the civil war; changing to a democratic regime; and the traditional cultural and moral roots of the position of older people in family structures. She drew on official statistics and from *The Observatory of Elderly Persons*, highlighting differences and inequalities by gender and age in: health, education, work, social benefits and living conditions.

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