

Should we all look to change travel habits earlier rather than giving up driving when we get old?

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A major UK's report looking into the travel habits, needs and issues surrounding driving in old age has found that older people have a mixed range of views to changing their habits and or opting to use other modes of transport. The report reaches some predictable conclusions about loss of independence and worries about isolation if people live in remote areas. However it examines the potential of an about turn in travel habits earlier in life that could help people avoid some of the 'withdrawal' symptoms like depression and loneliness.

A thinkpiece written by Dr Charles Musselwhite from UWE Bristol for

the International [Longevity](#) Centre and the British Society of Gerontology has already started to make waves in the right places.

The report published in November will be highlighted on the International Longevity Centre website from 15 December and has already been launched at a debate at the House of Lords by representatives from the Department for Transport, RoSPA, Parliamentary Council for Transport Safety, Age UK and the Driving Standards Agency.

Lead researcher Dr Charles Musselwhite from UWE Bristol says, “People need to be mobile accessing daily services and shops and to socialise. But travel is also about maintaining independence, status and image, access to life beyond the home, a way of engaging with nature and seeing the world.

“The car has become the dominant vessel of use for people from all walks of life, allowing these needs to be met with perceived minimal hassle and financial commitment. But as some [older people](#) give up driving for health or safety reasons, if not properly prepared they can face depression and a poorer quality of life. However, this is not the case amongst all older people.

“The challenge to society is how we can help older people maintain a good quality of life while reducing car use or indeed eliminating the need to drive altogether. And an important key to this is to start preparing for the changes by altering travel habits whilst still young.”

The report found that people who do well when giving-up the car are those who have practical and emotional support but it highlighted that society as a whole has a role in taking responsibility in helping older people when they have to give-up driving.

Successful giving-up driving is also characterised by those who have spent a long time over the process, gradually reducing driving and trialling different modes.

Dr Musselwhite continues, “There is a need to raise awareness of the potential need to give-up driving at an earlier stage of later-life because individuals who reduced car use from much earlier in life and were multi-modal found giving up less painful.

“We believe that the government should continue efforts aimed at reducing our dependence on use of cars. The raising of the retirement age and changes in working practices will mean future generations of this age group are more likely to work than ever before bringing to the fore a need for early contemplation and trial of alternative transport.”

Some ideas that help in the process of giving up driving include refocusing on the good social activities that can be enjoyed in local communities yet the researchers concede that a society that champions hypermobility prizes it above non-movement and its associations with old age, [depression](#) and death is counterproductive in this sense.

People are moving to promote their vitality and their youthfulness. But, those that re-discover a life closer to home tend to be more satisfied than those who are still looking further afield.

Other findings point to the importance of older people being connected and using technology and computers to fulfil some tasks like ordering heavy shopping items over the internet.

The free bus pass in the UK for over 65s has allowed greater use of the bus but service reductions for those in rural areas in particular have alienated some people from public transport.

Other ideas include Buddy systems where experienced public transport users accompany less experienced travellers should be established. Expansion of Community bus service should be to a wider group of older people.

Dr Musselwhite concludes, “What is really important is to recognise this as a problem and creating a transport environment conducive to older people including measures to encourage cycling and walking amongst older people. ”

Older people may actually be just be the first group in society who are responding to similar issues that wider society will need to address in terms of reduced travel in light of the challenges of peak oil, rising fuel costs and climate change. Hence, there is a need to assess what works well for older people and how far this might be further applied to other age groups and generations.

Provided by University of the West of England

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