

Insights from case studies into the role of politics in English elderly care services

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Marked pressures on local elderly care services in England existed before the global crisis of financial markets. With a general election expected to be held in May 2010, elderly care services recently re-appeared high on the national political agenda. Although the three main political parties agree that urgent action is required on elderly social care services and their financing, they disagree on what action is required. The nature of elderly care services is considered to reflect and be part of ongoing negotiations between citizens and the state. This paper reports on the preliminary findings of case studies of English local authorities, especially the four local authorities that, for whatever reasons, chose to set either the most or least restrictive criteria for access to their elderly care services. These decisions were made before the global crisis of the financial markets that could increase local authorities' difficulties in financing elderly care services at a time of generally increasing demand. Interviews with some local politicians, documentary evidence and media reports provide some evidence about the local policy context and local-central government relations. However, this research mainly uses in-depth, individual interviews of local residents aged over 50 to explore their political experiences and understandings, and, in particular, the possible relationship between their political activities and accessibility of local elderly care services. This research is linked mainly to the literatures on political participation and on relations between policy and political behaviour.

Key Words: older people, politics, social care policy

Introduction

Public services in England face years of financial cuts and restrictions. Local government has already experienced the challenge of working under a system of ongoing performance monitoring and assessment, alongside central governments' expectations of councils altering their ways of working to generate efficiency savings and having only small increases in council tax (a local tax). Specific direction has been given about making major changes in the provision of social care services for older people. Councils are expected to work in partnership with the health service, local businesses and not-for-profit organisations. Furthermore, councils with responsibility for social care services (CRSS) are expected to lead and monitor delivery of these services. Thus these services are operated in and developing in a challenging and dynamic organisational context in which various types of politics will continue to play an important role.

This paper is based on preliminary analysis of some of the findings emerging from an ongoing empirical research project investigating the politics of ageing in England.

Reported local variations in political participation, the distribution and characteristics of the population of older people (aged 50 and over) (e.g. Parry *et al*, 1992; Pattie *et al*, 2004), and access to and quality of social services for older people have long been recognised to provide a means to assist with exploring this complex topic .

Within the English context, there have been a series of research projects exploring aspects of geographical variations associated in some way with politics. Many studies have focused on using aspects of politics as potential explanatory factors for local variations associated with public service provision. Projects have typically adopted a quantitative approach. For example, Alt (1971) investigated correlations between county borough expenditures in England and Wales in 1958-1968 and variables including 'party control' (operationalised as the proportion of council seats held by the Labour party) and 'party competition' (operationalised using a 'competition index') (pp. 51-2). Alt recognised that these variables were inadequate for his purpose, he advocated using partisan control in other comparative studies of local politics (pp. 60-2).

Duke and Edgell (1986) conducted comparative case studies of two districts in Manchester, England. One district was represented by a Conservative MP and the council was controlled by the Conservative party. While in the other district both the MP and council control was by the Labour party. This analysis focused on impacts on local council expenditure of spending cuts imposed by either Labour or Conservative governments in specified periods between 1975 and 1982. They concluded that "local political control is clearly a key factor in the explanation" of the differences in these districts, including the maintenance of markedly higher levels of spending per head on social services in the Labour controlled district (p. 265). Education suffered the greatest cuts in both places. An interview survey in these locations indicated that greater spending cuts in education are correlated with both more people who believe they have been affected by the cuts and greater political activism (p. 266).

However, the nature of the relationships between social services provision for older people and its existing and potential service users seems likely to differ in relevant ways from education. Unlike education there is uncertainty about when and what type of services might be wanted or required in the future. Furthermore, among the public , there is likely to be considerable ignorance about these services. Some people might only temporarily come to rely on social care services, for example older carers and older people recovering from temporary health-related problems. And some users, such as very frail older people or some people with dementia, could be unable or uninterested in engaging in political action.

Boyne (1998) investigated party control and local expenditure change in English non-metropolitan districts between 1984 and 1987. He reported finding statistically significant 'party effects' on expenditure, with increased spending per head associated with Labour control and spending cuts associated with Conservative control (219).

Directly relevant for this paper are studies such as that of Hoggart and Smith (1991), who investigated change in local authority services for older people in England in 1979-88. Described as a decade "councils came under increasing fiscal pressure" (p.

1743). They found that “distinctive political party responses have persisted”. Consistent with the ideological values associated with each political party, Labour-dominated councils tended to respond to expressed needs while Conservative-dominated councils’ responses tended to be weakest if there was alternative (private sector) local provision (p. 1755).

However, focusing on party politics seems to be omitting many other potentially relevant aspects of political behaviour and political actors. The desirability of adopting a qualitative approach with a broader focus for exploratory research is indicated by Burau and Kroger’s (2004) case study of ‘the local and the national in community care services’ in Britain. This research helped to explore the relationship between policy and politics (p. 793).

Furthermore, although CRSSs have a central role in the development and provision of social care services for older people, practical delivery within any CRSS area increasingly involves diverse organisations. Each organisation will have its own distinctive internal politics. And key people within these organisations will have their own personal and professional politics.

And finally, the wider public needs to be considered. As citizens, taxpayers and existing or potential service users, the politics of the wider population should not be ignored. While analytically useful models of political participation (e.g. Goerres, 2009, Fig. 2.1, p. 25) provide a reminder of the usefulness of exploring potential sources of political skills and resources, including information, and mobilisation. This could bring in local media and diverse local organisations.

Methods

This paper reports on the preliminary analysis of case studies undertaken in four CRSS areas in England that, for whatever reasons, had chosen each year since 2005 to have either the most restrictive (Northumberland and West Berkshire) or most generous (Calderdale and Sunderland) formal criteria for access to social care services for older people.

A qualitative research approach was considered appropriate. This paper includes statements made in eight background interviews with two senior councillors in both West Berkshire and Northumberland, one senior councillor in Calderdale, and the senior officer of Age Concern Berkshire, Age Concern Sunderland and Age Concern Calderdale and Kirklees. These interviews were conducted between 23 September and 23 December 2009. Interviews took around an hour to complete and focused on local politics, understandings of older people’s politics and local social care services for older people.

Also presented are relevant findings from 31 face-to-face interviews with individual older people, aged from 56 to 90 years; with 21 people living in Calderdale and 10 people living in Northumberland. There were three married couples. Most interviews were conducted between 1st February 2010 and 31st March 2010, with two interviews held on 4th May 2010.

Research participants were recruited in three phases starting in autumn 2009. First, through charity shops. Next, through two educational organisations – the University of the Third Age (U3A) and the Workers Educational Association (WEA). Finally, through local history groups. The intention was to meet people who were articulate, socially outgoing, and have diverse political experiences and understandings. The research participants cannot be considered to be representative of people of their age. There is a bias towards highly educated, professionals aged in their 60s. Interviews took place in diverse locations, but mainly in participant's homes and cafes. They were recorded, with overall recorded durations ranging from around 50 minutes to two hours 32 minutes. Some survey questions (without response options) were included to help make links to existing research. Semi-structured interviews were used, with the following stages:

- Introduction: considering place (where people have lived and observations on the social and political characteristics of the area they live in), perceived 'senior-friendliness' of society, and opinions about older people standing up for their rights and participating in 'political life'.
- Main section: exploring individuals' experiences and understandings of a range of political activities, using specific examples and including major changes, political mobilization and influences.
- Social care for older people in their own homes: exploring individual's experiences, awareness and knowledge of these services, and of these services as a political issue.
- Final section: collecting selected personal data (such as economic activity status, car driving, and rural/urban characterisation of place of residence); identifying the political issues that individuals think are important; and commenting on media use, perceived influence of local media, and the existence of real 'older people's champions'.

The author did not raise the topic of social care with research participants until the social care section of the interviews, which started after around 36 minutes to one hour 44minutes. Formal written consent was requested at the end of the interviews. As far as possible, interview transcriptions were transcribed verbatim. These preliminary analyses were undertaken using spreadsheets. Relevant text was extracted from anywhere in the interviews. Research participants' data were placed in rows with one topic or question per worksheet. Different font colours were used to highlight desired types of information, especially their answers, reasons and potentially interesting observations

Other information was obtained by systematically retrieving relevant reports from sources such as the Audit Commission and Care Quality Commission websites, searching the *Hansard* website for information concerning activities of local Members of Parliament (MPs), and the searching the NEXIS database for entries about 'older people' and 'care' in the available local newspapers.

Findings are presented by focusing first on political parties and politicians. Then, aspects of the ways in which councils work internally and with their partners is considered. Finally, the focus turns on local people.

Political parties – administrative areas and politicians

At least three major considerations make it difficult to provide meaningful descriptions of the political characteristics of CRSSs: shifts in the nature of each party's politics over time, having numerous politicians representing each CRSS, and the difficulty of categorising the politics of individual politicians. In addition, politicians are people whose individual experiences and interests are likely to impact on their political practices.

First, there are real and perceived political shifts in the three major political parties. For example, several older research participants doubted the socialist credentials of the Labour party because of the current Labour government's apparent reluctance to reduce income inequality through taxing wealthy people. And the relationship between individual political parties and social services can be unclear. As a former social worker observed, there was a tendency for people to assume that her habit of voting Conservative was 'wrong'. She said:

"Well I was always Conservative, you see. Yet a lot of my views are left wing. But I don't see them as left wing. I see them as being caring."

(65 year old woman)

The run-up to the recent national elections in May 2010, provided an opportunity for all three major political parties to express their concern about current and future provision of social care services for older people. However, discussions about a pre-election cross-party consensus on action were apparently wrecked by crude, but widely publicised, party political posturing. The two major parties appeared to conform to established political expectations. As one 58 year old man summed it up: the Labour party wanted to establish "some sort of universal system", but "not for years", and the Conservative party "in their usual fashion are saying... it's got to be voluntary and people have choice so they, the rich people can buy the best system and the poor people can buy the poorest system". However, previous experiences and the timing of this recent political debate also left some people sceptical of its practical implications. For example:

"But it's difficult to take these promises, if you like, seriously. Because I think a lot of it's just electioneering. And when it comes to the crunch, they'll say : Well we would have liked to have done this and that but we can't afford it"

(72 year old woman)

Certainly the Liberal Democrats ditched many of their longstanding manifesto commitments to older people in the run up to the 2010 national election. And all three major parties have focused their attention and disputes on financial aspects of providing social services for older people.

The second major consideration when thinking about describing the politics of CRSSs concerns the number of political representatives in each area. If there is only one political representative per CRSS, then it could be relatively straightforward to characterise this aspect of each of the politics of 150 CRSSs in England. However, each CRSS has several politicians, who may be members of any or no political party. And there are two major types of politician: the MPs and the local councillors

forming the Council of the CRSSs (hereafter referred to as 'councillors'). Typically, councils are characterised politically by the political party with control of the council or by the political composition of the council, for example in terms of the proportion of seats occupied by independents or each political party. Taking the four CRSSs in this research project as an example reveals the political complexity existing in 1997 to 2009.

Sunderland superficially has the simplest political characteristics in terms of political representatives. In 1997 to 2009, there were four parliamentary constituencies representing all or part of the CRSS area. At any time, all four MPs were Labour party members and this party had control of the council.

In Calderdale there are two parliamentary constituencies, both of which were held by Labour MPs during 1997 to 2009. Political control of the council varied, mostly having no party in overall political control. In practice, there has been minority Conservative rule aided initially by the Labour party and more recently by the Liberal Democrats. After the 2010 local elections, the council still had no overall political control but is currently run by the Liberal Democrats and Labour parties.

Northumberland has four parliamentary constituencies each held by the same MP from 1997 to 2009. The two more urban and populous areas in the south east were represented by Labour MPs. The northernmost, more rural constituency had a Liberal Democrat MP. While the remaining largely rural constituency had a Conservative MP. Up to spring 2008, the CRSS was under Labour party control. Since administrative changes in 2008, the CRSS has had no political party in overall control of the council. Currently, it is run by the Liberal Democrats.

West Berkshire is largely covered by the Newbury parliamentary constituency, which was held by a Liberal Democrat MP until the 2005 local elections, when he was replaced by a Conservative MP. This CRSS area is covered by part of the Reading West parliamentary constituency, with a Labour MP, and part of the Wokingham parliamentary constituency, with a longstanding Conservative MP. Control of the council was initially held by the Liberal Democrats, fell into having no political party having overall control in 2002 up to 2007, and then became Conservative controlled.

Therefore, putting a single political label on these CRSS areas is problematic. Even the apparently simple case of Sunderland currently has 18 Conservative councillors among its 72 members.

Stable political control might help to explain why Sunderland has been able to prioritise older people's social services offering both high formal accessibility and high quality as assessed by independent assessors. The council has publicly expressed pride in these services while simultaneously charging relatively low rates of council tax (a local tax).

However, having no party in overall political control need not be a barrier to working. For example, having "not much partisan working" was considered to help councillors to work together 'well' on the scrutiny committee concerned with social care in Calderdale. If a party with extreme plans is prevented from acting, then it might be beneficial for existing and potential service users. However, politically inspired

disputes can delay favourable or inevitable changes in services. A recent example is in Northumberland, where the Liberal Democrat leaders have (and want) to progress the previous government's personalisation agenda. Part of their proposals is the contentious decision for the council to cease to run day care centres. Here:

"Every time you vote. You've got to work at getting everything through. Because there's no overall control here, you see. There's too much political posturing. "

(Liberal Democrat councillor, Northumberland)

In addition, politically-inspired disputes among political representatives (councillors and MPs) reduce the amount and quality of "sensible conversations" about finding locally appropriate ways of tackling difficult decisions.

Finally, the fact that politicians are individuals with distinctive personal and political histories and interests adds a further level of complexity to local politics. One issue is how to categorise the political characteristics of some councillors, such as the diverse people who do not belong to any formal political party (Independents) or those who have changed or lost their political affiliation. For example, in this project a councillor was identified who had switched from being a Liberal Democrat to a Labour party member. The tendency for national political parties to try to impose selection of certain types of candidates, such as women, and even to 'parachute' in candidates with no local connections has prompted some people to compete in the elections as Independents. One woman talked about "an excellent councillor" in her area:

"... And he was going to be kicked out. So he stood as an independent. But obviously with the same values. And he was voted for by just about everybody..."

(63 year old woman)

But other Independents could have distinctively broad or narrow range of interests.

Sometimes people with no political affiliation become politically active under the label of a political party. In one CRSS area, an older research participant talked about the local Liberal Democrats inviting non-party members who displayed organisational abilities to consider standing as candidates for local council elections. Her personal opinion was that CRSSs and other local councils should not be 'party political' but should "go for consensus government".

At national level, membership of a political party does not always mean that the MP agrees with all their party's proposals and acts as suggested. A Calderdale MP (Linda Riordan) was identified as one of the 'most rebellious' Labour MPs (Anon, 2006a).

Searching the Parliament's website of *Hansard* for the contribution of MPs from these four CRSS areas to written and spoken debates in the 2008-9 session suggests that social care for older people is not a topic that has attracted much active work. Linda Riordan (Calderdale CRSS area) appeared to be the most active. Ms. Riordan wrote to ask about rheumatoid arthritis (15 January 2009) and spoke

about improving the quality of older people's residential care in a local context where around a quarter of homes had the lowest independent quality rating (10 February 2009). Ronnie Campbell (Northumberland CRSS area) was the only MP from these four CRSS areas to contribute to the debate of the Care and Support Reform Bill (14 July 2009). Unfortunately, Mr. Campbell's contribution was more a protest at Northumberland council's about day care provision than a constructive extension to the debate.

Given the potential diversity of opinions among members of any political party and the limited time available for their work, it seems likely that politician's personal experiences and interests will influence their work. Thus, it is unsurprising that the MP Richard Benyon, a landowner and former soldier (West Berkshire CRSS), has a website revealing that he has been very actively engaged with issues related to military personnel and the countryside. Both the Calderdale MPs in 2009 have websites revealing they were previously local councillors with an interest in social issues.

Calderdale's older people's social services might benefit from the presence of senior councillors with relevant interests. The interviews revealed that the current Leader has worked in social work, the Deputy Leader works as chief executive of the voluntary organisation Age Concern Calderdale and Kirklees, and the Chair of the Adult Health and Social Care scrutiny panel has worked with Age Concern Todmorden. While in Sunderland in 2008, an older, longstanding councillor who had worked with Age Concern was made Deputy Leader of the council.

In an interview, one senior councillor suggested that there was little knowledge or interest in social care issues among most councillors. By 'educating' them, for example about the benefits of modest spending on preventative measures, he felt he could help protect and develop services. Another councillor in another CRSS felt that the behaviour of most councillors did not suggest an interest in supporting older people's interests.

The amount of contact that local and national politicians have appears to vary greatly. Where a council is controlled by one political party, councillors are more likely to have informal contact with any local MP belonging to that party. For example, in the interviews local Conservative councillors, including those concentrating on older people's issues, said that they have contact with Richard Benyon MP. For Liberal Democrat councillors running Northumberland, the Liberal Democrat MP (Alan Beith) was said to make constructive representations, the Labour MPs tended to play party politics, and the Conservative MP made no contact.

A 'division of duties' among councillors and MPs was not always recognised by the wider public. One Northumberland councillor said that although MPs are seen to 'work in London'. Dissatisfied local residents sometimes 'threatened' councillors with contacting MPs, not realising that the MP would send work inside the councillors' scope back to them. In West Berkshire, the local MP seemed to receive a high proportion of communications that should have been directed to the councillors.

Ways of Working – in the Council and partnerships

The political characteristics of the CRSS areas are also affected by the ways decision-making and service provision are provided locally. Here it is appropriate to think of the organisation of these activities in the council and the role of council staff. In addition, all areas are engaged in partnership working with non-profit and profit-making organisations with an ability to influence provision and key decisions.

Government guidance and direction would come directly to councils and, if appropriate, would be interpreted by council staff for councillors. In the case of social care for older people, a key advisor is likely to be a senior social worker. Therefore it seems reasonable to suggest that the activities of these advisors could be influential. For example, if advisors have strong beliefs that there should only be a residual service for people with very low incomes and multiple objective support needs. To the extent that personal and professional views impact on final decisions about the allocation of resources and services, then these activities are political. But as with individual front line social workers use of their professional discretion in assessments and reviews of older people, these are political activities outside the scope of this research project.

However, several research participants had become aware that some officers (employees) in some councils appeared to have considerable power compared to councillors. For example a woman aged in her 50s had found it enlightening to be involved in a campaign about a major redevelopment of a town centre:

“... my eyes were really opened by the amount of work that councillors do and also with the small amount of power they actually have over how things actually pan out. And how much power ... council officers have, who aren't even elected...”

It seems likely that a similar power imbalance could exist in social services, with its apparently huge range of specialist guidance and legislation. Some people thought that some of their local councillors had limited 'competence'. However, longstanding councillors could acquire specialist knowledge to enable them to take a more proactive and leading role in social care or other services. For example, Sunderland's adult social care services received praise for their leadership starting with:

“Key council members were knowledgeable about social care and committed to providing excellent services for Sunderland.”

(Care Quality Commission (2010) p.9Q)

Establishing shared agendas between council staff at all levels and councillors is essential for both everyday operations and service developments. Therefore the quality of these relationships was something considered by independent performance assessors like the Audit Commission and Care Quality Commission. Thus, a change in Leader (a councillor), chief executive and “other key officers” was considered to present West Berkshire Council with “an opportunity to introduce a clear leadership style” both internally and with partner organisations (Audit Commission (2002b,p. 9) Later, this council was praised for the “active role in the

development of social care” undertaken by councillors (Care Quality Commission, 2009a, p. 2). Interviews with councillors, suggested that part of this role was their willingness to find out about services and give social workers ‘permission’ to use their ‘common sense’ to provide some support that would be beneficial to the older people involved but which might not be provided if service criteria were applied strictly.

The political composition of councils can be rendered meaningless by the adoption of certain approaches to decision-making. For example, a decision-making group called a Cabinet or Executive, usually made up of senior councillors, has the potential to facilitate communications and decision-making. However, it can become problematic if all the Executive members are councillors from the controlling political party and the full council receives inadequate information or even have decisions imposed on them. In these situations, the majority of councillors are effectively made redundant in these processes and they cannot claim to be able to represent the interests of their constituents (local residents) or their political parties.

Problems with the operations of councils were reported in interviews with councillors in both Northumberland and Calderdale. In Northumberland, there were said to be decision-making delays and an Executive apparently ignoring the advice of experienced councillors undertaking scrutiny work. For example a review of proposed day care changes by the Care and Well-being Overview & Scrutiny Committee (with representatives from all political groups) resulted in a report that recommended the proposals to the Executive (all Liberal Democrats) with four caveats. The Executive sent the unchanged proposals to the full Council, where it was ‘thrown out’. More serious problems appear to have occurred in Calderdale in recent years, which became more public as the result of several highly contentious, major decisions made by their Executive (all Conservatives). One woman aged in her 60s commented on these “horrendous decisions” and observed that:

“.... even within the system, the power could have been shared. But the Tories [*the Conservatives*] have taken all the lead places for the seven directorates. So basically the decisions in Calderdale are made by seven Tories.”

After the May 2010 elections, there was no overall control. As the Conservatives were claimed to be unwilling to change the way they ran the council, the Liberal Democrats and Labour party formed a joint administration. In a press release they:

“Both expressed their commitment to working together to promote a new way of running the Council that will involve more councillors, be more open to the wider community, and establish a new and more positive direction for the Council” (Anon, 2010a)

In addition, CRSSs all now achieve their goals for providing older people’s social care services by working in partnership with other local organisations. The major partner is usually the local health service, with whom councils might choose to work within a formal structure, such as Northumberland’s Care Trust. Voluntary organisations [charities or non-profit organisations] also play an important role in service delivery, especially local Age Concern branches, as do private businesses.

The existence and strength of partnerships has long been a feature of independent assessments of public sector performance.

However, the operations of such partnerships is often unclear. Politics can play an important role, for example in terms of allocating resources to and among organisations and dealing with changes to organisational resources. There have long been problems of 'cost-shunting' from health to social services. Such problems have apparently not been eradicated. For example, West Berkshire councillors were angered by the unannounced decision of the local health service to transfer responsibility for 30 people requiring expensive social support services (Interviews; Johnson, 2009).

Tough financial settlements and demands for improvements in efficiency have been experienced by councils throughout the period studied. This situation is likely to worsen when the new Government starts to impose severe 'austerity' measures. In recent years, councils have tended to try to keep council tax low, a situation which can sometimes lead to cuts in funding for services. But payment of council tax can be problematic for older people, who are mainly living on fixed and often small incomes. Therefore low levels and increases in council tax are favoured by a wide range of people. For Labour controlled Sunderland, there is great civic pride in being able to claim to provide older people with generous access to good quality social care services, including preventative services, while retaining low levels of council tax (e.g. Revely, 2009) However, following the May 2010 local elections, the former Conservative Leader (councillor) in Calderdale interpreted the results as a vote against delivering "the lowest ever council tax rises without cuts in front line services (Baines quoted in Anon, 2010).

But social care services for older people remain vulnerable to cuts or increased charges because of the determination of all public sector organisations to keep in budget. As the previous Secretary of State for Health (Andy Burnham) observed there was 'unfairness' in the way some councils took money from social services to spend on other priorities risking some older people having 'unmet needs' (Hansard, 2009). Threats to services could come from unexpected financial costs, as with the unexpected increase in demand for services from older people living in West Berkshire (Johnson, 2009).

If demand for services are growing and the services are prioritised, then the council will be seen to give them additional resources. Contrary to stereotype, Conservative controlled West Berkshire council have increased council tax partly to cover rising costs for their older people's services. However, both Conservative councillors and the Conservative MP (Richard Benyon) have protested that they receive an inadequate grant settlement from the Labour government (Sloan, 2009; Anon, 2006).

Performance monitoring and reporting practices imposed by governments have probably helped to protect some older people's services. For example, featuring prominently in Audit Commission reports on councils.

All of these considerations indicate how difficult it will be to explore the role of party politics as well as other types of politics on the provision of services for older people in England.

The people – and potential sources of political mobilization

Attempting to understand the role of politics in the provision of local social care services for older people makes it necessary to try to understand politics by and for older people as it relates to these services. This is another problematic task.

In general, neither the wider public nor older people living in the four CRSS areas appear to have engaged in protesting about or campaigning for better home care or home help services for older people living in their own homes. For example, Calderdale has some community websites that include some apparently popular discussion pages about topical issues. One local councillor used a site to tell 'local residents' off for getting "tremendously agitated about relatively trivial issues ... whilst staying silent about" planned "huge increases in home care charges" (Swift, 1997). This message did not appear to have stimulated any debate on these services.

Home care and home help services appear to attract little public interest or attention. Based on personal experience with a parent using these services, one councillor suggested that often circumstances suddenly bring people "up against social services", then they enter a phase of having to focus to get things done, with people just wanting to 'get on with life' once the service is not longer used by their relative. He went on to suggest that in his area most people's experience was likely to be 'good', therefore there was little reason to take further interest in these services.

"... Why would you want to campaign for bigger or better or more. ... If a thing is good, no-one ever says. No-one campaigns because this is a wonderful thing. They campaign to change it."

However, changes in the provision of these services could create greater dissatisfaction among users. Among the older people interviewed there were comments about the trend for paid carers to visit for short times. For example:

"A Well. Just when my mother, as she got older and ... she became housebound really. ... She had a home help that used to come. Well, I think initially she started to come to clean. But then she needed more help. She needed meals and things. But they just kept cutting down their time. That these people could come."

(64 year old woman, Northumberland)

In this example, the paid carers increasingly were having to cut their visits short and were coming at inconvenient times to provide lunches too early in the day or to put her mother to bed early in the evening. Yet this experience did not seem to promote attempts to change services, although this lady said:

"I mean, it would be great if it did work. Because, like me, I would much prefer to stay in me own home. But I don't want to be in bed at half past seven at night."

(64 year old woman, Northumberland)

Apart from concerns about availability of services and the quality of life they provided, more serious concerns were raised by an older woman aged in her 60s, whose employment had given her experience of working with an organisation providing social care services for older people. She had observed the presence of two types of paid carers:

“...[a core group of] people, who were going out to old people, were very caring. ... it fit[s] in with their home life. They did a good job. The organisation got good value. But I also found within that organisation were people that hadn't any other job to go to. And it was just a job to them. And it was really not fair on the old people”

(woman in her 60s, Calderdale)

The latter group of paid carers “really worried” this research participant. The observation is consistent with comments in a background interview suggesting that the recession had helped organisations to recruit people into carer posts. Such recruitment seems unlikely to be sustainable if easier and better paid work becomes available.

Interviews with older people suggested that their actual contact with these services could be limited. Often their older relatives lived at some distance, and detailed and everyday arrangements might be made by someone else. A few people had cared for a spouse, but not made use of social service supported home help/care services. Therefore most people had limited knowledge of these services.

Many of the older people who were interviewed gave little thought to these services, often having busy lifestyles and often not seeing themselves as being older people. A woman aged in her 50s was among those who gave her future potential care requirements some thought because she had no children. But thinking about these issues only caused her to ‘worry’. While an active 72 year old woman said “I try not to think about it”.

Residential care seemed to have been given more thought. As this generally appeared to be viewed as an undesirable service, the fact it received any consideration seems to partly reflect the high charges for these services and their much higher profile in both local and national media and in national political campaigns. In Calderdale, the council has purchased residential accommodation for many older people in homes with poor quality ratings. This practice has been commented on by, amongst others, a local MP and independent inspectors (Care Quality Commission, 2009, p. 3) and, recently, even stimulated some online comments in a local newspaper (Peel, 2010).

Proposed and recently implemented changes in day care services have become the focus of a major political conflict in Northumberland. Here the local media appear to have taken greater interest in these issues and associated political disputes, fuelled by the close party political competition in this area and some misreporting and poor communications. Importantly, these changes had marked implications for access to valued services for some older people and threatened some people's jobs within these services. In 2009, the local media picked up on the understandable concerns of older people who were ‘hit’ by the introduction of relatively high charges for using

day care services (Anon, 2008a). As previously mentioned, a dispute also arose within the council about the reorganisation of day care that would involve the closure of council day centres. Although undoubtedly worrying many service users and generating considerable local media coverage, attendance at consultations for the wider public about the proposed 'personalised support' approach to care attracted very little interest. For example, "only about five" local residents attended one meeting in July 2009, which was attributed to inadequate publicity (Coulson, 2009).

Linkage with organisations and external interests could support longer-term campaigns and the organisation of mass demonstrations. One of the research participants had participated in public demonstrations organised by the Alzheimer's Society in Newcastle:

"... it was protesting at care home fees. And the injustice of it towards people with Alzheimer's ..."

(63 year old woman, Northumberland)

However, there are few powerful groups interested in home care/help services for older people. The most well-known charities for older people were Age Concern and Help the Aged, which have recently merged together under the name of Age UK. However, the campaigning activities of this organisation appear to have made little impact on the older people in this project. One woman said that she had come across:

"... The money-making. Yes. And I'm all for charity shops. I love charity shops. I mean that's where I buy all my books. And I buy lots of gifts for people. But no. Not political. Whereas, you can go to Oxfam and the political's there. You can go into the RSPCA, and the political's there. Into Relate – it's there. But Age Concern – no."

(66 year old woman, Northumberland)

When asked if she had any idea why this was, the reply was that "I don't think they're very political any more". Local Age Concern branches in these four areas were heavily involved in providing social care services, often on behalf of the councils.

Age UK have been involved in setting up some local 'forums' for the over 50s – designed to act as 'voices' for older people. As the geographical coverage of these forums is reputed to be uneven and as many of the older people interviewed did not regard themselves as old, it is perhaps unsurprising that only one person said she belonged to one. And she was involved in organising the forum. Initially, she suggested that this was not 'political', typically involving information being provided to people attending. But on reflection, she thought it could be political in the sense of providing people with information about proposed changes. Information upon which political action could be based.

The vast majority of organisations set up and run by older people appear to be social or educational organisations. Explicitly political organisations, such as local groups of the National Pensioners Convention (NPC) are uncommon. However, local pensioners' groups with at least one well organised, 'politically-minded' member could have a marked impact locally. In the locations studies, there was only one

currently active and effective local group known to research participants. In Calderdale, some local residents and councillors were aware of the existence of an active pensioners' association. The councillors said that key members of this group regularly attended meetings and made useful contributions to service reviews. In addition, they had played a major role in establishing a successful local campaign to prevent the central library in Halifax from being demolished and relocated to an inconvenient location. However, one of the research participants reported that the main person in the organisation recently moved to another part of the country. It is questionable if this group will remain as effective in her absence.

Finally, the characteristics of the resident population seem likely to play a part in local politics. Within living memory, all four areas had experienced marked changes in local population characteristics and size. Politically relevant changes seem likely to include the popularity of Calderdale as a home for many teachers and academics working in nearby Leeds and Manchester. This change has boosted the numbers of residents capable of undertaking diverse political action. While the loss of industrial employment, especially mining, in Northumberland has reduced local opportunities to acquire political skills and collective attitudes. The growth of commuting means that in many parts of Calderdale and West Berkshire, many residents have little involvement in local social and political life. The thriving social and educational activities in many areas provide a basis for busy lifestyles. So many people have little time to engage with social care issues. Furthermore, settlement patterns in all four areas help to fragment the population.

Conclusions.

This paper presents some of the preliminary findings from an ongoing research project investigating the politics of ageing in England. These findings suggest that attempts to meaningfully characterise the political nature of CRSSs and their areas should involve consideration of a range of things. Some of these things are associated with party politics. Arguably, party names should be treated as labels that cannot be directly translated into accurate and meaningful representations of the political nature of councils, politicians or other people. In addition, important aspects of local politics exist but seem likely to be difficult to investigate across all CRSSs in England. In particular, the politics associated with the practices of key professionals and the organisational politics of key partners engaged in various ways in providing and developing social care services for older people.

Easily forgotten is the role of the wider public in current and future provision of social care services for older people. Few organisations appear to exist that provide an effective role in political mobilization of older people about social care services. Local media appeared to have the potential to both stimulate some political thinking and action but could also generate unwarranted fears that could deter political engagement.

Further exploration of these political systems and carefully selected broadly comparable ones elsewhere in England should help to gradually illuminate the complex workings of politics associated with the provision of social care services for older people. Similar comparative studies undertaken in other countries would help to indicate the extent to which different emergent findings exist outside England.

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Please note that this paper is based on work in progress.