

Review Article

What makes a community age-friendly: A review of international literature

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This paper undertakes a comprehensive review of the growing international literature on age-friendly communities. It examines a range of approaches and identifies the key attributes associated with creating a sustainable environment for seniors. The authors critically evaluate emerging policy trends and models and suggest directions for future research attention. The discussion provides important information and insights for the development of ageing policy and planning in Australia.

Key words: *age-friendly community, ageing policy, ageing well, planning and governance, social environment.*

Introduction

As a result of rapid population ageing, policy-makers and service providers are increasingly aware of the importance of providing 'age-friendly' services or products to older people. In recent years, there has been increased discussion of strategies and practices that ensure services and products meet the specific needs and life situations of older people. This so-called 'senior friendly boom' [1] (p. 5) has spread through North America and Europe over the past decade. The idea of an 'age-friendly community' is the latest incarnation of this trend in ageing policy and discourse. The building and maintenance of an age-friendly environment is widely regarded as a core component of a positive approach to addressing the challenge of population ageing.

Over recent years, several trends or developments have intensified the discussion relating to the development of an age-friendly community. First, there is the wide adoption of ageing in place as a policy goal [2,3]. Governments and international organisations now agree that supporting older people to continue living in the community for as long as possible makes both economic and social sense. Enabling older people to age in place is however a very complicated task. It requires comprehensive planning and provision of a wide range of support services in the community as well as the removal of barriers that segregate older people and limit their activities [4]. The advance in ageing in place policies highlights the imperative for an 'age-friendly community'.

The rising importance of environmental gerontology over the past decades also fuels the discussion of an age-friendly community [5–7]. Environmental gerontology applies a multidisciplinary focus to the relation between older persons and their socio-spatial surroundings. Current research evidence suggests that well-being in later life is closely related to the physical environment, which is an important factor mediating ageing experiences and opportunities [8,9]. Recent findings of urban studies also confirm that the nature of the neighbourhood has a significant impact on mobility, independence and quality of life of older people living in the community [10–13]. In addition, senior-friendly urban planning has moved beyond health care considerations to include neighbourhood design and increasingly sophisticated conceptions of place. Recognising that age composition is a dimension of diversity, urban planners now emphasise the value of inclusive design for preserving heterogeneity in the community [14].

Finally, the endorsement by influential international organisations like the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations of creating a supportive environment for older people encourages discussion of age-friendly communities [15,16]. For instance, initially through its *Healthy Cities Project* [17] that commenced in 1986, the WHO has emphasised the relationship between health and the built, natural and social environments as well as the role of local government in promoting active living for all ages [18]. In 2005, the organisation launched a *Global Age-Friendly Cities Project* in 33 cities around the world [19]. This global project has catalysed renewed interest in the concept of an age-friendly community in many countries.

This paper reviews the international literature on age-friendly communities published since 2005. It seeks to

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determine key attributes of this concept identified in recent research and practice.

Methodology

This review adopted three approaches to the literature search:

1. A search of peer-reviewed articles in the online database group *Cambridge Scientific Abstract* (the social sciences section)¹ using the keywords 'age-friendly', 'elderly-friendly', 'livable community', 'lifetime neighbourhood' and 'community for all ages'.
2. A search of websites or databases of leading ageing research institutes, including *American Association of Retired Persons Policy & Research* and *Evidence Database of Center for Aging Policy*.
3. A search of the World Wide Web using the search engine Google to pick up grey literature such as government program reports and policy papers.

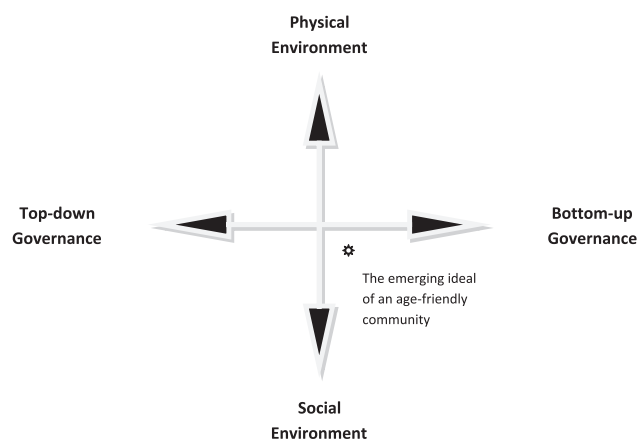
Relevant materials were also selected by the authors through examining references in review articles or research reports. The searches were limited to works that were published in English and to the period 2005 to 2008. However, some earlier seminal articles were also included. In total, 32 articles or reports examining different aspects or meanings of age-friendly environment were included in this review. The review sought to extract, compare and organise defining features of age-friendly communities explicit in these various writings.

Findings and discussions

The authors found that different terminologies have been used to describe an age-friendly environment. The WHO first coined the term 'age-friendly city' in 2005 when it launched the *Global Age-Friendly Cities Project* [19]. The Canadian Government, which played a leading role in the project, adopted this model more widely and used the term 'age-friendly community' in many policy documents [20]. The term 'livable community' is, however, more common in the United States [21–25]. In the UK, policy-makers use the term 'lifetime neighbourhood' when referring to the construction of a favourable environment for older citizens [26,27]. The differing terminology is not a problem in itself, but is a manifestation of a range of emphases and approaches relating to age-friendly communities among researchers and practitioners. Two facets of this range of discourses can be represented diagrammatically as a two-dimensional continuum (Figure 1).

¹The *Cambridge Scientific Abstract* allows a search of a number of databases simultaneously using the same user interface. The social science section comprises a wide range of databases including Social Sciences Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Urban Studies & Planning and PAIS International. For a full list of the databases included, see http://www.csa.com/e_products/databases-collections.php?SID=io9k7p86tv73a5u0p20h6j5mm3.

Figure 1: Dimensions of the age-friendly community discourse.



The vertical axis represents a continuum between an emphasis on physical infrastructure/services and a stress on quality of the social environment. Some models, like those proposed by the AdvantAge Initiative [28] and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (N4A) [24], concentrate on the physical end of the vertical continuum. They examine in detail community infrastructure or resources as well as design specifications for various aspects of the built environment that address the needs of older people living in the community. Examples of these include housing, transportation services and home modification programs. In contrast, there are other approaches, like the UK elaboration of lifetime neighbourhoods [26,27], that pay relatively more attention to the importance of 'social quality' [29] or the quality of social relations that promote inclusion, participation and personal development. The vertical axis thus illustrates the range of outcomes portrayed in the literature as defining an age-friendly community.

There is also much discussion in the literature of the governance processes associated with an age-friendly community. The horizontal axis, therefore, focuses on models of governance differing particularly with respect to the breadth of participation in defining and implementing age-friendly features of a community. On one end of the continuum, there are initiatives like the *Calgary Elder Friendly Communities (EFC) Program* [30,31] that concentrate on facilitating older people's participation, empowering them and cultivating their capacity to enhance their neighbourhood and community. At the other end of this continuum are approaches defined by a focus on local authorities' leadership and role in achieving predetermined guidelines for age-friendliness of a community (e.g. [18,26,32]). These approaches are more top-down and often involve planners and policy-makers assessing their community against established criteria or checklist such as the guide developed by the WHO *Global Age-Friendly City Project* [19]. The horizontal axis represents a range of processes associated with an age-friendly community.

Table 1: Key features of an age-friendly community identified by selected models

	Age-friendly city (World Health Organization)	Lifetime neighbourhood (Department for Communities & Local Government, UK)	Livable community (American Association of Retired Persons)	Livable community (National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, USA)	Elder-friendly community (University of Calgary, Canada)	Elder-friendly community (The AdvantAge Initiative, USA)
Physical Infrastructure	Outdoor spaces and buildings	Built environment	Land use	Planning and zoning	–	–
	Transportation	–	Transport and mobility	Transportation	Being mobile	Maximising independence
Social Environment	Housing Communication and information	Housing	Housing Cooperation and communication	Housing –	Ready access to information and services	– –
	Social participation	Social cohesion and sense of place	–	–	Maintaining independence and involvement in activities	Promotes social and civic engagement
	Respect and social inclusion	Social inclusion	–	Public safety	The importance of being valued and respected/Financial security and personal safety	Addresses basic needs
	Civic participation and employment	–	Public education and involvement in community planning	Culture and lifelong learning	–	Promotes social and civic engagement
	–	Innovation and cross- sectoral planning	Leadership	–	Community development work	–

While some of the literature focuses more on one of these dimensions than the other, it should be emphasised that none of the approaches reviewed is located at the extremes. Rather, the trend is to include elements of both the physical and social environment with an ideal of integrating these through appropriate policies, services and structures. Indeed, a common observation is that the built and social environments are contingent on each other and mutually reinforcing. Equally, the literature supported considerable community participation as well as stakeholder involvement in collaborating with local government leaders to build a community with age-friendly features as defined by older people and also informed by external evidence. Within the diversity of the literature, an emerging rhetoric of age-friendly communities is converging in the bottom right quadrant of Figure 1, close to the intersection of the two axes (as marked in the diagram). The characteristics of this emerging ideal, identified in this review, are two-fold: an integrated physical and social environment, and a model of participatory, collaborative governance.

An integrated physical and social environment

While different models may take up different positions along the physical-social continuum, these differences are simply a matter of degree. Table 1 maps and compares key attributes or features of an age-friendly community as identified by a few prominent international models. While the models vary in specific features or themes covered, most of them cover a range of concerns that cut across both physical and social aspects of the environment. In most cases, features in the upper rows place more emphasis on physical infrastructure and lower ones are more oriented to the social environment.

This highlights an underlying assumption that is now widely shared by policy-makers and planners: an enabling social environment is just as important as material conditions in determining well-being in later life.

Unlike senior-friendly programs that focus narrowly on technical or architectural guidelines or design specifications, the recent discourse on age-friendly communities emphasises the critical role of quality of social relations like respect and inclusion in the enhancement of quality of life of older people. Echoing the recent development that treats the climate of inclusiveness as one of the most important aspects of age-friendly communities, many writings emphasised specifically the importance of public attitudes and perceptions in affecting the well-being of seniors. They regarded an age-friendly community as not just a space with a range of services but also as a place that facilitates and honours the participation and contributions of older people. Consistent with this, most of the literature examined acknowledged the need to construct an environment where all social and physical facilities and services are integrated and mutually enhancing to support people to age well.

A model of participatory, collaborative governance

The literature also suggests that an age-friendly community is characterised by the governance processes adopted for defining and building it. One theme in this respect is that older people are not just the beneficiaries of these communities but also have a key role to play in defining and fostering their distinctive features. Translated into practice, this implies the encouragement of bottom-up participation and genuine involvement of seniors in voicing their concerns and

participating in defining characteristics of services or facilities. In fact, many of the age-friendly community models were constructed based on extensive research with older people or on analysis of existing government data on the situation and experiences of seniors [33–35]. The involvement of older persons, however, takes different forms depending on the specific model concerned. Some models, like the WHO *Global Age-friendly Cities Project* and the AdvantAge Initiative's *Elderly-Friendly Community Model* for instance, consulted and engaged older people in conventional ways through focus group meetings, interviews or surveys. Others, like the Calgary *EFC Project*, involve seniors in a more ongoing way as active participants and encourage them to define and lead community development initiatives in their neighbourhoods. Despite these divergent approaches for involving older people, the literature clearly supports the idea that older people's lives and experiences should be used as a starting point to identify desirable community services and support.

In addition to involving and consulting older people, the literature also highlights the value of cultivating and maintaining partnerships with multiple community stakeholders. This suggests the need for broad-based collaboration including service providers, voluntary organisations, the private sector, carers and citizens' groups as partners. For such diverse networks, age-friendly guidelines or toolkits often provide a starting point with some evidence-based criteria to consider. The community concerned then determines the relevance of these, their priorities and the best way to enhance the age-friendliness of their environment [36]. Many models reviewed suggest cross-sectoral involvement with both top-down and bottom-up input is necessary in developing an age-friendly environment [26,37].

Within such joint efforts, leadership and coordination by local authorities is another critical factor identified by the literature in building age-friendly communities. Although there is considerable variation across national contexts, local government generally has a unique position in creating a sustainable environment for older people as it has long been involved in strategic planning and managing of transport, health and social care services. The literature affirms the role of local authorities in building a safe and secure environment for seniors, but it also recommends local governments take a lead in addressing broader strategies for facilitating social participation and inclusion and ensuring a positive public policy context. Given the emphasis on involving stakeholders from all sectors (including older people themselves) in decision-making, the literature on age-friendly communities provides a distinctive, collaborative model for local governance.

Critique

On examining the writing about age-friendly communities, the review identified three gaps in the literature. First, most of the discussions focused on the urban setting and relatively

little was said about building sustainable and friendly neighbourhoods for older people living in rural or remote areas [20]. As more than half of the world's population are now living in urban areas, the focus on cities is understandable [38]. However, the limited literature also suggests that older residents of remote or rural community areas have different ageing pathways and experiences to the general population [39]. To better understand the condition and predicaments of these seniors, and the different challenges posed for smaller local authorities, more research and discussion on building and managing an age-friendly environment in such areas are needed.

In addition, although the literature concedes that older people's ability to participate may be compromised by a lack of social recognition, so far there has been limited exploration of effective ways to deal with individual differences and values in modern communities that have become increasingly diverse and complex [40]. Because the formation of community involves both the creation of solidarity between in-groups and the construction of boundaries to fence off out-groups [41], it is essential for policy-makers to understand the normative dimensions of social inclusion and to strike a balance between enhancing social engagement and protecting individual diversity [42]. Findings of this review point to the need for a broadening of the dialogue along this line of discussion.

Finally, much of the literature examined is essentially descriptive. It provides considerable detail about initiatives prompted by recognition of the importance of supportive public policy, environments and services. These cover a range of approaches to fostering age-friendly communities – in terms of models of governance – and a range of outcomes regarded as age-friendly in terms of both physical and social characteristics. However, there has been limited documentation of the effectiveness of specific approaches or evaluation of the impact of specific processes or outcomes on older people's lives. Future developments of age-friendly communities would benefit from a rigorous base of evidence so the review suggests both process and outcomes evaluations as directions for further research.

Conclusion

The upsurge of interest in the notion of age-friendly communities over the past decade signifies a paradigm shift in public discourse on ageing. Instead of conceiving older people as a social problem or burden, the new discourse constructs ageing as a positive process and emphasises the active roles older people continue to play in society [43,44]. This focus on active participation and engagement of older people is an antidote to the conception of old age as an inevitable period of withdrawal from social roles and relationships. This new discourse on ageing has redirected policy discussion from economic or welfare issues to matters of social inclusion, engagement and community development [45,46].

There is now a consensus among policy-makers and researchers that well-being in later life involves more than having good health and physical comfort. As Kochera and Bright [23] observe,

Positive outcomes for older people involve more than independence. They include the ability of older people to function and remain active in their setting of choice and to continue to enjoy their desired level of support and interaction with other people (p. 35).

This review of literature on age-friendly communities has demonstrated that a supportive context with positive social relations, engagement and inclusion is a core prerequisite for ageing well and that there is a global impetus to build an integrated and mutually enhancing environment for the well-being of older citizens. To meet the challenges of building an age-friendly community, policy-makers and planners are encouraged to take a proactive approach and to engage with multiple stakeholders as well as empowering older people themselves to create the conditions for active ageing.

Regarding the situation in Australia, the *National Strategy for an Ageing Australia* [47] has endorsed the importance of 'including' older people in all aspects of community life and the imperative of building a society for all ages. The document expounded a general framework for the building of age-friendly communities in Australia. Despite this development, many discussions in various tiers of government still focus narrowly on architectural or town planning issues and do not address the wider social and cultural dimensions of age-friendly communities as identified in this review [32,48,49]. The recently elected Labour Government acknowledges that a social inclusion agenda is needed to address all aspects of Australian life [50]. The implications of that commitment in relation to building age-friendly communities are, however, unclear. This review of the international experiences highlights the breadth of issues and discussions regarding the challenge of building age-friendly communities. It shows that stakeholders from various levels of government, the private sector and the community need to work together to respond to genuine needs of older people for supportive physical and social environments.

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