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DEVELOPING AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES IN AN EMERGENT POST PANDEMIC WORLD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

'Developing Age-Friendly Communities in an Emergent Post-Pandemic World' is a research project led by the University of Salford in partnership with Inspiring Communities Together and Manchester Metropolitan University. It is funded by the Dunhill Medical Trust, through its Building and Delivering Suitable Living Environments and Communities for an Ageing Population programme.

The project investigated the legacy and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on older adults' connections to other people and places in order to develop evidence-based recommendations to support older adults to continue to age in place. The research centred on three questions:

- How have older adults made connections within and around their environments during the pandemic, and what can we learn from this as we move out of it?
- What has been the impact of Covid-19 on older adults and their living environments, and how can the development and adaption of new and existing support activities help age-friendly places to succeed?
- How have activities for older adults changed, and how might these continue to adapt post-Covid-19?



RESEARCH DESIGN

PHASE ONE

Comprised of focus groups and interviews with key service providers in Salford. Stakeholders were from organisations that either support older adults directly, provide community services that include older adults, or develop policies that support older adults. Nine focus groups and 2 interviews were conducted with 37 individuals representing 11 different service providers.

PHASE TWO

Involved 59 interviews with 44 older adults, which included 38 participants interviewed individually and 6 as spousal couples. Two approaches were used: 15 older people took part in walking interviews and 44 social network mapping interviews were completed.

PHASE THREE

Involved a group of 8 older adults coming together to form a self-titled 'Voice and Influence' group. With Age-Friendly Salford's support, they explored pandemic-related changes through a 12-week photo-voice project. Using photos, videos, and creative methods, they created a coffee table book and booklet to document and share their experiences.



KEY FINDINGS

LOCAL CONNECTIONS

The findings underscore the significance of local spaces and the profound impact of removal or restriction of access to them during and post-pandemic. The opportunity for serendipitous encounters, as well as more routine or regular contact with familiar strangers in local places, contributed to a sense of belonging in and to place for older adults. By constraining many of these opportunities the pandemic brought the value of such interactions to the fore.

CHANGING SENSE OF PLACE

The pandemic left a lasting imprint on older adults' relationship with the local environment. Shifts in their everyday geographies worked to reshape their sense of place; local green spaces were not only refuges, but spaces of exploration and sources of change. Understanding these changes is crucial for designing, age-friendly communities that can better support older adults moving forward.

SOCIAL LOSSES

The disruptions created by Covid-19 - especially the loss of community spaces, diminished face-to-face interactions, and reduced contact with family and friends - had a profound and lasting impact on some older individuals. Understanding and addressing these enduring losses are crucial for supporting older adults to re-engage with previous contacts and establish new connections.

RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION

Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, older adults demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience. They found innovative ways to stay connected, embraced new hobbies, and redefined their social roles. This was enabled not only by their personal resilience and willingness to explore new opportunities, but also the support and encouragement provided by local age-friendly spaces, services, and activities.

INNOVATIONS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

The pandemic drove innovation in service delivery, prompting providers to create new activities and use outdoor and digital spaces to meet older adults' changing needs. The collaborative methods developed during this time continue to thrive with the support of strong partnerships. Changes in agile working, digital connectivity, and partnerships have improved service effectiveness, flexibility, and inclusivity, leading to more diverse and accessible age-friendly spaces.

KEY FINDINGS

ENDURING CHALLENGES IN SERVICE DELIVERY

Third-sector agencies, local service providers, and key connectors played a crucial role in bridging the social networks of older adults. However, the introduction of new delivery methods strained some service providers due to increased demand and insufficient or misaligned resources. Enduring challenges related to digital transitions, resource constraints, decreased community provision, and infection concerns have further contributed to reduced engagement among some older adults.

COLLABORATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Partnerships with older adults have become crucial for effective service delivery. The pandemic highlighted the importance of co-production, with older adults taking on more active roles as collaborators in service design. This approach has not only challenged ageist stereotypes but also empowered older adults to influence the services that impact their lives. They recognise the significance of this involvement and value the opportunity to define what 'age-friendly' means to them. It is essential that older adults continue to have a voice in this process to ensure services align with their needs and preferences.

DIGITAL INCLUSION

The shift towards online interactions highlighted the digital divide among older adults. While digital technologies had an important role in enabling older adults' social connectedness, preferences and access varied widely and some remain digitally marginalised. Ensuring digital inclusion is vital for preventing the marginalisation of those who cannot or choose not to access technology. While much has been done to make physical spaces and infrastructure more age-inclusive, further work is needed to ensure older people can easily access and navigate digital spaces and platforms.

UNEQUAL IMPACTS

Older adults with the resources to remain socially connected, who were part of existing support networks, or had the confidence to seek help, fared better through the pandemic and beyond. Others though, described feeling powerless and not in control of their lives. In this way, the pandemic highlighted the uneven impact on older adults. The interplay of various factors – such as the cost-of-living crisis, changes in service delivery and challenges in accessing health care services – have worked to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and inequalities. While the height of the pandemic may be over, the challenge to ensure age-inclusive communities can support everyone continues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 PRIORITISE FLEXIBLE DELIVERY MODELS

Leverage the success of new activities and modes of delivery to create service models that are adaptable to individual needs and preferences and resilient in the face of unexpected situations.

2 STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

Continue to foster ongoing communication and cooperation between service providers. Sharing resources and expertise, and exploring opportunities for collaboration, will help to ensure comprehensive and coordinated support systems are in place to address the diverse needs of older adults.

3 INVEST IN DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT AND ACCESSIBILITY

Work to tackle digital exclusion and offer flexible training and support so that older adults can engage with technology in their preferred ways. Regularly evaluate and adapt digital initiatives to ensure they effectively address the evolving needs of older adults.

4 PRIORITISE THE INCLUSIVENESS OF ONLINE MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

Create online environments where older adults, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, can participate. Offer content and services that respect and reflect the diverse backgrounds, languages, and experiences of this demographic.

5 SUPPORT SOCIAL (RE)ENGAGEMENT

Recognise the different ways that older adults prefer to connect post pandemic. Prioritise outreach and support for those facing isolation, and ensure services are adaptable enough to cater to increasingly diverse social needs.

6 BUILD ON THE INCREASED PROMINENCE OF THE LOCAL

Acknowledge the heightened importance of local green spaces, age-friendly infrastructure, and community provision in the post-pandemic landscape. Offer diverse, accessible programs that facilitate exploration and social engagement within familiar and new areas of older adults' neighbourhoods.

7 TARGET LASTING PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH IMPACTS

Develop and implement collaborative, long-term solutions to address the broad spectrum of physical, mental, and social health impacts of the pandemic on older adults.

8 RECOGNISE AND WORK TO ADDRESS COMPOUNDED INEQUALITIES

Prioritise efforts to redress the systemic disparities highlighted by the pandemic and work with the recognition that the ongoing cost-of-living crisis continues to intensify these inequities in experiences.

9 CHAMPION INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING

Directly involve older adults in the processes that shape the services they use. Incorporate their voices and perspectives to co-create solutions that empower older people effectively.